A Spicy History
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HERITAGE

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Europe's demand for piquant tastes fueled centuries of worls exploration

Black pepper was once worth its weight in gold. That was more than sufficient reason for explorers such as Ferdinand Magellan to risk sailing below the equator (believed to result in insanity) in search of an ocean passage around Africa, or for Christopher Columbus to dare the more final fate of falling off the edge of the Earth by sailing west to reach India. While ancient Hindus knew the Earth was round, most 15th century Europeans believed it to be flat. Magellan and crew retained their sanity, found the tip of Africa and ultimately the source of pepper, cloves, cinnamon and nutmeg, previously monopolized--with exceeding profitability--by Arab merchants. Columbus didn't fall off the Earth; nor did he find India, though until the day he died, he thought he had. Instead, he ran into the Americas, beginning one of history's cruelest genocidal colonizations--all for spice.

The foremost spices of history were black pepper, nutmeg, cinnamon and cloves. Less major players were ginger, cardamom, mace and saffron. Black pepper (piper nigrum) came from India, principally Kerala. Cinnamon (cinnamomum zeylanicum) was found in Sri Lanka. Nutmeg and cloves came

from the Muloccas, or fabled Spice Islands, now a part of Indonesia, located south of the Philippines. The spice trade is ancient. Cinnamon is know to have entered the Middle East and Egypt at least by 2000 bce.

As in ayurvedic medicine today, treatment of disease in ancient times relied heavily on herbs and common spices, such as ginger and turmeric. This was true in ancient Egypt and Europe, and remained so until the 17th century. An Egyptian scroll compiled in 1550 bce lists over 800 medications, many using spices. They were also used for perfumes, incense and, of course, food.

"Spice" is by definition something tropical. Spices won't grow in Europe or even northern Africa. And obtaining anything from India, Sri Lanka or Indonesia in ancient times was no easy task. There were two ways to go, by land or by sea. Overland was by the "Silk Road," which began on the eastern side of the Mediterranean and proceeded through modern Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and India, ending in China. Few merchants traveled the entire route. Most goods were handled by a series of middlemen. The sea route to India was initially by hugging the north coast of the Persian Gulf east to India and then south to Kerala, Sri Lanka and beyond. Later mariners discovered a swifter route directly across the Arabian Sea from the Gulf of Aden, using the seasonally variable winds to sail first east to India, then six months later return in the other direction. Few in Europe understood where the spices came from, and even if they did, they had no way to get to the source without crossing Arab territories--hence the search for other sea routes by east or west to get to India and the Spice Islands. About 40 ce, the Romans found out where the spices came from and developed

their own routes to India, but with the fall of the Roman Empire, the trade returned to Arab monopoly.

The Arabs spread stories about the spices: for example, that cinnamon grew in deep glens infested with poisonous snakes. Further, great birds picked the twigs of the trees to make their nests, which were then raided at great personal risk by bold villagers to collect the cinnamon. The Romans were not fooled, however, and the great historian Pliny the Elder (23-79 ce) ridiculed the reports and stated the obvious: "All these tales have been evidently invented for the purpose of enhancing the price of these commodities."

It was the Portuguese who turned a business into colonial domination. Unsatisfied with simply buying spices from the natives, by the 1500s they conquered Sri Lanka and the Spice Islands. In 1621, they lost control of this region to the Dutch, who burned all the clove trees except on two islands in order to drive up prices. Their monopoly was broken when a Frenchman stole nutmeg and clove seedlings and established them on the island of Mauritius. Finally, driven still by the value of spices, the British entered the picture, ending up in control of India (and pepper), and Sri Lanka (and cinnamon), while the Dutch kept the Spice Islands.

The ancient Indians, too, were active seafarers, traveling about Southeast Asia at least as far back as 543 bce. K.T. Acharya in his fascinating book, Indian Food: A Historical Companion, believes the ancient trade connections extended even to South America and Mexico. A stone inscription in an Indian script in Mexico, he claims, records that a merchant named Vusaluna,

captain of a ship, explored the coastline in 923 ce, long before Columbus. This may seem farfetched, but there is one very compelling piece of evidence--corn (or maize), native solely to the Americas. Clearly visible on existing sculptures dating to the 11th to 13th century ce in Karnataka State, India, are ears of corn.

Corn wasn't the only foodstuff to travel backwards along the spice routes. Anise originated in the Mediterranean, as did coriander, cumin, fennel, fenugreek and mustard. But the real shocker to any Indian is bound to be red peppers. In fact, you might want to sit down for this: All red peppers (and green and yellow, the entire capsicum clan) come from the Americas!

Still with us? Yes, hard to believe as it may be, Columbus collected the peppers during his voyages, introducing them to Europe upon his return. They were eventually brought by Portuguese spice traders to India about 1750, where they were an instant hit. Today it is hard to imagine Indian food without cayenne and its relatives. Not that the ancient Indians lacked heat; they had ground pippali (piper longum, called long pepper in English) roasted in ghee--plenty hot enough.

It is no understatement that the spice trade decisively shaped modern India, Southeast Asia and the entire Americas. So, the power of pepper is nothing to sneeze at, even though today an ounce of gold will buy 230 pounds of it.

FOR A WONDERFUL ACCOUNT OF SPICE HISTORY AND USES, AND FROM WHICH WE HAVE FREELY BORROWED FOR THIS REPORT, READ THE COMPLETE SPICE BOOK BY MAGGIE STUCKEY, ST. MARTINS PRESS, 175 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK,

NEW YORK, 10010

You Call This Chai?

Fast-food versons of the Indian tea connoisseur's art

Chai is that rich Indian drink made from fine tea, cloves, cinnamon, ginger, black pepper, cardamom and milk, all carefully blended and boiled down in a process that might take half-an-hour. It is the latest Indian delicacy to enter mass production, reported on here

by Lavina Melwani (lassiwithlavina.com), a very serious chai fancier.

According to Joseph P. Simrany, President of the Tea Association of the US, "The tea industry in the United States is undergoing a period of rebirth the likes of which are seen rarely, if ever, in the food and beverage industry." Brian Keating of the Sage Group says tea sales, which were us$3.9 billion of wholesale in 1995, are expected to be $4.8 billion in the year 2000.

Indian chai is part of this boom, but in its passage to America, it has received quite a makeover. While some companies do cater to the high-end serious tea market, many have created American versions that tastes nothing like the chai Indians drink on family verandahs or at roadside stops during long car journeys.

Raphael Reuben first encountered chai at various Hindu ashrams in the

Catskill Mountains of New York. In 1980, he established the Masala Chai Company and was one of the first to offer bottled or packaged Masala Chai. Over the years, about a dozen chai manufacturers have come up. Reuben and his partner Susan Beardsley have gone on several chai pilgrimages to India, and they say people love their blend there, thinking it to be an old family recipe.

The Republic of Tea offers condensed chai packaged in ten-ounce bottles which produce two-and-a-half gallons of chai. Their Republic Chai and Decafe Chai Latte are more or less traditional recipes, while their Mate Latte Chai is an herb tea blended with Belgian chocolate and almonds and "Chai of

Many Virtues" is made from green tea (not favored for chai) with echinacea, ginkgo biloba, goldenseal, ginseng, cinnamon, honey and ginger. Says spokesperson Julie Matter, "Though chai is a drink that is hundreds of years old, our intent is to assimilate this captivating brew into

American culture."

Then there's Oregon Chai, which promises you "Nirvana in a cup." Its promotional material tells the tale of Heather who accidentally spilled chai into a nearby bowl of strawberries.

"Not one to cry over spilled chai, she sampled a chai-soaked berry--it was divine!" The moral of the tale, says Oregon Chai, is experiment. The company starts the tea drinker off with recipes for Strawberry Chai Pie, Nirvana Sorbet, and--get ready

for this--Chai Chicken Drumette, in which chicken drumsticks are basted in a cup of chai concentrate and other spices. The chai-wallas of India would shake their heads sadly at this corruption of their heavenly brew.

Dev Menon represents the East India Company, a modern-day distributor of fine teas with an old name. What does he think of this Americanization of chai? "It has been altered to suit the

American palate. It's like a tea-flavored milk shake. This all may or may not be a fad. My view is that the more hype about tea, the better. Ultimately, it will wean more people to the tea fold, and that's good."

Indeed, even in ancient days there was fusion and innovation and a transfer of foods. Though it is hard to believe it today, but tea is not indigenous to India, and even chai, the word beloved by Indians,

is derived from the Chinese word cha, for China is the original home of tea.