

The Spice of Life

BY SUE MAYFIELD GEIGER

Illuminate The Fall season with colorful and aromatic spices.

Trade a pound of nutmeg for a fat oxen or pay your rent in peppercorns. As unheard of as that may seem, spices were a hot commodity centuries ago. Archeologists discovered spices in Egyptian tombs as early as 3000 BC and we've been mesmerized by their aromas, vibrant colors, healing powers and preservative qualities ever since. Because of spices, early trade routes came about, monopolies were established, and wars were fought. Shrewd merchants became wealthy as brokers of exotic spices. In John Kaey's book, *The Spice Route*, he writes that "more nations participated in it, more wars were fought for it, and more discoveries resulted from it than from any other global exchange."

The Silk Road (a network of ancient overland trade routes that extended across the Asian continent and connected China to the Mediterranean Sea) was an important path for spice traders.

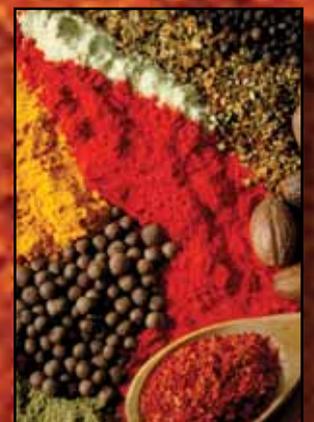
Caravans followed these routes and each was filled with goods and spices. Towns and cities were created while traders, missionaries and refugees introduced new religions, customs and a multitude of products.

Spice Islands is not just a brand of spices available at grocery stores and spice

markets, but normally references a small group of islands to the northeast of Indonesia, between Celebes and New Guinea. Despite their small size, they were once the largest producers of mace, nutmeg, cloves and pepper in the world.

Toward the end of the 18th century, the United States entered the world spice trade and today, McCormick & Company, Inc. is the largest firm within the spice industry throughout the world. They even include the scent of vanilla on its annual report. Locally, one of the best places to find spices is Penzey's in the Heights area of Houston. With hundreds of spices to choose from, plan to spend several hours. From the moment you walk in, prepare to be intoxicated by the aromas, but also enjoy the color show as you feast your eyes on the golden hues of turmeric, fiery red paprika, earthy brown cinnamon and so much more.

Spices vs. Herbs. Herb comes from the Latin word herba, meaning grass or green crop. Spice comes from the Latin word species, and spices are products of tropical plants, aromatic roots, bark, seeds, buds and fruits usually used in dried form (whole or ground). Some plants are both herbs and spices, like cilantro. Its



leaves are an herb but its seeds (coriander) are a spice. Same with dill—the seeds are a spice, yet dill weed is an herb.

The Top Ten Spices for Healthy Cooking (*DivineCaroline Magazine*):

Black Pepper. Crisp, slightly spicy and unbelievably versatile, it is no small wonder that black pepper is the most common spice in the world. It is a great way to add a touch of heat and a bright aroma to just about any sort of savory application.

Cinnamon. One of the more potent of the essential spices, only a little cinnamon is needed to bring its trademark dense and rich flavor to a dish. Cinnamon is a great addition to savory rice and Indian dishes.

Cumin. Cumin has a rich smoky flavor that works well in a variety of dishes, particularly Mexican and Indian recipes.

Coriander. Coriander brings a bright, warm, almost citrus flavor to any dish. It works best in a recipe as a contrast to the heavier smoky flavor of cumin or as a compliment to orange and lemon flavors.

Cloves. Extremely aromatic and slightly sweet, cloves, whether whole or crushed, have a strong flavor and are best used in small amounts. Sprinkle a pinch of crushed cloves in your coffee or tea to add a bright flavor.

Cayenne Pepper. A tiny bit goes a long way, making cayenne pepper one of the best spices for transforming the flavor of a dish. Add a touch of cayenne pepper to your sweet chocolate recipes.

Turmeric. While traditionally used in curries and Indian-style recipes, turmeric is one of the best spices for adding color and aroma to a dish. Turmeric also has a whole host of medicinal benefits, including as an anti-inflammatory.

Paprika. Basically just dried and crushed red bell peppers, paprika is one of the essential spices for Hungarian and many Eastern European recipes. Ranging from sweet to slightly spicy, paprika adds a pungent, bright, and colorful element to any recipe.

Mustard Seed. An aromatic spice with a touch of heat, this is perfect for complimenting the stronger flavors found in heavy meat dishes and pickles. Think of the flavor of mustard seed as a less intense version of horseradish or wasabi.

Ginger. Whether for adding a bright pungency to Chinese and Japanese recipes or for adding a touch of spice to cookies and sweet drinks, ginger is one of the most unique spices because of its versatility, plus it is great for digestion issues.

Bobby Flay's Oven Roasted Cauliflower with Turmeric & Ginger

3 tablespoons vegetable oil
1 tablespoon black mustard seeds
1 jalapeno, finely diced
1 tablespoon grated fresh ginger
1 teaspoon turmeric
1 head cauliflower, cut into florets
Salt

Preheat oven to 425 degrees. Whisk together the oil, mustard seeds, jalapeno, ginger, and turmeric in a small bowl. Place cauliflower in a medium baking dish and toss with the flavored oil and season with salt. Roast until lightly golden brown and just tender, 20 to 25 minutes. Serve hot.

Chickpeas and Spinach with Smoky Paprika

1 tablespoon olive oil
4 cups thinly sliced onion
5 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
1 teaspoon Spanish smoked paprika
1/2 cup dry white wine
1/4 cup organic vegetable broth
1 (14.5-ounce) can fire-roasted diced tomatoes, undrained
1 (15-ounce) can chickpeas (garbanzo beans), rinsed and drained
1 (9-ounce) package fresh spinach
2 tablespoons chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley
2 teaspoons sherry vinegar

Heat olive oil in a large Dutch oven over medium heat. Add onion and garlic to pan; cover and cook for 8 minutes or until tender, stirring occasionally. Stir in smoked paprika, and cook for 1 minute. Add white wine, vegetable broth, and tomatoes; bring to a boil. Add chickpeas; reduce heat, and simmer until sauce thickens slightly (about 15 minutes), stirring occasionally. Add spinach; cover and cook for 2 minutes or until spinach wilts. Stir in parsley and vinegar.

Roasted Pears with Honeyed Cinnamon and Cloves

4 ripe but firm Bartlett, Bosc, or D'Anjou pears (about 2-1/2 pounds), halved, cored
1/4 cup brandy
3 tablespoons honey
3 tablespoons water
2 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into pieces
1 (3-inch) piece cinnamon
4 whole cloves
Low-fat whipped cream for serving

Heat oven to 400 degrees and arrange a rack in the middle. Place pears cut side down in a 3-quart baking dish. Drizzle pears with honey, water, dot with butter, and add brandy, cinnamon stick and cloves. Roast pears, basting every 5 to 10 minutes, until pears are knife tender in the thickest part and sauce is slightly syrupy, about 35 to 45 minutes. Serve with low-fat whipped cream and spoon roasting juices over the top.

