

Put MSG in Everything, You Cowards

skillet.lifehacker.com/put-msg-in-everything-you-cowards-1831721707

By now, we should all be completely unafraid of monosodium glutamate, the umami-boosting molecule more commonly referred to as “MSG.” It will not give you headache, it will not make your arms numb, but it will inspire you to eat an entire head of roasted broccoli in one sitting.

As Beth has covered in the article linked *right above* this sentence, the symptoms of “Chinese Restaurant Syndrome” have never been reproduced in a laboratory setting. (If that syndrome sounds pretty racist, that’s because it very much is.) This is great news, because it means we are free to enjoy the combination of sodium and glutamate with wild abandon, not just in Doritos, but in our very own recipes.

Buying MSG is not as easy as buying salt—look for a bottle of Accent in the store or a bag of

Ajinomoto online—but it’s just about as easy to use. However, just as with sodium chloride, it

can be easy to get carried away with MSG, particularly when you start to realize all the wonderful things you can bring this newfound source of umami to. The key is to take it slowly

—1/4-1/2 a teaspoon is usually plenty for any recipe that serves four to six people. (More than that can give your meal an unpleasant, artificial flavor.) For a single serving—or a beverage,

which we’ll get to in a moment—start with a pinch, taste, and add more if needed. (I

recommend tasting a little bit of it plain, to get a full sense of its kinda meaty, very slightly

sweet, and very savory quality.)

What, exactly, should you add it to? Pretty much any non-dessert item that could use some

umami. If you would add soy sauce to it, you can add MSG. If you would add Parmesan to it,

you can add MSG. If you think “this could use some fish sauce/tomato paste/nutritional yeast,” you can (and should) add MSG. If you need ideas, I have some:

Tomato sauce

Confession, I have never not messed with Marcella Hazan’s three-ingredient sauce. It’s fine

on its own, but I’ve always added garlic, or wine, or fish sauce, or *something* to give it just a

little oomph. This Friday, I added 1/2 teaspoon of MSG, and enjoyed it immensely. (It’s also

worth noting that Ofclaire, who has never liked the Hazan sauce, liked it so much he ate the

cold leftovers while standing over the sink. Or maybe it’s not “worth noting,” so much as “mildly entertaining.”

Bread

Do you want to elevate your garlic bread to mid-level restaurant heights of deliciousness?

Sprinkle on a little MSG, just as you would salt. If you’re dealing with a bread stick or biscuit,

just brush ‘em with a little butter first so the crystals have something to cling to.

Popcorn

This one is obvious. Sprinkle on a few pinches; toss, taste, adjust as needed.

Boring roasted vegetables

I'm just kidding; roasted vegetables are already very good, but I absolutely inhaled the head

of broccoli I dusted with MSG. For every couple of servings, toss the vegetables with 1/8th of

a teaspoon of MSG, along with a couple of tablespoons of olive oil and salt.

Soups and stews

Half a teaspoon is plenty for most meaty recipes. I particularly like in it tomato soup, chili,

and anything bean-based.

Ground turkey

Yes, you could put MSG in other ground meats, but no meat needs help in the flavor department quite as much as ground turkey. Use 1/2 a teaspoon per pound.

An absolutely filthy martini

To up the savory quality of an olive-infused martini, add just a pinch of MSG to your ice-filled

stirring glass, along with 2 1/2 ounces of gin, 1/2 an ounce of dry vermouth, and 1/4 ounce of

olive brine. Stir, strain, and enjoy.

Dips, dressings and spreads

Add a pinch to homemade onion dip, salad dressings, pimento cheese, bean dip, or plain cream cheese. (I did the cream cheese thing on Sunday morning, it was fantastic.)

Bland, out-of-season tomatoes

Look—I know I shouldn't be messing with tomatoes this time of year, but sometimes I'm

A big dummy who can't help myself, and I find myself with a few round, red, flavorless orbs.

However, seeing that glutamate is one of the flavors that make tomatoes so good, a little sprinkling of the stuff renders out-of-season tomatoes downright edible, if not totally delicious.

The only thing I wouldn't recommend you put MSG in or on is sweets. An apple might be

okay—apples and Parmesan are very good—but that's as far as I would push it.

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Update 01/14/18 1:06 PM EST: *People can have allergies and sensitivities to any ingredient. You know how your body reacts to things, and I'm not telling you to eat things*

that make you feel bad, but MSG is not a "bad" ingredient, and "Chinese Restaurant Syndrome" is not a thing that has ever been reproduced consistently in a lab. (Similarly: I

cannot eat mangoes without my lips breaking out in little bumps, but this doesn't mean mangoes are bad for the general population, and this does not make "mango lip syndrome"

a thing.)

DISCUSSION

Whiggly

1/14/19 12:16PM

Amazing timing: But not so fast. What about in people who specifically self-identify as being sensitive to MSG?

Here things get more interesting. In a November 2000 study from the *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology*,⁵ scientists administered increasing doses of MSG and a placebo to 130 adults who self-identified as MSG-sensitive. While responses to MSG were not completely consistent with repeated testing, testing subjects generally showed more reactions to actual MSG (38% of respondents) versus a placebo (13% of respondents).

The conclusion of the study was that MSG does, in fact, elicit adverse responses from a particularly sensitive subgroup of the population when administered in large doses (greater than three grams) on a mostly empty stomach. The existence of MSG Symptom Complex is concrete scientific fact.

Turns out the dizziness, flushed face, and numbness in the chest and arms that I always insisted was just in my older sister's head is real after all. (Sorry, Aya.)

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It's important to remember that in virtually every study, it was only when glutamic acid was consumed on a nearly empty stomach that adverse reactions manifested. When paired with enough food, symptoms virtually vanished

Jeffrey Steingarten, *Vogue* magazine's long-time food correspondent, has suggested that the rash of people claiming MSG sensitivity in the '70s and '80s might be due to the fact that in those days, many Chinese-American restaurant meals started with a bowl of MSG-rich wonton

soup consumed on an empty stomach before the rest of the meal. This theory seems to fall in line with scientific data. Even though Parmesan cheese is packed with glutamic acid, it's got plenty of other "stuff" in it, too, and most likely you're pairing that cheese with pasta or pizza.

One final note: some have hypothesized that when it comes to Chinese restaurants specifically, MSG-rich broths consumed on an empty stomach may be part of the culprit, but there's also a good possibility that some folks who claim sensitivity to MSG may in fact be experiencing reactions to other ingredients common in Chinese food but not so common in other restaurant cuisine such as the peanut oil frequently used for stir-frying, the shellfish extracts used for flavoring, or herbs like cilantro. As far as I am aware, there is currently no scientific data that would elevate this hypothesis to theory