

A juniper berry Christmas

December 23, 2013 5:30 pm • RONIT and SHULI MADMONE

There's something fascinating about juniper berries, not just because they look like blueberries, but more for their culinary purpose. The *juniperus communis* is the variety mostly used as a spice as well as a flavoring ingredient for making gin. There are other varieties that are not suitable for consumption, such as *juniperus sabina*, which is very bitter and can be quite toxic.

However, the juniper berries that are used as a spice are actually a form of cone from a shrubby conifer tree, that is native to Europe and is used in many European cuisines as a spice. Not only are the berries used as a spice, they are also used in other applications. In fact, the Native Americans have used the seeds inside the juniper berry as beads for making jewelry and art decorations.

The crushed form of juniper berries is perfect for making excellent meat rubs. The clear, sharp flavor is favorable for elevating the taste of meat dishes, especially wild game and pork. They are used both fresh and dried, but their flavor and odor are at their most potent immediately after harvest.

A volatile oil found in all parts of the juniper tree is terpinen 4-ol; it is also known as a diuretic that can cause irritation in kidney functions. The terpinen ingredient is the strongest in the fresh berries. Doctors say that pregnant women who have kidney ailments should not consume juniper berries.

When storing juniper berries, it is best to buy them in small quantities. By the time the berries are dried and cured, the oils have already deteriorated, so they will have little taste if they are stored for a long time.

The juniper berry is that kind of spice that can be recognized for its festive essence — lovely to look at and great as a culinary ingredient.