

The History, Mystery and Romance of Spices

Spices not only make our food and drinks better, but also provide various health benefits

BY SYED IMTIAZ AHMAD

SPICES HAVE PROMPTED SOME OF history's greatest trading expeditions — maritime routes from Europe to South Asia and back again, as well as overland routes from southern Arabia and Africa to Europe. Considering their scarcity, accessibility, and cost, for most of history they have been luxury items for monarchs and their courts.

So useful, indeed indispensable, were spices in both political and economic terms that monarchs sent expeditions to find them, merchants risked life and fortune to trade in them, wars were fought over them. Whole populations were enslaved to produce them, the world was explored and the restless, ruthless competition to find and sell them engendered many far-reaching changes.

History. Looking back across some 7,000 years of history enables historians to highlight spices' pivotal part in developing

modern civilization. Frederic Rosengarten's "The Book of Spices" (1973; <https://www.gutenberg.org>), a classic account of the history of some 41 of the world's most popular spices, describes their earliest appearance in ancient Egypt and ends with their myriad uses today.

Many of the spices were native to South Asia, which has suitable climatic conditions, although some were imported. (<https://www.mccormickscienceinstitute.com/resources/history-of-spices>). At a time when Europe knew nothing of sugar, tea, coffee, chocolate, potatoes, citrus fruits or tobacco, South Asian spices supplied flavor and piquancy for food and drink and fragrant aromas to mask a multitude of unpleasant odors.

The early sea routes promoted the growth of this trade. Arab traders sailed directly to spice-producing lands long before the Christian era. Chinese merchants crossed

the waters of the Malay Archipelago to trade in the Spice Islands (the Maluku islands of modern-day Indonesia). Sri Lanka was another important trading point.

In Alexandria, Egypt, port dues revenues were already enormous when, in 80 BCE, Ptolemy XI bequeathed the city to the Romans, who soon initiated voyages from Egypt to South Asia. Under them, Alexandria became the world's greatest commercial center and the leading emporium for South Asia's aromatic and pungent spices, all of which found their way to the markets of Greece and the Roman Empire.

Roman trade with the region was extensive for more than three centuries, revived somewhat during the fifth century and declined again during the following century. It weakened, but didn't break, the Arabs' hold on the spice trade, which endured through the Middle Ages.

Cinnamon, cassia, cardamom, ginger and turmeric have always been important commercial items. The first two found their way to the Middle East at least 4,000 years ago. From time immemorial, southern Arabia had been a trading center for frankincense, myrrh and other fragrant resins and gums. Arab traders artfully withheld the true sources of the spices they sold.

Spices have been used in China since about 2700 BCE, although ancient reports are shrouded in mythology and superstition. A



▲ The economically important Silk Road (red) and spice trade routes (blue) were blocked by the Seljuk Empire c. 1090, triggering the Crusades, and by the Ottoman Empire c. 1453, which spurred the Age of Discovery and European Colonialism. (c) Cartographic-images.net

reliable tradition holds that in the third-century BCE, royal courtiers had to put cloves in their mouths to sweeten their breath when addressing the emperor. The ancient Greeks imported pepper, cassia, cinnamon, and ginger to the Mediterranean area.

The use of spices gradually became widespread among the common people as well. Both the Quran and the Old Testament record Prophet Yousuf's (*'alayhi as salam*) sale to a caravan of Egypt-bound spice traders and the Israelites begging Prophet Moses (*'alayhi as salam*) to ask God to send

Mutant Prostate Cancer Cells," <https://cancerres.aacrjournals.org/content/66/6/3222>). Cumin and turmeric, which possess powerful antioxidant and antimicrobial properties, can be used against harmful bacteria in the body.

Chile peppers are one of the world's most important spice crops. Although hot peppers contain no real heat, eating one may cause a burning sensation in one's mouth — they trick the brain into thinking that the mouth is on fire — or to sweat. Eaten moderately, they strengthen one's digestive system and have other beneficial health effects.

IN GENERAL, EVIDENCE-BASED DATA SHOWS THAT SPICES KEEP ONE'S HEART HEALTHY, PROMOTE WEIGHT LOSS AND ACT AS CATALYSTS THAT ENHANCE THE BODY'S METABOLIC ACTIVITY, CALM AND KEEP THE GUT HEALTHY AND RELIEVE PAIN.

them herbs and spices, including garlic and ginger. Before his prophetic mission, Prophet Muhammad (*salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) worked as an agent for Makka's various spice and other merchants.

Many centuries later, European armies began spreading the spices of the "Old World" to the "New World," notably South America. The U.S. entered the global spice trade in the late 18th century. Freed from the taxes and trade restrictions imposed by Imperial Britain, Americans traded salmon, codfish, tobacco, snuff, flour, soap, candles, butter, cheese and beef for pepper, cassia, cloves, cinnamon, ginger and other spices.

Studies indicate that spicy food leads to longevity, particularly in the absence of alcohol and other intoxicants. Spices such as cumin, cinnamon, turmeric, peppers and chilies can raise one's metabolic resting rate and slow down one's appetite. Curcumin, a compound in turmeric, may reduce inflammation (Jun Lv, et al., "Frequent Spicy Food Consumption Linked with Longer Life," doi: 10.1136/bmj.h4932).

Ginger's anti-inflammatory properties can heal arthritis, autoimmune disorders, headaches and nausea. Capsaicin, an active component of chili peppers, slows and destroys cancer cells. A UCLA study found that it also inhibits the growth of prostate cancer cells in mice while leaving healthy cells unharmed (Akio Mori, et al., "Capsaicin, a Component of Red Peppers, Inhibits the Growth of Androgen-Independent, p53

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Mystery is defined as that which is secret, lacking a clear explanation, hard to understand or explain, or something unexplainable or unsolvable, often eliciting curiosity. What lies behind the outward face of the taste and aroma of spices? What leads to the choice and amount of certain spices in a recipe? How are additional spices chosen — through trial and error, cultivating a certain "art," or is there some science behind it? The phrase "Grandmother's recipe" often carries mysterious connotations.

Ayurvedic texts dating back some 5,000 years advise that chewing cloves and cardamom wrapped in betel-nut leaves will increase one's saliva, which helps digestion, and to recline on one's left side after chewing spices. What was the source of this advice — experimentation or some form of revealed knowledge?

Merchants imported and traded in spices from distant, unknown lands. By the time these spices reached their final European destination, they were reputed to have mystical, almost occult-like and barely fathomable properties.


To discourage competitors and enhance prices, long-ago spice merchants told many stories. Cassia cinnamon, a type of cinnamon prepared from the dried inner bark

of an evergreen tree that grows in areas of Southeast Asia, was said to grow in shallow lakes guarded by winged animals and/or to grow in deep glens infested with poisonous snakes. Other merchants claimed that giant birds grabbed cinnamon sticks from massive slabs of ox meat to build their nests on cliffs. The large slabs would collapse the nests, allowing clever merchants to collect their prize.

An author who lived around 400 BCE wrote, "Cinnamon grows in deep lakes, near the homes of flying animals." A story related in a 13th-century book told of how people cast their nets in the Nile in the evening and went out in the morning to get the collected ginger and cinnamon. Some maintained that the source of these spices was the "Earthly Paradise," interpreted by some as the Garden of Eden.

The 16th-century English encyclopedist Bartholomew de Glanville believed that black pepper was the result of white pepper scorched by fire. He considered peppercorn to be the fruit of a tree that grew in a forest on the south slope of a hill named Caucasus, the home of a vicious breed of snakes that had to be driven out by fire so the fruit could be harvested.

Romance, the idealized use of imagination, has elements of mystery and excitement often far removed from earthly considerations. Cooks are known to associate various spices with certain symbols. For example, rosemary symbolizes remembrance, bay leaves fidelity, oregano joy and happiness, and thyme affection.

In his book "The Poetics of Spices" (1968), Timothy Morton focuses on spice and Romantic consumerism and details the relationship between consumer capitalism and literary representation. Spice became a figure of pure opulence, the richness of figurative language itself. He claims that capitalism achieves its legitimacy by mobilizing desire and promoting fantasies that produce consumers who desire them. These "exotic" goods, which materialize dreams, play a powerful role in producing and then circulating those desires found in consumer culture. 

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