

# THE SPICE IS RIGHT

Chefs don't find flavour from a packet gathering dust in a kitchen cupboard — and neither should you. It's time to give your food the fresh, aromatic punch it deserves, says the spice trader *Rachel Walker*

Photographs by  
Kevin Dutton

**T**here are 24 glass jars in my grandfather's kitchen. The labels are faded and the spices are bleached from sunlight that beams through the window above the sink — untouched since my grandmother died 16 years ago. It's just one of many kitchens I nosed around on my journey to becoming a spice trader. I came across rusted tins of Old Bay Seasoning and decades-old curry powder. One spice cabinet contained 17 jars of cumin and I encountered more than one bag of holiday spices that fostered a hatch of eggs.

From these chaotic cabinets emerged the idea for Rooted Spices: a range of tin caddies filled with single-origin spices and blends. After all, we're a nation that buys hand-roasted coffee, first-flush tea and single-plantation chocolate. Yet when it comes to spices, anything goes. There's little talk of provenance in the spice aisle and we have a tendency to be lenient with the best-before dates — 13% of Britons have spices sitting in their cupboards that are more than four years old.

That's not the case in restaurant kitchens, where chefs are far more discerning about the crucial

flavours that hold together or finish a dish. The New Zealand chef Peter Gordon, known as the “godfather of fusion”, has more than 40 spices in his kitchen at the Providores and Tapa Room, in Marylebone, all carefully stored to prevent light exposure.

“Spices become like a perfume that's been sitting in the sun for too long,” he says. “If they aren't punchy, aromatic and full of essential oils, they aren't worth using. They can turn into a texture rather than a flavour. Something like a dried-out cinnamon has very little to contribute. It's pointless.”

It's not just storage, but also the sourcing that has a bearing on taste. “For years, tons of spices were tipped into hoppers and people thought that the fact they were using any at all was enough,” Gordon says. He's noticed that as more home cooks prepare meals from scratch, they are starting to be more discerning about their ingredients: “Now there's talk of the provenance of spices, and a growing awareness about size, colour and aroma.”

It's these properties that helped propel single-origin coffee and chocolate onto supermarket shelves. What left me scratching my head is why spices hadn't

followed suit; why they were ambiguously labelled as coming “from countries of multiple origin”. Why, when the best turmeric comes from India (it has the highest percentage of curcumin, which is responsible for the colour and health benefits), is produce from Peru, China, Ethiopia and Indonesia used to bulk-out jars?

So, in the name of research, I drew up a list of what would become our core range of spices and started tracking down as many samples as I could from countries around the world to see if I really could taste the difference. I devised a tasting sheet and set about methodically awarding marks for colour, grind size, nose and taste (when eaten with plain lentils or rice).

Soon patterns began to emerge: the soapiness of poor-quality allspice, the bitter edge to bad cumin and the artificial taste of budget cinnamon. Yet specific regions started to stand out: hot smoked paprika from Extremadura in Spain, where jaranda peppers are left to ripen on the vine before being dried over oak wood fires; the sherbet-brightness of quality Indian amchur [mango] powder; fennel seeds that have swollen under a hot Turkish sun. ➤➤➤

## TOP TIPS

**Don't season only with salt and pepper.** Take inspiration from Turkish cafes and try pul biber — it really lifts a dish

**Cardamom is often crushed and infused in recipes,** but you'll get more flavour by grinding the seeds with a teaspoon of sugar

**If there's one spice not to scrimp on, it's cinnamon,** and I am sure that the best is grown in Sri Lanka

**Dried Mexican chillies are a versatile store cupboard ingredient.** Mix with coriander, caraway, cinnamon and olive oil for a homemade harissa

**Cayenne pepper has a 1980s devilled eggs reputation,** but this fruity chilli packs a punch in a smoothie blend

“There’s no doubt that growing conditions — whether tropical, temperate or anything in between — are going to influence hugely the way a crop grows, its taste and productivity,” explains Pippa Greenwood, a plant pathologist. “It’s useful to use wine grapes as an analogy. You can have the same grape variety growing in two different places, and it can produce two very different-tasting wines.”

We sourced plump pods of green cardamom from Guatemala — the world’s top exporter, thanks to the tropical rain and intense sunshine that provides the perfect growing environment for the spice known locally as “green gold”. Then there’s cumin from India, which is the world’s biggest producer, although only 20% leaves the country because quotas state that domestic need has to be met before any can be exported.

Once the core spices were fixed, then I began the task of picking the rest of the range. I trawled the latest cookbooks, writing lists of the spices that were caught in the time-lag between books being published and new ingredients becoming available: shichimi togarashi to garnish Japanese noodles, dried pasilla chillies, which crop up in Mexican recipes, and Kashmiri chilli powder for the northern Indian dishes that specifically call for a restrained hotness rather than an eye-watering heat.

I filled a container on a ship sailing from Istanbul with

glistening black Urfa pul biber, tangy cured sumac and heady, fragrant mahlab — dried cherry stones, which are ground and baked in sweet breads. Just as the “Ottolenghi effect” saw soaring demands for sumac and za’atar, so recipes from Nigella’s Turkish eggs to Sabrina Ghayour’s peach salad and the Ashura cereal baked at Honey & Co call for an ever-evolving set of ingredients.

“We live in an increasingly globalised world and there’s a real appetite for new ingredients,” says Angela Clutton, founder of the Borough Market Cookbook Club. “There is still a lot to be discovered and brought over into our mainstream culinary culture. I think people will become more knowledgeable about spices, not just new ones, but also the spices they recognise. There’s still so much more to learn.”

Indeed, before our spice cabinets expand too quickly, it’s worth becoming more familiar with the spices we already use. Instead of seeking out the latest superfood seed, reacquire yourself with the delight that can come from a well-timed pinch of paprika or a fresh grating of nutmeg. Clear your shelves of decades-old dross, reinstate order and find new ways to incorporate spices into everyday cooking — because the taste of something potent really can make the world of difference ■

*Rachel Walker is the co-founder of Rooted Spices; [rootedspices.com](http://rootedspices.com)*

## THE SPICE GLOSSARY

### SHICHIMI TOGARASHI

This Japanese blend is one to watch. It’s made from seven ingredients including dried chilli and orange peel. Though traditionally used to garnish Japanese noodles, it’s a game-changer when sprinkled over melted cheese on toast.

### PUL BIBER

There are different varieties of this Turkish spice, such as Urfa pul biber (dark, with flavours of raisins and molasses) and Aleppo pul biber (lighter, with notes of sun-dried tomato). It’s sweated in sacks after being picked, which makes it oilier than most dried chilli flakes, and it’s often used as a finishing spice to add a final burst of flavour.

### TEMPERING

This technique is not just used in chocolate-making, but also as a way of adding flavour to dishes from the Indian subcontinent. Heat oil or ghee in a pan, add whole spices (mustard seeds, dried chillies, curry leaves), then stir the flavoured oil into dishes such as cooked lentils.

### BLACKENING

Forget burnt barbecue sausages, blackening is a Cajun technique of cooking with spices. First, drench meat or fish in butter, then coat in a spice blend (usually paprika, cayenne and thyme), and cook on a high heat (either over flames or in a cast-iron skillet) until it develops a black crust.

### TOASTING

This technique has the dual benefit of releasing the aromatic essential oils from spices and also drying them out so they are easier to grind. Toasting spices can be done in a clean frying pan or on a tray in a hot oven. It’s often worth setting a timer to make sure that they are given only a light toasting.

### SOAKING

The best way to cook Mexican chillies is to first toast them until they start to blister, then remove the stalk and soak them in hot water. Throw away the bitter, discoloured water, then blitz the plump, soaked chilli flesh into the base of a mole or marinade.

## HEALTH BENEFITS OF SPICES



### CAYENNE PEPPER

Capsaicin, the most active ingredient in cayenne, is known to boost the metabolism and help burn calories



### NUTMEG

Often used as a natural remedy for insomnia, nutmeg is also thought to contain compounds that relieve pain and aid digestion



### FENNEL

More than just a breath freshener, fennel can help with insomnia and also increase the quality, quantity and flow of breast milk



### CUMIN

Traditional remedies use cumin to treat mild digestive disorders, and modern research shows that it can help improve the symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome



### NIGELLA SEED

Its Latin name (panacea) roughly translates as “cure all”, and it has wide-ranging benefits, from alleviating rheumatism to improving skin disorders



### SUMAC

Though more research needs to be done, there’s evidence that sumac may lead to a lower risk of cardiovascular disease among people with type 2 diabetes



### TURMERIC

Lauded as a superfood, turmeric’s active compound curcumin is thought to have antioxidant and anti-inflammatory properties



### CLOVES

Long used as a natural remedy, either ground and drunk as a tea to settle the stomach or chewed to numb toothache