

THE
BOOK OF
SPICE

FROM ANISE
TO ZEDOARY

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PROFILE BOOKS

INTRODUCTION



I remember vividly the first time I tasted spicy food. I was nine or ten, and we – my mother, sister and I – had come to London to visit Auntie Sheila, a deeply pious Irish Catholic woman who lived in a tiny flat in Marylebone that would now be worth about £16 billion. Auntie Sheila was not actually our aunt but one of our mother’s oldest friends, and she fascinated us as children because she claimed an angel had once visited her in the night. (For the record, the angel had ‘the most beautiful face you ever saw’ and a mass of golden ringlets. It smiled at her, as angels should.)

On this occasion we had a picnic in Hyde Park. Amid the deckchairs and joggers a blanket was spread out and green bags emblazoned with the legend ‘St Michael’ emptied onto it. There were white fluffy rolls and crisps and bottles of lemonade, tubs of white goo with raw cabbage and tangerine floating in it, Caramel Delight Desserts – liquefied crème caramel topped with star-bursts of cream – and chicken legs coated in something bright red, sticky and oddly yoghurt-smelling.

‘Eurgh,’ I said, fishing one of these legs out of its plastic tray. ‘What the hell’s this?’

‘It’s tandoori chicken,’ replied my mother. ‘It comes all the way from Tandoor in India.’ She leaned forward and whispered sharply: ‘Don’t say “What the hell” in front of Auntie Sheila.’

I bit into the chicken. It was delicious. One of the most delicious things I’d ever eaten. How clever were the citizens of Tandoor, to have invented such a dish! That creamy sourness. That gentle, peppery heat with a hint of lemon and ... hang on, what were

those *other* flavours, the ones overtaking on the inside lane as my saliva went to work?

There was only one word for them, a word I had never needed to use before: spicy.

This would have been 1981, possibly 1982 – only a few years after a young woman in the product development department at Marks & Spencer called Cathy Chapman transformed food retail in Britain by introducing a range of high-quality chilled readymeals. The first of these was chicken kiev, a huge hit in 1979. A version of chicken tikka masala, the Nation's Favourite Dish, followed soon afterwards. (Quite possibly, M&S's St Michael-branded tandoori chicken legs were Chapman's idea too. I wouldn't be surprised.)

CTM, as chicken tikka masala is known in the trade, is supposed to be a British invention. The son of chef Ahmed Aslam Ali claims his father invented it in the early 1970s in his Shish Mahal restaurant in Glasgow after a customer complained that his tandoori chicken (and 'tandoori', as we all know now, refers to the clay oven in which the chicken is cooked, not a place) was 'a bit dry'. Ali's solution was to open a can of Campbell's tomato soup, add some garam masala and a dash of cream and pour it over the chicken. 'Pukka', as someone once liked to say.

This is a wonderful story, so wonderful that in 2001 it formed the basis of a famous speech by the then foreign secretary, Robin Cook, to the Social Market Foundation singing the praises of multiculturalism. Cook described CTM as 'a perfect illustration of the way Britain absorbs and adapts external influences': 'Chicken tikka is an Indian dish,' he declared. 'The masala sauce was added to satisfy the desire of British people to have their meat served in gravy.'

Well, yes and no. The current thinking among Indian food historians is that, far from being 'inauthentic' – the meaningless criticism usually flung at CTM – the dish is a bastardised version of murgh makhani, or butter chicken, invented (or at least popularised) by the New Delhi restaurant Moti Mahal shortly after

partition in 1947. And if we're going to talk about the appeal of meat in gravy, we can go back, back in time, to ancient Mesopotamia, the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers that is now part of Iraq, to prove it's no mere British obsession.

When the French Assyriologist Jean Bottéro deciphered three cracked clay tablets written in around 1700 BC in the Mesopotamian language of Akkadian, he realised not only that they contained the world's oldest extant recipes, but also that these recipes were rich and sophisticated – evidence of a scientifically based cuisine miles from the bland mush of pulses he and his colleagues had expected. Among the recipes curated and glossed by Bottéro in his book *The Oldest Cuisine in the World: Cooking in Mesopotamia* (2004) are proto-curries in which meats such as lamb, goat, pigeon, stag and francolin (a species of wild fowl) are seared until charred before being immersed in a fatty, spiced broth to finish cooking. Using Bottéro as a starting point, author and food blogger Laura Kelley, aka The Silk Road Gourmet, conducted research of her own and concluded that the Sumerians of southern Mesopotamia probably used a wide range of spices, including cinnamon, liquorice, carob, dill seed, juniper, sumac, cumin and asafoetida.

The point I'm trying to make is straightforward, and its implications ripple out across this book: dietary habits change not in a formal, ordered fashion that it is possible or desirable to police, but by accident and, especially, assimilation. My childhood bite of tandoori chicken led me, over the course of the next thirty years, through a network of meandering taste pathways, influencing both the way I cook and the sort of food I want to eat. In short, it made me love spice.

The concept of 'fusion' food that combines elements of different culinary traditions has been with us since the 1970s. But really, is there any other kind?

Consider Mughlai cuisine, which for many people outside India is 'synonymous with Indian food'.¹ In fact, it is a synthesis of the cuisines of northern India, central Asia and Persia – a memento of

invasion. Similarly, the roots of that much-maligned curry-house staple vindaloo lie in the Portuguese carne de vinha d'alhos, a dish of pork marinated in wine and garlic which the Portuguese brought to Goa. In Mamak cuisine – the food of Malay Tamil Muslims – the Mughlai dish korma will, unlike elsewhere, contain coconut milk and be seasoned with star anise. When Gujaratis left India's west coast for Kenya and Uganda, they took their cuisine with them, but it melded with indigenous cuisines, yielding results Madhur Jaffrey describes with elegant precision:

A Kenyan-Indian family might serve the Portuguese-influenced prawn peri-peri, a dish of prawns cooked with bird's-eye chillies (the peri-peri), garlic, cumin and either lemon juice or vinegar one day, followed by green coriander chicken, maize cooked with mustard seeds and a very Muslim pilaf containing rice, meat and cardamom-flavoured stock the next.²

Sometimes spice use defines food cultures shared by people who have little else in common. In Jerusalem ownership of local staples such as the spice mix za'atar is fiercely contested by Jews and Arabs. But as Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi point out, Israeli and Palestinian food cultures are 'mashed and fused together in a way that is impossible to unravel. They interact all the time and influence each other constantly so nothing is pure any more.'³

As with language, so with food: flux is the natural state of things. Any attempt to marshal dishes into rigid canons will fail because of the casual, aleatory way recipes are transmitted in the real world.

Of course, global travel and immigration and the internet have catalysed this process. Last week I had some prunes that needed using up, so I cooked a late-medieval lamb stew from a National Trust cookbook. Reading the recipe, I thought it would be more interesting if, instead of black pepper, I used the Javanese cubeb or the African melegueta pepper (also known as Grains of Paradise), both of which were available in England in the fifteenth century.

Neither was sold in my local Sainsbury's – surprise! – but Brixton Market, in the heart of south London's African-Caribbean community, came up trumps, and even if it hadn't, they would have been simple to source online.

Bottéro observes that all societies develop 'routines and rituals, perhaps even myths, to regulate the use of food, indeed, to confer a value upon food that goes beyond the mere consumption of it'.⁴ A glance through Dorothy Hartley's magnificent *Food in England* (1954) makes plain that this country once had plenty of these, from the belief that animals should be slaughtered 'when the moon is on the wane' to the insistence that an egg and lemon jelly will be spoiled if any ends of sponge biscuit are allowed to protrude above the surface. By the 1980s, when I was growing up, such rituals still existed but had ceased to be about cooking. Instead they were about branding, packaging and convenience – the extension of a trend that began in 1953 with the launch by the American firm Swanson of the frozen TV dinner.

On Sundays we ate together as a family. During the week, though, we balanced plates on our knees while watching *Wogan* and *EastEnders*. I agree with the cookery writer Rose Prince that 'the rituals of preparing dinner and laying the table are an enormous part of happiness',⁵ but our mother, newly divorced and working full-time, lacked the energy or enthusiasm to cook in the evenings. I recognised her strongly in Nigel Slater's portrait of his mother in his memoir *Toast* (2003) – a 'chops-and-peas sort of a cook' who 'found it all a bit of an ordeal'.⁶ We ate a lot of chicken kiev (though not from M&S – too expensive) and microwavable tagliatelle carbonara.

What we didn't eat, the odd leg of tandoori chicken excepted, was spicy food. Opposite our house in Loggerheads – a small village on the border of Shropshire and Staffordshire, 4 miles from Market Drayton, home of Müller Fruit Corners – was a Chinese restaurant called Ambrosia. I couldn't tell you if it was any good because we never went there and never would have done, even if

we could have afforded to eat out. If my childhood is anything to go by, the focus of white lower-middle-class culinary aspiration in the mid- to late 1980s was Italy rather than India, China or South-East Asia. (As for Africa, I believed for years, on the basis of Band Aid's assertion that it was a place where 'nothing ever grows', that its cuisine amounted to airdropped bags of rice.)

We dressed salads with olive oil and drank espresso-strength Lavazza coffee by the mugful – even me, as a child, which accounts for a lot. But although we did possess a spice rack, none of the dusty little jars ever saw action. They just sat there, in the glare of the summer sun, gathering dust while their contents grew stale and discoloured.

Not until I left university, moved to London and started working at the listings magazine *Time Out* did I appreciate that there was more to spicy food than supermarket chicken jalfrezi. I remember leafing through the annual *Eating & Drinking Guide* that *Time Out* published – a thick directory of London's best restaurants – and being amazed by the wealth of sub-categories. Contributing to it was obscurely thrilling, as if you were extending some vast codex of urban lore. Who knew that there were so many types of cuisine, and that a single city could accommodate them all?

When Das Sreedharan's Stoke Newington-based Keralan restaurant mini-chain Rasa opened a branch on Charlotte Street, close to our office on Tottenham Court Road, we all trooped along excitedly. (Sadly, Rasa Samudra closed in 2012.) And if the quality of the food in Chinatown wasn't always top-notch, it was still good to have it there, five minutes round the corner, when the desire for dim sum grew overwhelming.

Nowadays my cooking is more international than my Birds Eye Steakhouse grill-munching twelve-year-old self would ever have imagined. I use spices almost every day and try to be as ambitious as I can. But simplicity can be equally effective. One of my favourite recipes, immeasurably useful on those evenings when the kids are late to bed and time is short, is the first 'curry' recipe I ever

used – A Quick Lamb Curry, from Nigel Slater's *The 30-Minute Cook* (1994), a book I bought when it came out to commemorate my move to London. I recommend it heartily.

Slater gave me the confidence to experiment. From A Quick Lamb Curry it was but a short step to making spices a part of my daily cooking routine: glazing sweet potatoes with ginger syrup and allspice; stuffing chickens with harissa and dried fruit; baking Cornish saffron buns and hot cross buns and cumin-scented bread. It's hard to think of any food that can't be enlivened by spices. Though my children might tell you that smoked paprika sprinkled on fish fingers is a step too far.

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We take them for granted today, now that they are everywhere and, for the most part, dirt cheap, but spices might just be the most important commodities ever – more important even than oil or gold. For most of human history they have been held in sacred regard, despite the fact that in dietary terms they are utterly inessential.

No one ever died for want of spices. And yet thousands died in their name – both the plunderers and the plundered. The desire to control the trade in major spices such as nutmeg, cinnamon, cloves and black pepper led Europe's mercantile powers to commit atrocities on a par with those we're currently witnessing in the more turbulent parts of the Middle East.

Without the wealth generated by the spice trade, however, the Renaissance might never have happened. Alexandre Dumas *père* put it best when he wrote of Venice: 'The intellectual faculties seem to have soared in an enduring exaltation under the influence of spice. Is it to spices that we owe Titian's masterpieces? I am tempted to believe it.'⁷ (At the end of the fifteenth century Venice annually imported from Alexandria the equivalent of 500,000 kg of pepper, though over the next hundred years the importance

of spice to its success decreased after the Ottoman authorities restricted trade with Syria and Egypt.)

All the major expeditions – the ones that taught us how the world fits together, the ones headed up by legendary, storybook figures like Christopher Columbus (the Italian who, under the auspices of the Spanish monarchy, made four voyages across the Atlantic), Vasco da Gama (the Portuguese explorer who was the first European to establish a sea route to India) and Ferdinand Magellan (also Portuguese; his expedition to the East Indies led to the first circumnavigation of the Earth) – were compelled either wholly or partly by a greedy need to find the places where spices grew, so that the traditional middlemen – the Arab and Phoenician traders who sold spices on to merchants in places such as Venice and Constantinople – might be cut out of the picture.

Before da Gama, spices found their way to Europe along a variety of caravan routes – there was no single ‘spice trail’ – across the Middle East or along the Red Sea to Egypt. Their ultimate origin was India, Sri Lanka, China and Indonesia. Some spices, like nutmeg and cloves, were indigenous to a cluster of tiny, remote, unmapped islands (the Bandas in the West Pacific for nutmeg; the Moluccas for cloves) and could be obtained only from them. As soon as sea routes were established and blanks in maps filled in, spices came directly within Europe’s grasp. Vast corporations like Britain’s East India Company and its Dutch equivalent, the Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, or VOC, were founded to manage the trade in them and rule the lands where they grew. Once spices began to be cultivated in areas where they weren’t indigenous, the monopolies these companies had made it their business to enforce collapsed.

But perhaps, before we go any further, we should define our terms. What exactly is a spice? The word derives from the Latin *specie*, meaning ‘sort, kind or type’; the same root as ‘special’, ‘especially’ and, obviously, ‘species’. The best modern definition for me is the historian Jack Turner’s in his *Spice: The History of*

a Temptation (2004): ‘Broadly, a spice is not a herb, understood to mean the aromatic, herbaceous, green parts of the plant. Herbs are leafy, whereas spices are obtained from other parts of the plant: bark, root, flower bud, gums and resins, seed, fruit, or stigma.’⁸ But another authority, the American writer Frederic Rosengarten, who worked for many years in the spice industry, maintains that it is ‘extremely difficult to determine where a spice ends and a herb begins, as culinary herbs are in reality one group of spices’.⁹

I don’t think this is right, but you can see where Rosengarten is coming from. If you buy his line of thinking, then the aniseed qualities of a herb like tarragon make it more spicy than herby. And it is true that, before spices became cheap enough for ordinary households to afford, what we might call ‘spice effects’ were produced by using an array of aromatic plants no longer in the repertoire, such as bloodwort, borage, liverwort, tansy and patience.

That said, I’m not sure that chia, the seed of *Salvia hispanica*, a flowering plant in the mint family, deserves to be classed as a spice. Despite meeting Turner’s criterion (it’s a seed) and being hugely popular as a superfood on account of its high levels of Omega-3 fatty acids, fibre, antioxidants and minerals, chia neither tastes of anything nor has any meaningful culinary application as far as I can tell. I suppose a case could be made on medical grounds for including it here, but I haven’t – although it’s worth observing, by the by, that spices were the original superfoods.

The story of spice is a global one, which necessarily stops en route at Indonesia, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, India, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, China, Russia and Madagascar, not forgetting the New World of the Americas, Scandinavia, Central and Eastern Europe and Britain. For the formidable food historian Andrew Dalby this also affects the definition: spice is defined by ‘distant origin and long-distance trade, as well as unique aroma’;¹⁰ spices are ‘natural products from a single limited region that are in demand and fetch a high price, far beyond their place of origin, for their flavour and odour’.¹¹ Much of the time, especially in antiquity, spices were used

medicinally rather than to flavour food – also in embalming rituals and as perfumes and cosmetics. But then, as Dalby points out, the line between food and drugs was often rather fuzzy.

The upshot is that in the Middle Ages ‘spice’ tended to mean anything that was expensive and imported. So as well as cinnamon, nutmeg, black pepper et al. the term encompassed almonds, oranges, ambergris (a waxy substance secreted by the intestines of sperm whales and used in perfumery) and all manner of dyes and unguents and medicinal substances, such as the corpse extract *mumma* and *tutti*, scrapings from Alexandrian chimneys that were made into a poultice and applied to weeping sores. Nowadays we think of spices as edible items and shunt the likes of frankincense and spikenard into the siding marked ‘aromatics’. But often ‘edible’ spices were used as incense: the Roman emperor Nero is supposed to have burned the city’s entire supply of cinnamon to mark the death of his second wife.

Wolfgang Schivelbusch, in his ‘social history of spices, stimulants and intoxicants’ (note the way he brackets these together) *Tastes of Paradise* (1979), invents his own category of *Genussmittel* – literally, ‘articles of pleasure’ – to denote substances eaten, drunk or inhaled to provide sensory gratification, as opposed to substances consumed out of mere necessity. This approach lumps spices in with tea, coffee and sugar as well as alcohol, opium and cocaine. (After much deliberation, and although there is a compelling case to be made for their inclusion – a *much* more compelling one than for chia – I decided not to write about tea, coffee and sugar here. They are such massive subjects that covering them would have created a conceptual imbalance.)

In Europe the use of spices in cooking reached its apogee in the Middle Ages. One canard deserving of swift despatch is the theory, repeated time and again, that spices were used primarily as preservatives and to disguise the taste of rotten food. There were plenty of other methods and substances available for doing this, and they weren’t half as expensive. Rather, spices were status

symbols. The height of luxury and refinement, they made their consumers feel deeply cultured, as if they were partaking of something so magical and rarefied it could barely be articulated.

On the question of how widespread spice use was there is less agreement than you might expect. Schivelbusch may be overstating things when he claims that in the Middle Ages food was ‘little more than a vehicle for condiments which were used in combinations we nowadays would consider quite bizarre’,¹² and clearly the lower orders could not have afforded to add spices to their staple diet of foods, such as the cereal pottage frumenty – except perhaps mustard, which was home-grown and therefore cheap. But those nearer the top of the scale certainly would have used spices in their cooking, and from Anglo-Saxon times cinnamon and nutmeg were routinely added to beers and wines.

Ready-made spice mixes were available to buy in the Middle Ages. The most common were ‘blanch powder’ (pale in colour, made from ginger, cinnamon and sugar), ‘powder fort’ (hot, dominated by ginger and types of pepper) and ‘powder douce’ (sweeter, as its name suggests: the author of the fourteenth-century cookery book *Le Menagier de Paris* recommends it contain ginger, cinnamon, nutmeg, galangal, sugar and Grains of Paradise).

We know from the correspondence of members of the upper-class Norfolk family the Pastons, which runs from 1422 to 1509, that Margaret Paston often sent her husband to London to buy items she failed to source locally, among them spices, figs and treacle from Genoa, the last of these newly fashionable as a medicine. In one letter she asks her son, who is in London, to let her know the price of black pepper, Grains of Paradise, cloves, mace, ginger, cinnamon, rice, saffron and galangal, ‘and if it be better cheap at London than it is here, I shall send you money to buy with such as I will have’.¹³

The duke of Buckingham used almost 2 lb. of spices per day in the years 1452–3. But this was by no means standard practice. At least one food historian thinks it more likely that large quantities

of spices were ‘saved up for special meals rather than used every day to provide a light flavouring’.¹⁴

In medieval Europe, as in ancient Persia, spices were associated with feasting and banquets. Among the treasures of Richard II, recipes from whose court kitchen survive in the book known as *Forme of Cury* (c. 1390), were spice-plates for use when spices were served ceremonially at the end of meals with a spiced wine called hippocras. Spices like saffron made possible the ‘endoring’ of food so that it was brightly coloured and gilded, emphasising the extraordinary transformations a cook had wrought – though the roots of endoring lie in Arab medical lore, where the eating of gold was held to prolong life.

Neat patterns were valued: one capon might be served with a white sauce, the other with a yellow one. Sandalwood extract produced an attractive red; parsley and sorrel green. A popular (camel-)coloured sauce was cameline, a recipe for which can be found in the thirteenth-century French cookbook known as *Le Viandier de Taillevent*:

Cameline: To Make Cameline Sauce. Grind ginger, a great deal of cinnamon, cloves, Grains of Paradise, mace, and if you wish, long pepper; strain bread that has been moistened in vinegar, strain everything together and salt as necessary.¹⁵

‘Deep down,’ note the authors of *The Medieval Kitchen* (1998), ‘the medieval cook was an alchemist – in a quest for colour rather than for gold’,¹⁶ before making the good point that medieval spice mania was not solely a European phenomenon: the dietician to the Mongol court at Beijing in the early fourteenth century used twenty-four different spices in his cooking.

The theory that the huge impact of Arab cuisine on upper-class European cooking in the Middle Ages was a result of the Crusades is treated as a given by most food historians. Frederic Rosengarten maintains that the Crusades stimulated trade, leading to

the ‘unprecedented availability’ of imports from the Holy Land: ‘dates, figs, raisins, almonds, lemons, oranges, sugar, rice, and various Oriental spices including pepper, nutmeg, cloves and cardamom’.¹⁷ But there are dissenting voices: Clifford A. Wright believes that ‘the Crusaders made no impact on Western European cuisine’ because ‘the cultural contacts were already occurring by virtue of the dominance of Italian merchants in the East and the presence of Islamic regimes in Spain and Sicily’.¹⁸

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Of course, the story of spices pre-dates the Middle Ages and the Age of Exploration. Or should I say, ‘stories’, because there are scores of them.

Which one did you hear first? Was it the story of Joseph – of Technicolor Dreamcoat fame – who in Genesis 37: 18–36 is sold by his brothers to a gang of Ishmaelite traders carrying gum, balm and aromatic resin from Gilead down to Egypt? Or the story of the prophet Muhammad, whose first wife, Kadijha, was the widow of a spice merchant and who became a successful merchant himself before he experienced the visions in which the Koran was revealed to him? Or what about Shen Nung, the mythical father of Chinese medicine, who supposedly spoke when he was three days old, walked within a week and ploughed a field at three? His fastidious research into the properties of plants involved testing over 300 spices and herbs on himself, with predictably fatal consequences: the yellow flower of a rogue weed caused his intestines to rupture before he had a chance to drink his antidote.

Perhaps the most entertaining stories are the ones medieval Europe told itself about where spices came from, based on legends circulated by the Arabs and Phoenicians in whose commercial interests it was to keep the true location a secret. The association of spices with distant, magical lands is promoted assiduously in the literature of the period. Consider the idealised garden of the

thirteenth-century French courtly poem the ‘Roman de la Rose’. In Chaucer’s translation

Ther was eke wexyng many a spice,
 As clowe-gelofre [cloves], and lycorice,
 Gyngevre, and greyn de parys [Grains of Paradise],
 Canell [cinnamon], and setewale [zedoary] of prys,
 And many a spice delitable
 To eten whan men rise fro table.

In the satirical utopia of the anonymous Irish poem ‘The Land of Cockayne’ (c. 1330), where roasted pigs wander about with knives in their backs to facilitate carving, we shouldn’t be surprised to find an abundance of spice:

In the praer [meadow] is a tre,
 Swithe likful forto se,
 The rote is gingeuir and galingale,
 The siouns [shoots] beth al sedwale,
 Trie maces beth the flure [flowers],
 The rind [bark] canel of swet odor,
 The frute gilofre of gode smakke. Of
 cucubes [cubeb] ther nis no lakke.

Spices were, some believed, flotsam carried along by the rivers that ran out of Eden, shown on the Hereford Map of c. 1300 as an island in eastern Asia and inhabited, according to the anonymous author of the geographical survey *Expositio totius mundi et gentium*, by a race known as the Camarines, who ‘eat wild honey, pepper, and manna which rains from heaven’.¹⁹

Other quasi-humans believed to inhabit spicy realms were: the Cynophali, who have dogs’ heads; the Blemmyae, whose faces are in their chests; and the Sciopods, who hop around on a single huge leg. (Isidore of Seville on Sciopods: ‘In summer they

lie down on the earth and shade themselves under their great feet.’)

Many of these stories found their way into the fantastical *Itinerarium* (Latin for ‘road map’, meaning ‘travelogue’) attributed to Sir John Mandeville, allegedly an English knight from St Albans, but thought to have been written by a Belgian monk called Jan de Langhe. Despite being garbled nonsense cobbled together from sources such as the late-medieval Italian explorer Odoric of Pordenone, the *Itinerarium* was used as a reference book by Christopher Columbus on his voyages to the New World. So it led, ironically enough, to the discovery by Europeans of New World spices such as chilli peppers, vanilla and annatto.

As Charles Corn has written, spices conjure up ‘a legendary, if not mystical, continuum, a story deeply rooted in antiquity’.²⁰ Chinese and Arab traders were doing polite business in the Moluccas in the sixth and seventh centuries. Excavations in the Indus Valley show that spices were used there between 3300 and 1300 BC: traces of ginger and turmeric were found inside ceramic vessels and on the teeth of skeletons in burial sites in Farmana in the northern Indian state of Faryana.

The Ebers Papyrus, to which I refer frequently in what follows, is an ancient Egyptian medical directory, believed to date from around 1550 BC and named after Georg Ebers, the German Egyptologist who discovered it in 1874. Full of information about surgical techniques as well as drugs, it makes clear that spices like anise, coriander seed and fenugreek were hugely important in ancient Egyptian medicine. (One cure for stomach complaints listed in Ebers is a mixture of milk, goose fat and cumin. Yum!)

The exotic, flamboyant recipes contained in the Roman cookbook *De re coquinaria* – attributed, probably erroneously, to the gourmet Marcus Gavius Apicius – use spices copiously, especially black and long pepper, which the Romans sourced directly from the Malabar coast. After Rome’s annexation of Ptolemaic Egypt in 30 BC it sent ships from the Red Sea to India, taking advantage of

the monsoon winds by leaving in July, at the height of the monsoon season, and returning in November.

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Only a limited *tour d'horizon* is possible here, but the medicinal value of spices as both cures for specific ailments and restorers of equilibrium to unbalanced bodies is worth considering, not least because it enables me to introduce figures such as Pliny, Theophrastus, Dioscorides and Gerard and to explain why they are important – and why they crop up so often in this book.

According to the logic of humoral medicine, health was determined by the balance of the four ‘humours’, or fluids, believed to control the body: blood, phlegm, choler (or yellow bile) and black bile. Each of these humours could be cold, hot, wet or dry. Linguistic echoes of this system, the dominant one from Hippocrates through to Galen and beyond, are words such as ‘phlegmatic’, ‘bilious’, ‘choleric’ and ‘melancholy’ to describe character traits. (Ayurvedic medicine, too, is predicated on the idea of balance: of the three elemental *doshas* Vata, Pitta and Kapha.)

Different spices exerted different influences on the humours, whose composition was in any case unique to a person. A hot, dry spice like black pepper counteracted the ill effects of a wet, cold diet. Drugs, many of them spices, were listed and rated in large books called *materia medica*. The most famous of these is probably the five-volume *De materia medica* (c. AD 50–70) written by a Greek surgeon to the Roman emperor Nero’s army called Pedanius Dioscorides (c. 40–90). It lists around six hundred plants (and some animals and minerals too) and about a thousand drugs derived from them. Incredibly, it remained a key pharmacological text well into the nineteenth century, probably on account of its brisk, rational tone.

Before Dioscorides, however, there was Theophrastus (c. 371–c. 287 BC), born on the island of Lesbos and a pupil of Aristotle, who

bequeathed Theophrastus his library and whom Theophrastus replaced as head of the Lyceum in Athens. Regarded as the father of modern botany, Theophrastus wrote two treatises on plants, *On the Causes of Plants* and *Enquiry into Plants*, and was, as the gardening writer Anna Pavord puts it in her wonderful book *The Naming of Names* (2005), ‘the first person to gather information about plants, and to ask the big questions: “What have we got?” “How do we differentiate between these things?”’.²¹

Theophrastus separated plants into four categories: trees, shrubs, sub-shrubs and herbs. He often comes in for criticism – the redoubtable botanical scholar Agnes Arber, in her *Herbals: Their Origin and Evolution* (1912), felt that ‘his descriptions, with few exceptions, are meagre, and the identification of the plants to which they refer is a matter of extreme difficulty’²² – but Theophrastus is honest about the limits of his knowledge, explaining the paucity of his entries for frankincense and myrrh on the grounds that there simply isn’t any more information available to him.

Whatever his shortcomings, Theophrastus was plagiarised by Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79) in the botanical sections of his vast encyclopaedia *Naturalis historia* (*Natural History*) – thirty-seven books organised into ten volumes. In fact, Pliny and/or his copyists introduced numerous errors – he confuses ivy and rockrose because their names are similar in Greek – but it was Pliny whose works continued to be read into the Middle Ages while Theophrastus fell into obscurity, resurfacing only when original Greek manuscripts were found in the Vatican in the early fifteenth century and given to the Greek scholar Teodoro Gaza to translate into Latin – at which point, as we shall see, Theophrastus became important once again.

Fifty years after Pliny’s death in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius which destroyed Pompeii and Herculaneum, Claudius Galenus, better known as simply Galen, was born in Pergamon in Asia Minor, the son of a wealthy architect. Galen’s interest in spices as drugs was stoked early when he studied as a youth in the trading hub of Alexandria. He gained experience and significant

knowledge of anatomy treating the wounds of gladiators and over time produced a huge number of treatises, referred to as the ‘Galenic corpus’, which laid the foundations for modern medicine.

Galen was an enthusiastic exponent of humoral medicine, and his writings on pharmacology draw on Theophrastus, Dioscorides and Pliny as well as more obscure writer–physicians such as Heras of Cappadocia and Statilius Crito. A drug composed of a single substance was known as a ‘simple’. Galen’s special skill was compounding drugs from a variety of substances to produce so-called ‘galenicals’. His version of theriac, the ‘universal antidote’ to poisons, contained over a hundred different substances, many of them spices. (Theriac took forty days to prepare and was supposed to be stored for twelve years before use, though Marcus Aurelius drank some only two months after Galen had made it for him and survived ...)

Galen is a colossal, towering figure – truly the bridge between the medicine of antiquity and the scholars of the Renaissance. But he only became this because of the way his ideas were taken up and extended by future compilers of encyclopaedias like Isidore of Seville (c. 560–636) and, in Anglo-Saxon England, medical textbooks such as the ninth-century *Bald’s Leechbook* and the *Lacnunga* (c. 1000), a miscellany of prayers, charms and herbal remedies, some of which call for surprisingly exotic spices like ginger, black pepper, cinnamon and zedoary.

The most important developments, however, occurred in the Islamic world, in the intellectual powerhouse that was ninth-century Baghdad. Here, during what is known as the ‘age of translation’, Muslim scholars translated the ancient Latin and Greek *materia medica* into Arabic. Galen’s ideas found particular favour and fed into works like *Paradise of Wisdom* by al-Tabari (838–870) and *The Canon of Medicine* by Ibn Sinna (sometimes called Avicenna), the ingenious polymath who, among much else, invented the distillation process that enabled essential oils to be extracted from herbs and spices and used in perfumes.



The West, mired in the Dark Ages, was centuries behind and didn't catch up until the twelfth century, when the founding of a medical school in the dispensary of an old monastery in Salerno in the south of Italy catalysed Europe's own age of translation, when composites of Greek, Roman and Arab medical books were translated *back* into Latin, creating a whole new European canon.

I quote from a lot of 'herbals' in this book. These plant catalogues have always existed, but the advent of printing in the mid-fifteenth century boosted their popularity: the beautiful woodcut illustrations featured in some herbals meant that they were aesthetically pleasing as well as medically useful. Agnes Arber says the first printed herbal worthy of the term is Richard Bankes's *Herbal* of 1525. The anonymous *Grete Herball*, published in England the following year and derived from a French source, emphasises its Galenic roots in its declared aim to find 'vertues in all maner of herbes to cure and heale all maner of sekenesses or infyrmytes to hym befallyng thurgh the influent course of the foure elementes'. (Bear in mind that at this stage the word 'herbs' means 'plant material' and accommodates what we now regard as spices.)

Two other famous herbals that crop up repeatedly in these pages are those by Nicholas Culpeper (1616–1654) and John Gerard (c. 1545–1612). Culpeper was an apothecary's apprentice who became a doctor to the poor: a political radical who believed medicine should be a public service, not a commercial enterprise. His *Herbal* (1653) was essentially a cheap, vernacular version of the College of Physicians' Latin pharmacopoeia, with a side-order of eccentric-even-for-the-time astronomy. Predictably, it was attacked by the College as a 'drunken labour'.

Gerard was a keen gardener, but his notoriously unreliable *Herball* (1597) is a mash-up of Dioscorides, Theophrastus, Pliny and the Flemish herbalist Rembertus Dodoens. Even the woodcuts in the first edition were recycled from other botanical works. Over time it acquired an authority it doesn't really deserve. But its

popularity means it needs to be considered in any study of spice use in Europe.

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By the eighteenth century spices had had their moment in the sun: tastes changed, and the European focus shifted to new exotic stimulants like cocoa and coffee. By the nineteenth century England, which had once gorged on spices, regarded them with suspicion bordering on disdain. There was a time and a place for them (the colonies), and the odd bowl of mulligatawny soup probably wouldn't do you any harm. But really, they were best avoided. As Mrs Beeton puts it, quoting a 'Dr Paris in his work on Diet', spices are

not intended by nature for the inhabitants of temperate climes ... The best quality of spices is to stimulate the appetite, and their worst to destroy, by sensible degrees, the tone of the stomach. The intrinsic goodness of meats should always be suspected when they require spicy seasonings to compensate for their natural want of sapidity.²³

This insular, safety-first attitude would characterise British cuisine for the next hundred years, hardened by wars (where jingoistic self-reliance was the order of the day) and the subsequent bouts of austerity. Foreign muck? Who wanted to eat *that*? My favourite bit in Nigel Slater's memoir of his 1960s childhood *Toast* (2003) is when his family tries to coax his ageing Auntie Fanny into eating spaghetti for the first time: 'Auntie Fanny is looking down at her lap. "Do I have to have some?" I think she is going to cry.'²⁴

And now chicken tikka masala is Britain's best-loved dish. The more you think about it, the bigger an achievement it seems.

Actually, the key development in British cooking in the last decade or so – broadly, the years since the start of the war in Iraq – has been the explosion in popularity of Middle Eastern food, a

trend kick-started by one of my favourite food writers, Claudia Roden, in the 1960s. A spice that ten years ago would have been available only in specialist stores – sumac – can now be bought in almost every supermarket. And it is common practice for cookbooks to have at least one ‘Ottolenghi-style’ recipe: for example, the tahini-dressed courgette and green bean salad in *River Cottage Veg Every Day!* (2011) and the cumin-laden shakshouka in 2013’s bestselling diet-manual tie-in *The Fast Diet Recipe Book*.

The Oriental influence on fashionable Occidental cuisine seems as great today as it was in the Middle Ages, Holy War stimulating our appetite for foods from across the Levant. The joke powering 2007’s satirical *The Axis of Evil Cookbook* was that most Europeans and Americans were completely ignorant about what people ate in countries such as Iraq, Iran and Syria. What a difference a few years make. Head into central London today and you will find, on the sorts of sites where in the mid-1990s there might have been a Café Rouge or Le Piaf, branches of successful Middle Eastern-themed mini-chains such as Comptoir Libanais and Yalla Yalla.

Wondering what might be behind this interest, apart from the obvious tastiness of the food, I remembered the novelist and critic Umberto Eco’s theory that every time Europe feels ‘a sense of crisis, of uncertainty about its aims and scopes, it goes back to its own roots – and the roots of European society are, without question, in the Middle Ages’.²⁵

In a world riven by futile religious wars, gastronomic empathy may be the best route forward, a way of privileging private, domestic narratives – the narratives that bind us, regardless of circumstance – amid the chaos of conflict. As Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi put it: ‘Food is a basic, hedonistic pleasure, a sensual instinct we all share and revel in. It is a shame to spoil it.’²⁶

To call this book a ‘narrative encyclopaedia of spices’, as I did when I was writing it, suggests a mission to totalise. In fact, my aim has been more basic: to tell a series of entertaining, illuminating stories about the role spices have played in the development of the

modern world. To do this I have drawn on a variety of disciplines and the works of hundreds of writers. I hope the result is not too sprawling and eccentric.

There are, quite deliberately, many voices in the book apart from my own. This is my attempt to emulate the food writers I most admire – people such as Jane Grigson, Elizabeth David and Dorothy Hartley, in whose work there is a sense of perpetual dialogue (both with other writers and with the past), of ideas being tested and either waved through or found wanting. The sixteenth-century botanist William Turner attempted something similar in his herbal, published in three parts between 1551 and his death in 1568. His defence of his method makes me smile:

For some of them will saye, seyng that I graunte that I have gathered this booke of so manye writers, that I offer unto you an heape of other mennis laboures, and nothings of myne owne ... To whom I aunswere, that if the honye that the bees gather out of so manye floure of herbes, shrubbes, and trees, that are growing in other mennis medowes, feldes and closes maye justely be called the bees honye, so maye I call it that I have learned and gathered of manye good autoures not without great laboure and payne my booke.

My focus has been broad. I wanted, with each spice, to give a sense of botanical background, historical context and, where appropriate, culinary usage. But *The Book of Spice* is far from the last word and can't possibly be more than an introduction to such a vast and multifarious subject. The magical pull spices once exerted on the imagination may seem quaint, but there is no denying their continuing importance. As Jack Turner puts it, their 'cargo is still with us', the word alone 'a residual verbal piquancy that is itself the echo of a past of astonishing richness and consequence'.²⁷