



Summer Flavor School #1: The savory secret called umami

Welcome to Summer Flavor School! Over the next five weeks, we're going to master five techniques that take plant-based meals from commonplace to craveworthy. This week is all about **umami**, the savory backbone of your bean, grain, and veggie dishes. From there we'll explore: the secret start to so many chef-inspired dishes; the trick of blooming spices in hot oil; getting deep, smoky flavor without any meat; and the finishing touches that make everything taste fresh and balanced.

We're starting with umami because it fixes the most common complaint about plant-based cooking: that it can taste like something is missing. That missing something is often umami, the savory, satisfying taste that makes food taste rich and full. It's the mouth-coating depth of a good broth or a slow-cooked sauce, and it ranks as the fifth taste alongside sweet, salty, sour, and bitter, coming mostly from an amino acid called glutamate. You already know it from parmesan, soy sauce, a long-simmered tomato sauce, and a good steak (or mushroom steak). Fortunately, a lot of plant foods are packed with it, so you can get that same savory satisfaction with no meat anywhere in sight.

Your Umami Toolkit

Here are basic umami-inspired seasonings to keep in your kitchen. With these magical ingredients, you can add savory depth to just about anything.

- **Tomato paste**, cooked in a little oil until it darkens to brick-red before adding any liquid. That technique concentrates it into a savory explosion.
- **Dried mushrooms** like porcini or shiitake. Soak them, chop them, and save the soaking liquid, which is basically free savory broth.
- **Miso**, a fermented soybean paste kept in the fridge, with a spoonful stirred in at the end of soups, dressings, and sauces for a salty, complex zest.
- Soy sauce or tamari, for a salty finish with extra depth.

- Nutritional yeast, a cheesy addition to popcorn, pasta, or roasted vegetables.
- **Kombu**, a strip of dried kelp simmered into beans or broth and then fished out before serving. (It's the original source of umami, the seaweed that started the whole science!)
- **Roasted garlic and caramelized onions**, where slow heat turns both sweet and savory.

The Real Secret: Stacking

Umami multiplies when you combine sources. The glutamate in tomatoes, miso, and kombu gets a big boost from the compounds in dried mushrooms, so a dish using two or three of these tastes far more savory than any single one on its own. That synergy is why a tomato and mushroom sauce tastes so complete, and it's the main idea behind the bean recipe below.

One Caution: Watch the Salt

Most umami boosters are high in sodium. When you stack two or three in a dish, hold off on adding salt until the very end, then taste and adjust. It's too easy to turn "savory" into "too salty," so avoid a heavy hand. If you're following a low-sodium diet, be mindful of the total sodium you're adding to your food. The lowest sodium umami choices are dried mushrooms, tomato paste (check for a no-salt-added option), roasted garlic, and caramelized onions. Miso, soy sauce, and tamari are the saltiest.

Umami in Thirty Seconds

Here are a few ways to add savory depth to food:

- A spoonful of miso whisked into a salad dressing or a pot of soup
- Nutritional yeast showered over popcorn, pasta, or roasted vegetables
- A squeeze of tomato paste stirred into soups, stews, and sauces
- A splash of soy sauce or tamari in stir-fries, dressings, and marinades
- A handful of chopped sun-dried tomatoes or olives on a salad or grain bowl

Savory White Beans with Mushrooms and Miso



This recipe features three umami sources stacked into one delicious dish. Serve it in shallow bowls with crusty bread, or spooned over polenta or rice.

Ingredients (serves 4):

- 1/2 oz dried porcini or shiitake mushrooms
- 1 1/2 cups boiling water
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil, plus more for serving
- 1 onion, diced
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 1/2 teaspoon red pepper flakes (optional)
- 2 cans (15 oz each) white beans, cannellini or great northern, drained and rinsed
- 1 tablespoon white or yellow miso
- 1 tablespoon tamari or soy sauce
- A few big handfuls of greens, kale, chard, or spinach, chopped
- Black pepper
- Lemon, for serving

Instructions:

1. Soak the dried mushrooms in the boiling water for 15 minutes. Lift them out, chop them, and save the soaking liquid, leaving the gritty bit at the bottom behind.
2. Heat the olive oil in a pot over medium. Cook the onion until soft and golden, about 8 minutes, then add the garlic and chopped mushrooms and cook another minute.
3. Push everything to the side, add the tomato paste to the bare spot in the pan, and cook it, stirring, until it darkens to a deep brick-red, about 2 minutes. Most of the dish's flavor comes from this step, so don't rush it. Stir in the pepper flakes.
4. Add the beans and the mushroom soaking liquid, bring to a simmer, and cook 10 to 15 minutes until it thickens. Mash a few beans against the side of the pot to make the broth creamy.

Stir in the greens and cook until wilted. Off the heat, whisk the miso and tamari together with a spoonful of the broth, then stir it back into the pot (do not allow it to boil anymore at this point). Taste, add black pepper and a squeeze of lemon, and finish each bowl with a drizzle of olive oil.