

FLAVOURS of LIFE

IN HOT PURSUIT OF SPICES

by MISHELLE LIM
ASSISTANT MANAGER (SPECIAL PROJECTS)
SINGAPORE PHILATELIC MUSEUM



Mankind has used herbs and spices since the dawn of time, valuing these gifts of nature for their medicinal benefits and aromatic qualities. Archaeologists have found evidence that in the Bronze Age (3500-1100 BCE) people spiced up their beer with bitter herbs. Egyptian pharaohs such as Tutankhamen were buried with stores of garlic and coriander to sustain them in the afterlife.

Herbs and spices were also important preservative agents as their flavouring compounds are able to prolong the shelf life of many foods. The ancient Chinese used garlic extensively to maintain the quality of their foods. Many herbs and spices could be crushed for their essential oils or burnt as incense. Romans regarded cinnamon as sacred and lit this fragrant bark in their funeral pyres.

In the past, herbs and spices from Asia had to travel long distances to satisfy demand in Europe for their strong flavours and piquancy. Indian traders brought herbs and spices from Southeast Asian ports and sold these organic trea-

sures to destinations as far as Egypt, Rome, Arabia and China. Because the cultivation of many of the herbs and spices was confined to Southeast Asia and their exact origins a closely guarded secret, these 'mysterious' condiments commanded very high prices. In fact, until the 18th century, nutmeg, mace and cloves were grown only in the Moluccas Islands of Eastern Indonesia.

THE LANDS BELOW THE WINDS

Now known as the Maluku Islands, these tiny volcanic isles east of Sulawesi were once hailed as the "lands below the winds". Their geographical isolation and absence from most pre-modern maps kept the Moluccas from European eyes until the 16th century, when Portuguese ships from Malacca reached the Banda Islands in South Moluccas.

In the 15th and 16th centuries, rival European empires such as Portugal and Spain, anxious to wrest control of the highly profitable spice trade from incumbents such as Venetian and Arab merchants,

sent intrepid explorers to seek the sources of these spices. It was essentially this quest for spice that sparked the long wave of Western colonisation around the world, including the discovery of the Americas, more than four hundred years ago.

In 1498, Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama (1460-1524) was the first European to discover the maritime route to India's Malabar Coast. This marked the start of Portuguese dominance in the spice trade. Backed by gunpowder, Portuguese fleets soon captured spice ports like Malacca and the Moluccas Islands. The Portuguese success and monopoly fuelled a growing competition to gain a slice of the 'spice pie'. Formed in 1602, the Dutch East India Company established its base in Batavia (today's Jakarta), and challenged the Portuguese empire in the Far East. In 1641, they dealt an important blow by capturing Malacca from the Portuguese.

By the late 1600s, the Dutch had ousted the Portuguese from the region. They often used ruthless

measures to defend their monopoly, including killing or driving out virtually all the natives of the Banda Islands in Maluku. They also banned the cultivation of spice crops other than in their controlled territories and burnt excess trees to raise prices. After harvesting, the nutmegs were treated with lime to prevent their use as seed crop. The 1600s were the century of the Dutch, who dominated the pepper and cinnamon trade and enjoyed a near-monopoly in cloves, nutmeg and mace. The English were driven out of the Moluccas entirely after the second Anglo-Dutch war of 1665-1667, bartering the islands for the cold outpost of New Amsterdam on the eastern coast of America (known today as Manhattan).

COLONIES RULED BY COMPANIES

The English had made their foray into the East in 1601 with the newly-formed "Company of Merchants of London trading into the East", better known as the British East India Company. The Dutch monopoly ended in the 18th century when the French and the



British succeeded in smuggling nutmeg and clove seedlings to their own colonies in the tropics. Frenchman Pierre Poivre gained fame for his forays into the Moluccas Islands to obtain seedlings from illicit plantations. The prized plants found new homes in far flung locations such as Mauritius, Zanzibar, Madagascar in the Indian Ocean and Grenada in the Caribbean, as well as newly established colonies in the region such as Penang, Sumatra and Singapore.

When Sir Stamford Raffles claimed Singapore for the British East India Company in 1819, spices were very much on his mind. One of the first things he did was to order the experimental planting of nutmeg and clove trees at Fort Canning Hill. Unfortunately, the 19th century also marked the waning of spices as the lifeblood of empires as the newly-spawned industrial revolution of textiles and trains cried out for less glamorous resources such as cotton and metals. Culinary tastes in Europe were also shunning excessive flavours for more austere preparations and the Americas became a source that supplied both old spices as well

as new fruits like capsicum and tomato. Coupled with the loss of former monopolies, spices fell from national treasure status to being common commodities and their prices steadily declined.

SPICES MAKE THEIR STAMP

Nonetheless, the vibrant spice trade of the past has yielded rich cultural exchanges. Some herbs and spices are now fixtures in cuisines of places very far away from where they originated. A good example is chilli, the trade-

mark spice of Singapore food. Originally found only in the Americas, chilli only became known to the rest of the world when Christopher Columbus (1451-1506) brought the plant back to Spain. European traders soon spread chilli to Asia where it became a big hit. The peoples of Southeast Asia readily embraced the spice and incorporated the fiery fruit into their local cuisine. Can you imagine Thai, Indonesian or Indian food without a dash of red pepper? So, many of the foods we know and enjoy today would have been very different if not for Christopher Columbus!

This globalisation of herbs and spices is very much reflected in stamps. Every country issues stamps that depict a facet of its culture and heritage. Hence, even plants, crops and spices of foreign origin will earn a place in local philately when assimilated into local culture. One can find Asian herbs and spices on definitives issued in Europe; for instance, a set of food-themed stamps produced by Sweden in 2005 features oriental spices such as star anise. The bloom of the torch ginger, locally known as bunga kantan, which flavours our rojak salad and the kayu manis or cinnamon tree are some of the herbs and spices that have adorned Singapore stamp issues in recent years.

A MELTING POT

The history and culture of Southeast Asia are closely tied to the herb and spice trade. When Indian traders first arrived in this region 2,000 years ago, they introduced

their spices, religions and customs to the local populations. The ruins of pre-Islamic kingdoms in Indonesia, such as the Hindu Prambanan temple complex in Central Java, and the Buddhist Chandi Borobudur near Yogyakarta testify to a bygone era of Indian influence.

In the early 16th century, Southeast Asia experienced another momentous socio-political event – the start of Western colonisation. European interest in Southeast Asia was sparked by their quest for spices. As noted earlier, Portuguese were the first to establish themselves in the Far East, followed by the Dutch, the French and the British. The Europeans introduced new foods, languages, religions, architecture, schools and ways of governance, amongst many other things. This colonial legacy has left traces that are still evident in modern Southeast Asia, from the visible facades of grand buildings in Victorian style to the way indigenous languages, foods and habits have absorbed elements of European cultures and recast them into distinctively local moulds. The colonies also drew many immigrants from China and India who brought with them new tastes and practices. This resulted in a marked shift in demographics of Southeast Asia and further shaped it into the dynamic and, multicultural region that it is today.

NParks and NHB jointly organised the Spice Trail programme in September 2007 as part of NHB's integrative programming. It brings visitors to the 'Spice Garden' in Fort Canning Park, The Empire of Nature, Spice Frontier and Flavours of Life exhibitions at NMS, NAS and SPM respectively.



FLAVOURS of SOUTHEAST ASIA

TODAY, SOUTHEAST ASIAN CUISINE IS A DELIGHTFUL FUSION OF FLAVOURS KNOWN FOR ITS HEADY BLEND OF HERBS AND SPICES. HERE ARE SOME HERBS AND SPICES THAT ARE ASSOCIATED WITH REGIONAL FOOD AND USED ALMOST EXCLUSIVELY IN THIS REGION.



BILIMBI – Sometimes called belimbing (*Averrhoa bilimbi*), bilimbi is believed to originate from the Moluccas Islands. The juicy fruit tastes highly acidic and is used as a souring agent in curries or sambal paste. It can be added to salads or preserved as pickles to lower its acidity. In Malaysia, sugar is added to bilimbi to make a sweet jam. Bilimbi juice also makes a refreshing drink.



BUAH KERAS – Thanks to its rock-hard shell, this nut (*Aleurites moluccana*) has earned the name buah keras which means 'hard fruit' in Malay. Also called 'candle-nut' as some tribes burn its oil to produce light, buah keras has a creamy, nutty flavour similar to macadamia. It is pounded to a paste and added to curries. On its own, the spice tastes mild and is used to enhance flavours.

LEMON GRASS – The fragrance of lemon grass (*Cymbopogon citratus*) is concentrated at the bottom part of the leafy stalk. Easily grown in gardens, lemon grass can be eaten fresh in salads or used to flavour curries and spicy soups like Thai tom yam. There is an ancient Indonesian belief that lemon grass should be cut by young girls as only their purity would bring out the best of the plant's fragrance.



PETAI – These seeds from pods of a tall jungle tree (*Parkia speciosa*) in the legume family give off a strong pungent odour reminiscent of garlic. Though well-loved by the Thais and Malays, some find that eating petai is an acquired taste. It is often eaten raw as some believe that the plant will help to cleanse the body's system. Petai can also be fried with shrimps, onion and sambal paste.



SPICES IN FOLKLORE & MEDICINE

In the past, people believed that disease and misfortune were caused by evil spirits. Sometimes, they tried to appease or drive away these spirits with herbs and spices which they thought had magical powers. Hence, some herbs and spices are steeped in spiritual symbolism. For instance, Balinese legend has it that the God Siwa gave the people rice of four sacred colours. However, a spirit ate all the grains except the yellow ones, which he planted. A turmeric plant grew from the seeds and ever since, ceremonial rice offered by the Balinese at

their temples has been coloured with turmeric. In Southeast Asia, turmeric's yellow tone signifies happiness and it is used to colour rice at festive occasions such as Muslim weddings. Traditionally, the Malays chew and spit turmeric juices in corners of their houses where children play and rub turmeric paste on their stomachs to ward off evil spirits. Garlic is another spice used as an amulet against evil; it is used in the Visayan region of the Philippines to repel demons.

Herbs and spices are also essential ingredients in traditional local medicine. They can be consumed

or applied externally. Sometimes, the same herb or spice is used for different purposes by different cultures. For instance, cinnamon is used by Malays, Chinese and Indians for different ailments ranging from nausea and diarrhoea to respiratory problems.

While there is no consensus to the effectiveness of traditional remedies, we cannot deny the medicinal value of certain herbs and spices. Used for centuries, some of these medicinal plants have been scientifically proven to be effective remedies for various ailments. For instance, ephedrine is obtained from *ma huang*, an

important Chinese herb, to treat asthma, just as it was used traditionally. In a race to combat prevalent diseases like cancer, scientists are today conducting intensive research on traditional herbs. Perhaps, somewhere amongst the old remedies favoured by our ancestors, lies the bioactive answer that will become the cures of tomorrow.

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Turner, Jack, *Spice: The History of a Temptation*, Vintage Books, New York, 2004.



SPICE TALES

ON THE TRAIL OF SINGAPORE'S SPICE HISTORY

by ONG WEI MENG
ASSISTANT ARCHIVIST
NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF SINGAPORE



Photos show gambier leaves and gambier cubes

Source: National Archives of Singapore

Do you know that the aromatic spices gambier, pepper and nutmeg used to be widely grown in Singapore?

In the 1840s, there were 71,000 nutmeg trees in Singapore¹, more than 37 times the number of traffic lights installed in 2005. By 1880, Singapore exported 47,287,519 kg of gambier², equivalent in weight to approximately 1,182 Merlion statues, each weighing 40,000 kg.

Pepper and gambier were cultivated in Singapore before the arrival of Sir Stamford Raffles. But the island's new status as a British trading post in 1819 drew immigrants who set up many new estates. Later, the discovery that gambier leaves yielded a useful

brownish dyeing agent for fabrics led to gambier being widely cultivated due to the high prices it commanded. Pepper and gambier were typically grown together for economic and practical reasons. Refuse from gambier processing provided natural manure for pepper vines and protected the roots from intense heat. Furthermore, gambier did not require much attention apart from harvesting and therefore workers could devote their time to pepper, which also had a high market price. By the 1850s, gambier and pepper plantations intermingled with the virgin forests in the northern and western parts of Singapore helped to open up the interior of the island.

Meanwhile, the European com-

munity became dominant in cultivating nutmeg. After Raffles left Singapore in 1819, he sent a consignment of nutmeg and clove plants from Bencoolen to Singapore, and instructed his successor, Resident, Colonel William Farquhar, to promote their cultivation. Rising nutmeg prices during the 1830s and clear land ownership terms lured many European planters into this endeavour, leading to a 'nutmeg mania' in the 1840s. However, overproduction drove down the prices and mysterious diseases, later identified as the "nutmeg canker" and "nutmeg beetle", wiped out most of the island's nutmeg plantations in the 1850s.

Who was the former clerk and trader that became known as the Gambier King? How did spice cultivation take off and ultimately decline in 19th century Singapore? What was life like for the workers who toiled on the plots of pepper and gambier and faced the dan-

gers of the nearby forests? Where was the Botanical and Experimental Gardens set up in 1822? What do Oxley Road, Claymore Hill, Cairnhill Road have to do with our spice history?

To find out more about the 'spicy' facts that surround a particularly tasty side of Singapore's history, join the National Archives of Singapore at the exhibition "Spice Frontier: Changing Boundaries, Evolving Uses".

Drawing upon rich archival resources and oral history interviews, the exhibition traces the rise and fall of the spice sector as well as how spices are used in our everyday life as food and medicinal materials.

References

- 1 J.T. Thomson, "General Report on the Residency of Singapore, Drawn up Principally with a View of Illustrating its Agricultural Statistics.", JIAEA, J.R. Logan Vol. IV, 1850.
- 2 Straits Settlements Blue Book, 1880: Singapore exported 782,129 piculs of gambier in 1880.