**POPPY**

*Papaver somniferum*  
[puh-PAY-ver som-NEE-fer-um]

**Family:** Papaveraceae

**Names:** Opium Poppy; Head Waak; Blind Bluff; pavot somnifère, oeillette (French); Mohn (samen), Schlafmohn (German); papavero (Italian); adormidera, amapola (Spanish); kus-kus, khus(h)-khus(h), cus-cus (Indian); kasakasa (Tamil); ying sù ké (Chinese); ozokukoku (Japanese); aengokkak (Korean); Mak ogrodowy (Polish)

**Description:** This spice is the seed of the opium poppy, whose botanical name means “sleep-bearing.” Native to the Middle East, this large annual plant has handsome pink, white, or lilac flowers. It is among the oldest cultivated plants. The Egyptians liked the seeds as a condiment, and the ancient Greeks grew the plant specifically for its seeds which, among other uses, were mixed into cakes with honey and taken by Olympic athletes to provide an immediate burst of energy. In Roman times, poppy seed decorated mushroom-shaped breads, a practice which continues today.

The minute slate-blue, kidney-shaped seeds have a nutty flavor and a crunchy texture and it takes nearly 10 million of them to make a pound. The spice consists of the ripe seeds, while the medicinal derivatives-opium, morphine and codeine—come from alkaloids in the sap of unripe seed pods. The ripe seeds are used widely in the cooking and baking of central and northern Europe, the Middle East, India, and some areas of North America. Most of the seeds in Europe are the slate-blue variety, but there are also yellow seeds used in India and brown seeds used in Turkey. Opium was valued for its medicinal properties by the ancient Egyptians, and was not an abused narcotic until the 1800s, when opium smoking became fashionable, especially in China and among many artists and writers. As a precaution, many countries prohibit cultivation of the opium poppy without a permit.

Indian poppy seed - 'mawseed'--is a food for birds.

**History:** When Ceres, goddess of the earth, was mourning the loss of her daughter Persephone who had been carried off to the underworld she could not sleep and was neglecting her duties to the corn and it was not growing. So Somnus, god of sleep, caused poppies to spring up around her feet, and tasting their narcotic juice she was overcome with drowsiness. Seeds of the corn poppy were offered up in sacred rites of Ceres for the prosperity of the corn and it was thought that poppies in a cornfield were essential to the
welfare of the crop, so they came to symbolize fertility.

An Indian legend relates that Buddha, not wanting to fall asleep, cut off his eyelids and where they fell on the earth the opium poppy sprang up. Poppies have remained the symbol of forgetfulness in sleep, and the Greeks represented Hypnos, sleep, Thanatos, death, and Nyx, night, either as crowned with poppies or as holding them in their hands. In the language of Flowers the poppy represents "consolation". Poppy's generic name *Papaver* comes from the Latin *papula*, swelling, describing its seed-capsules. Poppy seed capsules have been found in prehistoric lake dwellings and a Sumerian tablet of 3500 BC mentions the opium poppy. They were brought via 6th century Persia to Egypt, Greece and Rome. Poppy seeds are mentioned in the Egyptian *Ebers Papyrus* of about 1500BC and on Crete a Poppy Goddess has been excavated near Heraklion. Poppy heads decorate her headdress and show cuts which make it clear that they extracted opium from the unripe pods in exactly the same way we do today.

The physicians of Arabia probably introduced opium into Europe. By the time of Mohammed both the medical and narcotic properties of the drug were appreciated and opium eating followed by opium smoking was the fashion. Eventually the opium poppy became so sought after that it was the cause of two wars between Britain and China. The Opium Wars of 1839-42 and 1856-60 were fought over the opium trade in China thus leading to the legalization of opium.

Poppies have been closely linked with battle fields, because of their association with death (long sleep). Many battlefields have become covered with poppies which supposedly sprang from the blood of troops slaughtered during the battle. And poppies sold for Remembrance Day are a result of the battlefields of Flanders being covered this way.

**Cultivation/harvest:** This is a glaucous hairless annual, reaching 1-4 ft, the lobed leaves having a blue tinge. The flowers are white to purple. They grow up to 5" in diameter. When the flowers fade, a capsule remains, rounded and crowned with a star-shaped shaped stigma. On drying, it splits, casting out myriad seeds in the winds. Cultivated varieties bloom in July. Needs a sunny location and loamy soil. In early spring, sow seeds in rows 1 foot apart. Poppies thrive with much watering, but must be well weeded. *P. somniferum* may not be grown in Britain or the US without a permit (right) which isn't much point because the western plants yield little opium due to a lack of strong hot sun and different soil conditions and the latex that provides the drug is absent by the time the flower ripens. The seed is hard to grind and requires a special machine for seed grinding or can be placed between sheets of wax paper and hammered or in a mortar and pestle. Store in airtight containers kept in a cool, dark place. When you slice into the unripe pods they ooze a thick latex, the source of opium and its constituents, morphine and codeine. The latex rarely touches the seeds inside the poppy. Ordinarily, when the pod ripens, there are no narcotics in the seeds or in poppy seed oil.

**Nutritional profile:** One tablespoon poppy seeds has 47 calories and provides 1.6 g protein, 3.9 g fat, 2.1 g carbohydrates, 127 mg calcium and 0.8 mg iron. Good source of protein. One tablespoon of seeds has as much protein as one ounce cooked, drained lima beans. But these proteins are considered "incomplete" because they are deficient in the essential amino acid *lysine*. Combining the seeds with grains as a cake filling or as a topping for bread provides the complete protein. Poppy seeds that have been contaminated with even infinitesimal traces of the latex may produce a false-positive result on a urine test for drugs, suggesting that you have used morphine or heroin, when in fact you have not.

**Constituents (in the latex):** morphine, codeine, thebaine, narcotine, narcotoline, cedoheptulose, D-mannoheptulose,
myoinositol, erythritol, sanguinarine, norsanguinarine, choline, cryptoplne, protopine

**Energetics:** sour, neutral

**Properties:** astringent to lungs and large intestine; analgesic; antitussive

**Meridians/Organs Affected:** lungs, large intestine, kidneys

**Medicinal Use:** In folk medicine poppy heads were used in poultices to cure earache and toothache and a remedy for facial neuralgia was to lay the warmed leaves on the skin. Medieval doctors pounded the seeds with those of sea holly and mixed them with wine to make a lotion for washing the ears, eyes and nostrils of those suffering from insomnia. Another cure was to mingle the juice with milk and other agents and make them into sleeping pills. An infusion made from the powdered capsules of poppy was once applied externally to sprains and bruises and a poppy flower poultice applied to excessive redness of the skin. A flower compress reduced inflammation and helped watering eyes and also helped to banish dark circles around the eyes. Morphine, heroin, codeine and papaverine are all derived from the milk juice of the opium poppy. One poppy product, laudanum, an addictive tincture of opium, was a universal cure-all, widely prescribed by doctors in the 19th century-its abuse celebrated by De Quincey, Coleridge and Baudelaire, among others. It was frequently administered to relieve pain and calm excitement, and was also used in bad cases of diarrhea and dysentery. It has both hypnotic and sedative effects. For excellent in depth books on Opium and the Poppy check out *Opium Poppy* and *Plant Intoxicants* both listed under the references. They give detailed descriptions on cultivation, extraction methods, botany, chemistry and pharmacology as well as history of usage.

Opium tincture and extract may be used internally to treat depression. (for more on this see *Herbal Medicine* This book also has an in-depth discussion on using Opium Poppy for cough suppression)

**Pharmacological Effects:** Morphine is a very strong analgesic; in fact, it is the standard by which all other analgesics are judged. It raises the pain threshold and also reduces the pain reflex. That is, even though the pain sensation is still perceived, it is no longer regarded as particularly uncomfortable. Codeine has approximately 1/4 the analgesic effect of morphine. Morphine and codeine are both hypnotics, but they induce only a light and restless sleep. Morphine is a strong and highly selective respiratory depressant. The dosage that acts in this manner is lower than an analgesic dosage. Codeine's effect on respiration is much weaker than that of morphine. Also a strong cough suppressant. Morphine causes peripheral vasodilation and histamine release, which can lead to orthostatic hypotension. Morphine in very low doses causes constipation by increasing the resting tone and markedly decreasing propulsive contractions in the wall of the gut, while decreasing the secretion of digestive juices. The constipating effect of opium is only really noticeable at the start of the treatment. It soon diminishes and can if necessary be corrected with small doses of rhubarb or the like.

**TCM:**

*Actions*: Contains the leakage of Lung qi: for chronic coughs; binds up the intestines: for chronic diarrhea and dysenteric disorders; Stabilizes the lower burner: for polyuria, spermatorrhea or vaginal discharge; Alleviates pain: for any kind of pain, especially that of the sinews, bones or epigastrium.

*Indications*: Chronic cough; chronic diarrhea and dysentery; stomach ache; prolapse of rectum; asthma; opium withdrawal.

*Dosage*: 4-10 g

*Flower Essence*: Indications: unable to find balance between activity and rest; deep exhaustion; unaware of past accomplishments; difficulty understanding and integrating lessons
and experiences. Healing Qualities: for finding a balance between doing and being; helps us integrate previous experiences so we may live more fully in the present.

**Ritual Use:** Gender: Cold. Planet: Moon. Element: Water. Associated Deities: Hypnos, Somnos, Ceres. Parts Used: Seeds, dried seed pods. Basic Powers: Fertility, Prosperity. Poppies were used in love divination. Placing a poppy petal in the palm and striking it with the other hand, if the petal broke with a sharp sound it meant that the lover was true. If it failed to snap this indicated infidelity. The flower had an evil reputation in many areas as a cause of minor ills and children used to say that if you looked into the heart of a poppy you would be blinded--if only temporarily. It's said that if you hold a poppy against your ear you will get violent earaches. Add the seeds to your food if you wish to become pregnant. Get a dried seed pod, cut a small hole in it to remove the seeds, and write a question on a small piece of yellow paper. Stuff the paper inside the pod and lay it beside your bed. Prophetic dreams may answer the question before morning. Carry the dried seed pod as a prosperity amulet, or use the seeds in prosperity amulets. The basic powers are fertility and prosperity. Gender: Cold; planet: Moon; element: water.

**Culinary Use:** Seeds have a mild sweetish aroma which is brought out by roasting or baking. The flavor is mild until heated, then it becomes nutty, with sweet-spicy undertones. Seeds should be crushed before use with a mortar & pestle or special seed grinder. Use poppy seed oil when a very light, delicate oil is needed for a salad dressing. Known as *huile d'oéillet* in France, it must be from the first cold-pressing which produces a clear, odorless oil with a slight almond flavor. Further pressings produce an oil that is used in artist's pains, soaps and ointments. It is important not to confuse the oil from an artist's supply shop with the culinary oil. The nutty flavor of the seeds is improved if lightly toasted before use especially when used in uncooked food, such as salads. When poppy seeds are used for pastries, they are covered with boiling water and allowed to stand for one to three hours before grinding. Pliny mentions poppy seeds being dried and mixed with honey before eating. Poppy seed paste is made from roasted, ground poppy seeds mixed with poppy seed oil and is used in a variety of Turkish dishes and pastries. Poppy syrup is made from the flowers of the corn poppy or rose poppy. It is used in cordials. This variety is also known as 'headache'--to smell it causes momentary dizziness. It is also the poppy of Poppy Day which is the emblem of the British and Commonwealth soldiers who perished in the War.

**Tastes good with/In:** breads, crackers, cakes, pastries, salads, especially coleslaw, cream-based dressings, curries, sauces for meat and fish, egg noodles, or sprinkled on vegetables as a garnish.

**Recipes:**

**Poppy Seed Noodles**
8 oz noodles
4 Tbsp butter
1 onion, finely chopped
3 tsp poppy seeds
salt and pepper to taste

Cook the noodles in salted water. Meanwhile, lightly sauté the onion in butter until soft. Add the poppy seeds and seasoning. Drain the noodles and stir into the onion and poppy seed mixture. Serve immediately. (The Macmillan Treasury of Spices & Natural Flavorings)

**Poppy Seed Dressing**
1 cup sugar
2 Tbsp Hot Mustard
¾ tsp onion powder
1/16 tsp garlic powder
1⅛ tsp salt
2½ Tbsp Poppy Seed
3 Tbsp lemon juice
½ cup White Wine Vinegar
2 cups olive oil

Blend together the sugar, mustard, onion powder, garlic powder, salt and poppy
seed. Stir in lemon juice and vinegar; mix with an electric beater at medium speed. Add olive oil, one tablespoon at a time, continuing to beat with electric beater. After all oil is added, beat at high speed for 15 minutes. Dressing will be rather thick, but will thin out when added to fruit. Or dressing can be thinned with fruit juice. Makes 3 cups. (The Spice Islands CookBook)

**Poppy Seed Strudel**

1 Tbsp poppy seeds, previously covered with boiling water, allowed to stand for 1 hour and then crushed
1 lb apples, coarsely grated
1 oz currants (optional)
2½ oz sugar
1 tsp lemon rind, grated
¼ tsp cinnamon, ground
4 strudel pastry leaves
2 oz butter, melted
3 oz breadcrumbs
icing sugar

Mix poppy seed with the apple, currants, sugar, lemon rind and cinnamon. Place one strudel leaf on a damp cloth, brush with melted butter and sprinkle with ¼ of the breadcrumbs. Cover with a second strudel leaf and repeat brushing with butter and breadcrumbs. Spoon half the apple mixture on to pastry leaving a 1 in border on all sides. Fold side edges over and roll up, lifting back cloth as you roll. Repeat with the other strudel leaves and place the strudels seam side down on a greased baking sheet. Brush them with melted butter and bake in the oven at 375F for 40 minutes until golden. Sprinkle with icing sugar and serve warm with cream. (Cooking with Spices)

**Poppy Seed Ice Cream**

1½ cups milk
1 vanilla bean
3 egg yolks
¼ cup sugar
¼ cup poppy sees
1/3 cup honey
2/3 cup heavy cream

Put the milk and vanilla bean in a pan and bring to the boil. Remove from the heat and leave to infuse for 10 minutes. Whisk the egg yolks and sugar together until thick and cream colored in a bowl set over a pan of simmering water. Remove the vanilla bean from the milk and pour the milk on to the egg and sugar. Stir constantly until the mixture thickens enough to coat the back of a spoon, but do not let it boil or it may curdle. When the custard is thick enough to leave a clear trail from a wooden spoon on the bottom of the bowl, remove the bowl to a cool surface. Toast the poppy seeds in a dry pan. Stir the seeds and honey into the custard and leave to cool. Whip the cream to soft peaks and fold into the custard. Freeze in an ice cream machine or a shallow container, beating the ice cream after 1-2 hours, then freeze until firm. (Cooking with Spices)

**Poppy Seed Cake**

2 cups flour
1 tsp baking soda
pinch salt
½ cup ground poppy seeds
1 cup butter
1 cup sugar
2 eggs
½ cup sherry
grated rind of 1 lemon
1 cup sour cream
1 cup chopped walnuts or macadamia nuts

Butter and flour a nine-inch tube pan or two bread loaf pans. Preheat the oven to 350F. Mix the flour, baking soda, salt and poppy seeds together and reserve. Using a mixer, cream the butter with the sugar until light and fluffy. Add the eggs and beat well. Mix in half the dry ingredients. Then stir in the Sherry, lemon rind and the sour cream. Add the rest of the dry ingredients and mix well. Fold in the nuts. Pour the batter into the prepared pan or pans and bake for one hour and ten minutes, or until the cake tests done. It will take the same amount of time in either type pan. Allow the cake to remain in the pan until it is cool enough to handle. Then turn out onto a rack to finish cooling. The cooled cake can be topped with a chocolate glaze or dusted with confectioners
sugar. Serves twelve to sixteen. (Herbs and Spices of the World)

**Hamantaschen**
These are traditional cakes eaten during the Jewish holiday of *purim*. Their triangular shape is reminiscent of the villain Haman’s ears or hat, depending on which traditional tale one knows.

**Kuchen Dough**
2½ tsp yeast  
¼ cup sugar  
4 Tbsp butter or margarine  
2/3 cup milk  
3¾ cups plain flour  
salt to taste  
1 egg  
honey

**Poppy Seed Filling**
1/2 cup poppy seeds, ground  
1¼ cups milk  
4 Tbsp butter  
1/3 cup chopped nuts  
2 Tbsp molasses

Preheat oven to 350F. Cream the yeast with 1 Tbsp of sugar in a warm bowl. Melt the butter or margarine, pour into the milk and stir. Add the creamed sugar and yeast. Sieve the flour and salt together and place in a bowl, leaving a well in the middle. Pour in the liquid mixture. Work the liquid into the flour, making a pliable dough. Cover with a cloth and set aside in a warm place for 2 hours. Add remaining sugar, a well-beaten egg and knead well. Cover again with the cloth and leave as before for a further 2 hours when the dough will be ready to use.

To make the filling, place all the ingredients together in a saucepan and cook over a low heat until thick, skimming frequently. Leave to cool. Roll out the dough to ¼ inch thickness. Cut into 4 inch rounds and brush with melted butter. Place 1 tsp of the filling in the center of each round. Fold the edges to form three-cornered cakes. Brush tops with warm melted honey. Leave in a warm place until the cakes rise to double their original size. Bake until golden brown. (Creative Cooking with Spices)

**Turnips with Poppy Seed Butter**
2 Tbsp butter or margarine  
3 tsp poppy seed  
¼ tsp salt  
¼ tsp ground black pepper  
4 cups diced, cooked hot turnips

Combine butter or margarine and poppy seed in a small saucepan. Stir and cook until butter is golden. Add salt and black pepper. Pour over hot turnips. Toss lightly. Serve hot. Yield: 6 servings. (The Spice Cookbook)

**Red Cabbage with Sour Cream Dressing**
1 small red cabbage shredded  
1 small milk onion, peeled and finely sliced  
1 large tart dessert apple, peeled, cored and sliced  
1 tsp cumin seeds, crushed to a powder  
1 Tbsp poppy seeds  
Dressing:  
5 oz sour cream  
2 tsp Dijon mustard  
1 Tbsp wine vinegar or lemon juice  
2 tsp sugar  
salt

Put the cabbage, onion and apple in a large salad bowl and fork through to mix. Sprinkle with the cumin and poppy seeds. Combine all the dressing ingredients and whisk with a fork to blend thoroughly. Pour over the salad and toss with 2 salad spoons to distribute evenly. (The Encyclopedia of Herbs, Spices and Flavorings)

**Lamb Korma**
¼ pint plain unsweetened yogurt  
1 Tbsp coconut cream  
3 garlic cloves, peeled and crushed  
1 inch piece fresh ginger root, grated  
1 Tbsp poppy seeds, crushed  
2 Tbsp coriander seeds, crushed  
1 inch piece cinnamon stick, crushed  
6 cloves, crushed
4 oz ghee or butter
3 onions, peeled and thinly sliced
1 lb lean lamb, trimmed and cut into 1 inch cubes
salt to taste
1/4 - 1 fresh green chili, seeded and finely sliced juice of half a lemon
fresh coriander leaves or parsley to garnish

Put the yogurt in a small mixing bowl and whisk with a fork until smooth. Pound together the coconut cream, garlic and ginger with a pestle and mortar or process in a food processor for 30 seconds. Add the poppy seeds, coriander seeds, cinnamon and cloves. Melt the ghee or butter in a large, heavy-based saucepan and stir-fry the onions until crisp and brown. Remove the onions and purée in a food processor or pass through a fine food mill. Add the spice mixture to the same saucepan and cook gently for 5 minutes. Add the cubed meat, yogurt and salt, bringing to the boil and simmer over a low heat for 45 minutes until the meat is tender and the sauce is brown. Add the finely sliced chili and lemon juice, stir well and simmer for another 5 minutes. Transfer to a heated serving dish and serve with rice, garnished with fresh coriander. (The Encyclopedia of Herbs, Spices and Flavorings)

References:
The Complete Book of Spices, Jill Norman, Dorling Kindersley, 1990; 0-670-83437-8
Cooking with Spices, Carolyn Heal & Michael Allsop, David & Charles, 1983; 0-7153-8369-8
Creative Cooking with Spices, Jane Walker, Chartwell Books, 1985; 1-55521-016-3
The Encyclopedia of Herbs, Spices and Flavorings, Arabella Boxer, Jocasta Innes, Charlotte Parry-Crocke & Lewis Esson, Crescent Books, 1984; 0-517-43942-5
The Encyclopedia of Herbs, Spices & Flavorings, Elisabeth Lambert Ortiz, Dorling Kindersley, 1992; 1-56458-065-2

Exotic Spices, Rosamond Richardson, Salem House, 1985; 0-88162-161-7
Herbal Medicine, Rudolf Fritz Weiss, MD; AB Arcanum, 1988; 0-906584-19-1
The Macmillan Treasury of Spices & Natural Flavorings, Jennifer Mulherin, Macmillan, 1988; 0-02-587850-6
Magical Herbalism, Scott Cunningham, Llewellyn, 1982; 0-87542-120-2
Opium Poppy, L.D. Kapoor, PhD; The Haworth Press, 1995; 1-56024-923-4
Plant Intoxicants, Baron Ernst von Bibra, Healing Arts Press, 1955 (reprint of 1855 book); 0-89281-498-5
The Spice Cookbook, Avanelle S. Day and Lillie M. Stuckey, David White Company, 1964
The Spice Islands Cook Book, Spice Islands Home Economics Staff, Lane Book Co, 1961