Star anise is a spice made from the dried fruit of an *Illicium verum* tree. The fruits of this tree have tiny oval seeds contained in pods shaped like a star. These pods are tough-skinned, rust-colored and have five to ten points. Both the pod and the seeds can be consumed. Star anise should not be confused with aniseed, though the two have similar flavor profiles. Nor should Chinese star anise be confused for the Japanese star anise, which is highly toxic. Star anise has a sweet and spicy flavor that is similar to fennel or licorice.

*Illicium verum* is an evergreen tree of the magnolia family reaching up to sixty-five feet in height. Star anise trees can bear fruit for 100 years or more. The fruit is picked before it can ripen and then sun dried. The auxiliary flowers of the tree come in varying shades from white to red. Star anise fruit trees are native to Southwest China and Northeast Vietnam. The spice is often found in Asian cuisines and medicine.

Star anise contains no fat and almost no calories or carbohydrates. When used in very small amounts, it is not likely to provide any vitamins or minerals. Despite this, star anise has many purported health benefits and has been used in medicine for thousands of years. Star anise contains a dense supply of flavonoids and polyphenols. It is believed that they are primarily responsible for the spice's broad applications and medicinal benefits. Shikimic acid extracted from star anise has been used in the preparation of anti-influenza drugs. In traditional Chinese medicine, star anise is prescribed to aid digestion and treat other abdominal pains. Even today, it is a common flavoring for medicinal teas, cough mixtures and pastilles.
SELECTING AND STORING

• Star anise can be purchased whole, ground, or as an oil.
• Star anise should be stored in an airtight container.
• Whole star anise will remain fresh and vibrantly flavored for about one year, whereas the ground spice will begin to lose flavor after about six months.

INTERESTING FACTS

• The scientific name of the plant, Illicium, originates from the Latin word “illicio” which means “alluring”. The name refers to the pleasant aroma of the fruit.
• The Japanese used to burn the aromatic bark of the tree for incense.
• According to Chinese folklore, finding a star anise with more than eight points was considered good luck.
• About 90% of the world’s star anise crop is used for the extraction of shikimic acid.

CULINARY USES

• Despite its sweetness, star anise traditionally is used in savory recipes, particularly with meats. It often is added whole to soups, stews and braising broths, to which it adds a sweet-licorice-peppery flavor.
• It is one of the signature flavors in the Vietnamese noodle soup pho.
• Star anise one of the spices in Chinese five-spice blends, along with cloves, cinnamon, Sichuan pepper and ground fennel seeds.
• Star anise is featured in many alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages including Moscow mule, ginger beer, and tonics.
• Toasting ground star anise can heighten the flavor.
ALL ABOUT STAR ANISE

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