



6005, boul Couture, Montréal (Québec), H1P 3E1  
Bureau Montréal Tél : (514) 852-2719 Fax : (514) 852-6132  
Toronto office Phone : (905) 602-9639 Fax : (905) 602-9654  
[www.bsa.ca](http://www.bsa.ca)

# Spices & Herbs

## History of Spices

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## History of Spices

It is impossible to relate the history of the world without talking about spices. They have been the cause of armed conflicts and the discovery of the New World. Spices also figure in the history of medicine, cosmetics, religions and their rituals, and even in the history of national cuisines.

- Chinese origins
- The route followed by Arab merchants
- Greece and Rome
- Middle Ages
- Italian Renaissance
- Marco Polo
- Christopher Columbus
- The English and the Dutch
- The Americans
- Spices today

### Chinese origins

Five thousand years ago in China, a medical treatise written by an emperor spoke very highly of ginger, cassia, anise and turmeric. This emperor's longevity was attributed to his extensive use of spices.

### The route followed by Arab merchants

In the same era, Arab merchants purchased their spices in India. They also bought other commodities elsewhere: cinnamon in Sri Lanka, mace and nutmeg in Indonesia and the Philippines, and myrrh in East Africa. Camel caravans followed roads from Calcutta, while ships reached the West by way of the Persian Gulf. To maintain their stronghold on this lucrative trade, the Arabs never divulged where the plants were cultivated. In those days, the Arab merchants were the only exporters and importers of spices. They traded for spices in Egypt, Iran, Afghanistan, and in the Mediterranean. The spices were exported to Europe from these countries.

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### **Greece and Rome**

Used regularly in cooking, spices were very important in the Greek and Roman civilizations. The Romans, who wrote extensively about the use of spices in medicine and cosmetics, also wasted them in great quantity. It is said that for the funeral of his wife, Nero ordered the burning of the equivalent of one year's supply of cinnamon incense. This was equal to his annual consumption and that of the whole city of Rome.

### **Middle Ages**

The pillage of Rome marked the beginning of the High Middle Ages that lasted seven centuries. The spice trade continued in Asia and the Middle East, but it declined and eventually disappeared in the West. During the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the crusaders brought spices and rare plants back from Palestine, thus favouring the new expansion of trade between Europe and other countries of the world.

### **Italian Renaissance**

The wealth of great Italian cities like Venice and Genoa was based on trade. The characteristic features of the local cuisine were research and originality. Although spices were expensive, food was highly seasoned and colourful as a result of the use of aromatic plants. The price of a horse was the same as the price of 500 g of saffron, while sheep were traded for the same amount of ginger, and cows were traded for a kilo of mace. To gain the favour of judges during trials, people would give them seasoned preserves. These spice contributions were voluntary at first, but eventually they became mandatory.

### **Marco Polo**

Around 1274, Marco Polo left Venice determined to discover a new route to the Far East, bypassing the one traveled by Arab merchants. Returning to Venice 25 years later, he brought back spices, as well as fabulous riches from the court of the great Kubilai Khan. No one in Venice believed that he had accomplished such an incredible journey, until one day he prepared a dish seasoned with the new spices brought back from China. His voyage took place two centuries before the European powers decided to challenge the Arab monopoly on spices in order to make them reduce their exorbitant prices.

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### **Christopher Columbus**

In 1492, Christopher Columbus landed in what he thought was India. He had in fact discovered the New World. He brought back new spices, peppers from Mexico and vanilla from Central America. In the same era, the Portuguese and the Spanish opened two new spice routes. Both nations competed ferociously until the dispute was arbitrated by the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494) that divided the world in two: Spain dominated the regions west of an imaginary line situated in the Atlantic Ocean, while Portugal maintained its domination of the eastern part.

### **The English and the Dutch**

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the British and the Dutch entered the spice market. The Dutch founded the East Indies Dutch company (1602), while the English financed the Drake expeditions, charged with the discovery of a new maritime route to China. War for the domination of the spice route broke out between the English and the Spanish, resulting in the defeat of the “Invincible Armada” (1588) and the foundation of the East Indies English Company.

The Dutch defeated the Portuguese in 1658. They took over the cinnamon trade originating from Ceylon and seized the pepper ports of the Malabar Coast and Java. At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the British evicted the Dutch from their Indian possessions, and London became the hub of the spice market.

### **The Americans**

During the War of Independence, the Americans built fast warships (“clippers”) to fight against the powerful English naval fleet. After the Declaration of Independence, these ships were reused to provide a link with Asia. The British monopoly of spices ended shortly after it began.

### **Spices today**

Following the merciless battles that took place during centuries on the spice routes, the present-day situation may seem quite uneventful. Gradually, spices fell out of favour in western countries. It is now time to return to fresh herbs able to awaken our senses with their spicy flavours and rich aromas. Because refrigerators are so common in the western world, spices are not used the way they were in the past when their strong taste would mask the relative freshness of basic ingredients. Yet, it would be a shame if we limited spices to a role of culinary

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camouflage, since they offer a practically limitless range of flavours and aspects that can enrich our gastronomic experiences.

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