

Module- 02: History of spices and condiments

2.1. History of spices

History of spices dates back to ancient and medieval times when the spices were the most valuable items of trade. The use of spices spread through Middle East to the eastern Mediterranean and Europe. Spices from China, Indonesia, India, were originally transported overland by donkey or camel caravans. For almost 5000 years, Arab middlemen controlled the spice trade, until European explorers discovered a sea route to India and other spice producing countries in the East. In addition of discovering spices, continents like north and South America were also discovered leading to worldwide exploration, trade and commerce into being. Columbus, Vasco de Gama and Sir Francis Drake all undertook epic and ground-breaking journeys in search of spices. Spices have been the catalysts of some of the greatest adventures in human history, from Christopher Columbus to Vasco da Gama, as well as being the driving force for the British East India Company and the British Empire, whose merchants turned London into the greatest spice market in the world for 200 years. In 1492, Christopher Columbus arrived in America while searching for a direct western route to the Spice Islands. Though he did not find the Spice Islands, Columbus brought allspice, vanilla, and red peppers from the West Indies back to his Spanish supporters. Americans began their entry into the world spice race in 1672.

The artwork and writings of early civilizations provide the first real evidence for spice use. However ancient Egyptians were using spices for flavouring foods, cosmetics, embalming dead ones. During Roman times, spices were available only to the upper class, who valued them as high as gold. Pepper, cinnamon, cloves, and nutmeg were hot commodity five centuries ago as they attract nations to sail across for their search. In the 16th century cloves for instance were among the spices used to preserve food without refrigeration. It is still used to preserve food like Virginia ham. Likewise later mustard and ground mustard were also found to have preservative qualities.

The spices were used from ancient times because they act as:

- luxury for a medieval king's ego
- medicine for defence against illnesses
- as aphrodisiacs
- used in rituals to dispel demons and summon gods
- Perfumery for mummies, and as the last word in haute cuisine

2.1.1. Primitive beginnings

Early civilisation wrapped meat in the leaves of bushes, accidentally discovering that this enhanced the taste of the meat, as did certain nuts, seeds, berries - and even bark. It is claimed that the lavish use of spices in ancient times was a way to mask the often unpleasant taste and odour of food, and later, to keep food fresh. In 1000 BC the Queen of Sheba visited King Solomon in Jerusalem to offer him

"120 measures of gold, many spices, and precious stones." A handful of cardamom was worth as much as a poor man's yearly wages and many slaves were bought and sold for a few cups of peppercorns.

2.1.2. The Roman Empire

The Roman Empire has extended boundaries from one side of the Mediterranean to the other, for the sought of spices. In the biblical story of the Magi, three kings from the exotic reaches of the Orient give gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the newborn Jesus Christ. Frankincense and myrrh were rare, very expensive spices of the time.

2.1.3. Spices in the middle ages

In early Middle Ages Arabs and other Muslims predominated as spice traders. The Prophet Mohammed, from the merchant tribe of the Quora chites, took advantage of the spice trade to spread his Holy Message. Arab traders were the first to introduce spices into Europe. Portugal was the leading power of Europe as Portuguese wanted and were first to gain a spice trade monopoly. It was soon England's and Holland's turn to dominate the spice-laden East. Sir Francis Drake returned from a voyage to the East Indies with six tons of cloves, making both English merchants and Queen Elizabeth I happy indeed. The spices lastly reached Britain via Arabia and the Red Sea from Egypt and the ports of Venice and Genoa.

During the twentieth century, the original Spice Islands became remote, isolated, and provincial; tourists have enjoyed making voyages there. Saffron has become the dearest and costly spice. Merchants went to great lengths to discover the origins of spices, it was widely accepted they came from lands beyond the known world.

2.2. Spice explorers:

- Magellan charted the first circumnavigation of the globe in search of the fabled Spice Islands and their cloves.
- Vasco de Gama sailed the dangerous waters around Africa to India in his quest for spices.
- Columbus sought a shorter route to India for gold and pepper but found the New World.

2.3. Condiments

Since ancient times, people have used condiments to enhance their food. The first condiment was salt. Salt has been used since ancient times, both as a preservative and to enhance the flavour of food. Vinegar has also been used since ancient times. Its name is probably derived from the French words vinaiger meaning sour wine. Vinegar was used as a medicine as well as a food but throughout the centuries other sauces and spices became popular as a result of trade empire expansion. The Romans, for example, brought mustard to the European areas they conquered. Certain condiments became more prevalent in the 1800s due to industrial growth; consumers could purchase mass-produced ketchup, horseradish and Worcester sauce.

The Romans liked condiments and they made many sauces for their food. One of the most common was a fish sauce called liquamen. The Romans also grew mustard and they introduced it into the parts of Europe they conquered. They also made mint sauce. In the Middle Ages mustard was a popular condiment in Europe. In the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries new condiments were invented. Pesto sauce was invented in 16th century in Italy. Furthermore new sauces were invented in the 17th century including bechamel and chasseur. Chutney comes from India. It was first exported to England in the 17th century. Soy sauce, which was invented in China, reached Europe in the 17th century and by the mid-18th century it was popular in Britain.

According to one story a French chef first made mayonnaise in 1756. Hollandaise sauce was also first recorded in the mid-18th century. Ketchup began life as a Chinese fish sauce called ke-tsiap. The name was gradually changed to ketchup. In the 19th century with the industrial revolution condiments began to be mass-produced in factories.

2.4. History of Indian spices

History of Indian spices is much older than recorded history. The origin of Indian spice trade dates back to 7000 years ago and Indian trade became very popular across the globe. Columbus was on the way to find shorter route to India to facilitate trade but led to the discovery of America. Centuries before the prices of spices was very high and Rome and Greece had been existing exploited spice loaded ships to India, Egypt, and Arabia. During these times the prices of the spices was very high and hence provide high profit. It is believed that the Romans were spending money on merchandise and also wars were fought by Romans to keep trading routes to India open. Arabians conquered India in 1000 A.C. and brought cumin and coriander with them. These spices were mixed with pepper, ginger and turmeric and the mixture known as “Garam masala” was then spread by the British to the whole world. In fact some of the Indian spices are from Far East.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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