

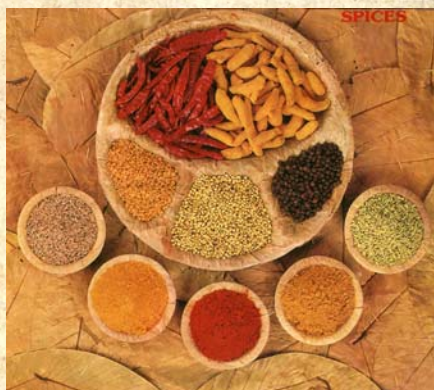
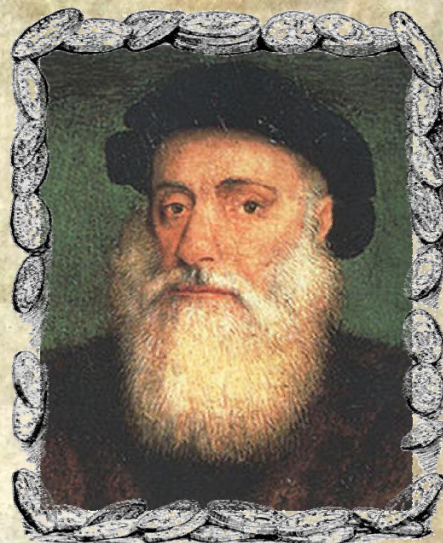
Gingerly Exploring Spices

by Lorraine Mercedes Picot, RNCP

A spicy little history...

Several years ago, I stood close to the shore in Portugal looking out onto a turbulent turquoise sea. The wind whipped my hair into my eyes as I contemplated the voyage of Vasco Da Gama setting off in the late 1400's with his two brothers and four ships from that very coast at that very spot on his quest for "Christians" and spices.

By 1498, the Portuguese explorer had rounded Africa's Cape of Good Hope and reached India, establishing the sea route for Europeans to access the enormous wealth of spices that lay beyond. By the early 1500's, the Portuguese had established dominance in the "Spice Islands", the Indonesian Moluccas.



As far as there is recorded history, spices were used to flavour and preserve food, to serve as medicines, to embalm the dead, to perfume the air, and of critical importance, to mask bad breath. Difficult as it may be for us to imagine today, pepper, cloves, and cinnamon were once as rare and valuable as gold dust. Along with nutmeg, cinnamon and turmeric, these spices were valued luxuries even in the most privileged of European kitchens. Imagine spending a year's income to purchase the contents of your basic modern spice cabinet. Today,

the spice Saffron is still the most valuable food item on the grocery store's shelves costing well over \$1,000. per pound!

History books again blame the Romans for first teasing European taste buds with exotic spices on their campaigns throughout Europe and Britain. The sophisticated Romans introduced over 400 spices and herbs from Asia, India, and Arabia! Although many of these were lost forever in the Dark Ages, the Crusades launched a renaissance for exotic spices.

Nations waged blood-thirsty wars advancing ship-building technology by leaps and bounds. Empires were created and destroyed. Continents discovered and subdued. Fortunes made and lost. And driving history forward was the people's insatiable lust for spices.

Cont'd....

More spicy stories...

To Europeans, the Far East was veiled in mystery. The *Arabian Nights* and even the Holy Bible hinted at sensual pleasures in these exotic, far-away lands. Many spices were believed to possess aphrodisiac properties. Modern “love potions” still use cinnamon, cloves, and ginger in their ingredients. None of this would do for the 17th century Puritans who banned the use of spices so as not to “inflame the passions” of their brethren. Perhaps it was man’s baser lusts that drove the quest for “spicy” spices after all!

If you want your spices to retain the maximum of their spicy properties and don’t mind taking the extra time it takes to grind them, buy your spices whole whenever possible. They can be ground quite easily in a clean coffee mill or for true foodies, a mortar and pestle. Light roasting whole spices in a dry pan before you grind them will allow them to fully release their true mysteries.

Take a moment to be grateful that you won’t need a fleet of ships or a king’s ransom to try some of my recipes. Keep the sweet treats for special holidays and gatherings. Just before you rush off to your kitchen to launch your own voyage of exploration...

...Here are a few of my favourite spices

CINNAMON: Available in powder form or in tight little scrolls of rolled dried bark, true cinnamon is often confused for the more common cassia which it resembles in appearance and flavour. Genuine cinnamon is a bit sweeter and the bark is thinner and lighter-coloured. The tropical evergreen tree, from which the inner bark is taken, is native to Sri-Lanka. It was once exchanged as a fitting gift between the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon! It’s used extensively in baking and lends an exotic touch to stews, curries, pilafs, and imbues cinnamon buns with tradition. Try it sprinkled on top of cappuccino or hot chocolate, Italian-style.



CLOVES: The little dried buds of a tree native to the Indonesian Molucca Islands, clove is available in powder form or whole. It’s the cute miniature claw and ball, or “nail”.



Chinese courtiers of the Imperial Court used cloves to sweeten their breath as do some of my courtly acquaintances. The Dutch, after a hard-fought victory over Portugal, restricted the growth of cloves to the Moluccas and eventually saturated the market. Today, Indonesia has to import its cloves from Zanzibar and Madagascar to supply the demand for this ingredient in their popular *kretek* cigarettes. If you don’t want to smoke your cloves, try them in mulled wine, spiced tea, cooked fruit desserts, Christmas puddings or baked goods, root vegetables, meat stews, or studded into a baked ham. For a festive touch, poke them into an orange a la Martha Stewart.

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GINGER: Available as a fresh root in the produce section or as a powder. Except for baking, don't bother with the powder as it doesn't compare to the fresh grated pulp. Look for smooth, unshriveled roots or rhizome. The Chinese traded ginger with the Romans as far back as the 2nd century. These days it's grown in almost every tropical country. Ginger is pungent and aromatic and adds zest to soups, stir-fries, grains, tofu dishes, sauces, salad dressings, and desserts. I particularly enjoy brewing my own soothing ginger tea for cold symptoms or to aid digestion. It's also an effective remedy against nausea - great for motion sickness! Along with cinnamon, and cloves, ginger is one of the three most important spices in baking and my favourite. Entire cookbooks are devoted to this versatile spice!



NUTMEG: This fascinating spice is actually the nut of a tropical evergreen tree native to the Moluccas. The nut is covered with a red lacy web from which the spice "mace" is derived. Though this exotic, sweet, woody spice is not so popular today, it was once so valued that the well heeled carried with them their own little silver nutmeg grater (complete with storage space). Freshly-ground nutmeg would be added to food and drinks. This practice can be explained by the fact that nutmeg contains *myristicin*, which taken in large quantities can produce euphoria and hallucinations. Test it out sprinkled on Brussels sprouts, quiches, mulled wine and, don't forget some in your eggnog.



SAFFRON: The true prima donna of all spices, delicately fragrant saffron remains today as expensive as gold. The little orange-red strands of saffron are really the stigmas of a precious crocus which blooms for only two weeks a year. Although originally dating as far back as prehistory and believed to originate from Asia Minor and Greece, saffron is now primarily exported from Spain. It is used in the famous Spanish Paella, Olé! Also great in fish soups and sauces, rice and seafood dishes, and used in some traditional English cakes and buns. Be sure to get the right stuff which is usually sold in little glass vials. The best strands should have a deep colour, not yellow or pale. Always add saffron towards the end of the cooking process and soak briefly in water before use.



TURMERIC: In my opinion, turmeric powder deserves top prize. As a natural anti-inflammatory remedy par excellence, turmeric (its' active agent is called curcumin) is rapidly rising up the charts with numerous studies backing up this true panacea. Obtained from grinding the dried root of a ginger-like plant, turmeric was one of the great Indian spices from antiquity valued for its culinary and medicinal uses. Today, it is one of the world's cheapest spices but that may all change. It's widely cultivated and used in North Africa, India, and the Middle East being a primary ingredient in curry powder and Garam Masala (which are both blends of several spices). It adds fragrance and warmth to fish, chicken and vegetable dishes, couscous and curries, and to condiments such as chutney lending these dishes their characteristic yellow colour. Chefs take note: turmeric, which was once used to dye religious garments, will stain your clothes and cooking utensils if you're sloppy. Save your best cloth serviettes for another meal!



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Some spicy treats ...

- 1 tsp turmeric
- 1 tsp curry powder
- 1/4 tsp ground ginger
- 1/4 tsp allspice
- 1/8 tsp cayenne pepper
- 1/4 to 1/2 tsp salt
- 4 (6-ounce) wild salmon fillets or steaks, about 1-inch thick
- 2 tsps olive oil



- 1 large onion, chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 3 medium sweet potatoes, scrubbed and cut in 1" cubes
- 4 green bananas, peeled and cut in 1/2" slices
- 3 cups vegetable broth
- 1 Tbsp curry powder
- 1 tsp paprika
- 1 tsp cinnamon
- 2 cups cut green beans or peas, frozen or fresh
- 1 cup coconut milk or soy milk
- 1/4 cup chopped cilantro (optional)
- Cooked barley, cooked brown rice or cooked quinoa (you choose)

Turmeric Salmon

Several studies suggest that curcumin, a component of the spice turmeric puts a damper on inflammation, as well as protect against chronic diseases. One study in mice showed that curcumin may also protect against breast cancer.

Preheat oven to 350 F. Place the first five ingredients in a small bowl blending spices together with a fork. Sprinkle salt evenly onto both sides of the fish. Pat spice mixture onto one side of each fillet. Heat oil in a large, ovenproof, nonstick skillet over medium-high heat. Add salmon, spiced side down, and cook for two to three minutes or until nicely browned.

Place salmon in oven, and bake it for five to six minutes or until fish flakes easily with a fork.

Serves 4

Sweet Potato Curry

Combine the onion, garlic, sweet potatoes, bananas, lemon grass, bouillon and spices in a large pot. Bring to a boil, reduce the heat and simmer, uncovered, 30-40 minutes or until the sweet potatoes are tender. Stir in the green beans or peas and simmer until they are tender (about 5 minutes for the beans and 2 minutes for the peas). Stir in the coconut milk or soy milk and stir. Serve over cooked whole grains. Garnish with the cilantro.

4-6 servings



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¼ lb. or 1 stick of unsalted butter
6 Tbs. of raw honey
2 Tbs. of organic blackstrap molasses
¾ cup organic milk or soya milk
1 organic egg, beaten
1 Tbs. lemon juice
2 cups organic spelt flour
½ cup rye flour
1 tsp. baking soda
¼ tsp. ground allspice
½ tsp. ground cardamom
½ tsp. ground coriander
½ tsp. grated nutmeg
¼ tsp. ground ginger
¼ tsp. ground cloves
pinch of sea salt

3 Tbs. cold-pressed vegetable oil
4 Tbs. organic unbleached white flour
1 ½ cup apple juice (warmed)
4 Tbs. raw honey
½ tsp. cinnamon



¼ cup honey
½ cup butter
½ cup molasses
2 cups unbleached white flour
¼ cup ground almonds
½ tsp. grated orange peel
1 tsp. ground cinnamon
½ tsp. ground ginger
½ tsp. grated nutmeg
¼ tsp. ground cardamom
½ tsp. baking soda
vegetable oil for greasing pans

Spice Bread

Preheat oven to 375 F. In a large mixing bowl, cream together the butter, honey, and molasses. Whisk in the milk, egg, and lemon juice. In a separate bowl, sift together the flours, baking soda, sea salt, and spices. Stir into the liquid mixture and blend well.

Butter a loaf pan and line with greased waxed paper. Spoon in the batter and bake for 50-60 minutes in preheated oven. Test for doneness with a toothpick. Turn out onto a wire rack and remove paper. Cool and wrap tightly in parchment paper then in foil. Let sit for several days before eating. Keeps for several weeks.

Makes 1 loaf.

Apple Syrup

Warm oil in a heavy-bottomed saucepan over very low heat. Add flour and stir with a wooden spoon. Cook for about 3 minutes while stirring. Add warmed apple juice and stir well with a whisk. Add honey and cinnamon. Bring mixture to a boil, stirring all the while. Serve warm over pancakes, your morning muffin, or a delicious slice of spice bread.

Traditional Spice Cookies

In a small saucepan over medium heat, combine honey, butter, and molasses and bring to a boil. Remove from heat and set aside for 3 minutes.

While mixture is cooling, combine remaining ingredients in a large mixing bowl. Stir in honey mixture and blend well. Divide dough into four equal amounts and roll each into a log. Wrap each log in plastic wrap and refrigerate overnight so the spices can ripen.

When ready to cut out your cookie shapes, preheat oven at 375F. Lightly grease non-stick cookie sheets and set aside. Roll each log out on a lightly floured work surface to 1/8-inch thickness. Cut into festive shapes with cookie cutter and transfer onto baking sheets. Bake cookies for about 5 minutes or so. Cool on cooling racks.

Makes about 3-4 dozen depending on size

The End