

History of the spices



Some aromatic plants have been searched and cultivated for millennia as flavoring, perfuming, and preserving agents, these are the herbs and plants used traditionally in our meals to bring the best possible taste to our daily food. Herbs are usually common wild plants that grow nearby, usually the leaves of certain plants. but what we Europeans call spices are from a very different class; they generally come from far away lands, the old West and East Indies, growing in tropical trees, shrubs, or vines and having characteristic and pleasant aromas and flavors. In other occasions the hidden seeds are the prized spices. Most of these spices and herbs need high or moderate temperatures and enough humidity and naturally they have their origin in the tropical and subtropical areas of Asia and the Mediterranean basin.

So the spices we use are just the plant parts that have the flavor and aroma and can be processed, kept and preserved. Let's see some examples, beginning from the roots of the plants, like Ginseng, horseradish; following with the bark as in the case of cinnamon; going to the flower buds, like the cloves; the flowers,

lavender; saffron, from flower stigmas; pepper and vanilla, from the fruits; and nutmeg, from the seed.

But herbs and spices not only gave a better taste to the soups and stews, they were in many occasions the sole source of paramedical remedies and even magic potions. Quite a few medicinal virtues were then and still are useful . At the moment, many pharmacologists and laboratories are working with herbs and natural substances in order to establish whether they are curative and if it is feasible to synthesize them.

Farmers from the cooler regions of Asia and Europe were the first to devise means to preserve the meat, because they have to slaughter their cattle as soon as the snow began to fall over the pastures. They then pack the meats in salt as a means of preservation by drying it. Other parts of the flesh were smoked and some were dried in the chilled air of the high mountains. The same was done with fish, but the result was monotonous and sometimes acrid taste with the added trouble of spoiled and putrid parts.

So the remedy was to apply a stronger flavor to mask as many odors and flavors as possible or, like the Romans: use exactly the opposite process, a well known fetid vegetal resin or a rancid fish extract (asafetida and li-



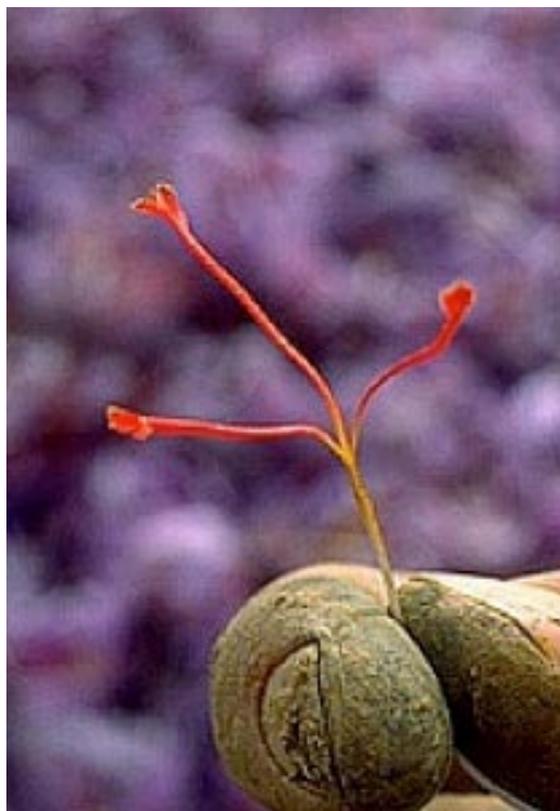
quamen) to camouflage the various “natural” putrefactions.

Savory spices were in another category. Apart from herbs like garlic and onion, laurel leaves and a wide bunch of wild bushes, the splendor of spices was just a delight for the very few who could pay the high prices asked for them. It was for this reason, high prices combined with small volume and weight, that trade was established on spices. Camels, horses, mules, donkeys, oxcarts, could carry but a few pounds and the ships, although being much bigger, could just take a few tons aboard and uncertainty was the rule for every trip.

After Persians, Greek and Romans, things did not change that much, in the dark ages, castle or hut cooking in cold Europe was as disagreeable as the rest of the sensations that human senses had to endure. To cover the scarce food they had only residual broths “enriched” with crumbs of stale bread and the like which acted as a primitive gravy, “tenderizing” the season’s dishes.

Since ancient times, Kings and queens, generals and landowners enjoyed the spices from

Arabia, India, and the remote fields of Asia. Spices had higher prices than gold ingots or elaborate jewels. Cities blessed with such trade were among the richest The Nabatean Petra was an imposing town excavated in rock by those who controlled the caravan routes to the East up the arrival of the Roman Empire. The Romans established in Alexandria the center of the cinnamon, ginger and pepper trade. From its port the Romans sailed to Arabia Felix and India . Later the Islamic Palmyra was also blessed with the fortune of caravans and sailors selling the best spices from India, the Spice Islands, and even China.. Then, another ship took the overpriced spices to the brothers of the Ottoman Empire, at Turkish and Egyptian ports. From there, a Christian merchant fleet changed the



Crescent Moon for the Cross, but kept the spices well guarded aboard. Then, they sailed to every port in the Old Mare Nostrum.

But those boatloads were not enough for Westerners needs and ambitions, One remote day, priests and kings used the faith and restlessness of their younger subjects to move their hearts in the recover of the Holy Land. For more than a century the Holy Crusades combined the charm of making a Christian Holy Land with the hope of a reward. There were many believers but more were dreamed with the fabulous treasures of the Arabs. In spite of death, imprisonment, defeats, never ending sieges, diseases, famine and a whole range of amputations, the fighting by the Mediterranean Sea appealed to thousands as the only way of escaping from the reality of feudal lords, where no chance of change or even improvement existed, apart from working lands. that was always the property of a Lord.

Apart from Spain, then involved in their own campaign against the Moors , the rest of the European Kingdoms, Ducats, Counties, and State Towns, saw the Crusades as a means of creating a new network of trade routes that belonged solely to the Christian faith.

After many bloody battles and years of changing circumstances, the Arabs finally gained control of the region. They knew the value of the source of their spices and the control of their corresponding routes very well. They kept a tight control over the land access to the East, very sure of the power of their monopoly. The overland transport of spices to Arabia began long before the Christian era and was to continue for centuries.

The biggest, richest and busiest European port of the Middle Ages was Venice, although it should be remembered what "rich" meant in those days. In way of comparison, any modest cargo ship anchoring at Venice today would unload more than what all the merchantmen

brought in a whole year then. All the same, Venice was the first European port dealing in Arabian spices, Chinese silks, African ivory and every conceivable form of gems and precious metals and the from the very day Marco Polo returned telling what he saw in the East, everybody dreamt of a paradise where pepper and cinnamon grew everywhere. But the conquest of Constantinopla by the Turks ended the land routes to the East and Venice began its decline.

At the end of the 15th century when the fighting with the Moors in Spain was coming to an end, a need for new horizons appeared in the peninsula. The Portuguese began to search new sea routes that would enable their fast and agile ships to elude Arabian control. Middlemen always meant higher prices and they were ready and anxious to establish their own spice routes. Then the Spanish followed, but instead



of moving to the East under the long belly of Africa, they went towards the West to Cathay and Cipango (China and Japan).

The Dutch and the English came later, but they were much more efficient. They established longer and effective trade relations and even the Imperial domination of the spice-producing areas of the East, where monopolies have existed since the 9th century when Indian traders operating from Java made the first one.

Six hundred years later Indian and Muslim traders and sailors took control of the port of Melaka around 1450 and in the end, some eighty years later they controlled completely the rich island of Java.

Since ancient times the aromatic spices of the Far East have been in demand by peoples of the East and West, and every power in its day has tried to gain the monopolistic control of the trade by means of money or force. So it was not unusual that brave although illiterate navigators, like Christopher Columbus, miniaturized the world to explain that a spice paradise was around the corner. The Portuguese, after making a much longer trip around Africa and India reached and obtained Melaka some twenty years after Columbus landed in America. The Portuguese were poor and few, but Portugal was favorably located on the Atlantic Ocean in the middle of the sea route between southern and northern Europe. After eight hundred years of fighting to throw out the Moors from their soil the Portuguese still wanted more victories over their former rivals. Like the Spanish, they wanted everything from maritime exploration to empires, as well the extension of Christianity and the spice trade.

Vasco da Gama and Columbus took different paths. It appeared that the East was clearly Portuguese and the West, from America to the Pacific was also Spanish. The Treaty of Tordesillas, two years after the discovery of America (with papal approval) established that the lands discovered west of an ideal line 100 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands were for Spain and the lands to the east of this line for Portugal. Changes were later with John II who negotiated a treaty with the Spanish, moving the line 270 leagues farther west, so the Portuguese were able to acquire Brazil.



But nobody knew for sure if the Spice Islands were in the Spanish or Portuguese half of the world and Fernando de Magelhaes (or Magellan in English) who sailed under the Spanish flag, went there to ascertain that the coveted Islands were Spanish. Magellan took the Spanish route, navigating west in 1519, and after a hard and dangerous exploration he found in 1520 the southern pass, the one that bears his name, the Strait of Magellan. It's an almost 600-km-long (350 statute miles) passage through cold waters and snow-covered mountains, with winds, fog, and tidal rips.

Magellan then crossed the Pacific and was killed in the Philippines. Juan Sebastián Elcano reached Spain with the his sole remaining ship, the Victoria from the other side of the world, being the first circumnavigator of the world, but, unfortunately, telling his kings that the Spice Islands (Las Islas de Especiería in Spanish) were definitely Portuguese.

But the Spice Islands were too much of a treasure to be left to others. Initially Melaka was but a small fishing village, but spice trade converted it into the capital of a Malay king-



dom. In 1511 the Portuguese conquered Melaka which was undoubtedly the center of the spice trade. In 1641 the Dutch took over the Portuguese and then, in 1795, Melaka was British. Britons used the East India Company, chartered by Queen Elizabeth I in 1600 for trade in the Eastern Hemisphere and to remove the Dutch from the Indonesian spice trade. But the Dutch were tough and ready to defend their possessions and the adventure ended in a massacre of British traders at Amboina in 1623. This defeat changed the plans of the company, now established on the Indian subcontinent, where they

were to exchange commerce for domination and spices for the Empire. Later on, Steamers, railways, trucks, and even planes, changed the face of the earth and the sense of distance. Many spices were grown in an industrial scale in Europe, Africa, America, and new places of Africa. The trade also grew a thousandfold, but always was and always will be enough supply of fresh and tasty spices and herbs. What was exclusively for sovereigns now is for everyone. Today producers and merchants have to work hard to get their share of the market, offering only the best. *