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Generosity With Spices Produces Flavor

Eleanor White finds seasonings in the lives of ancient Romans and moderns

VARIETY is the spice of life, yes, indeed, and variety in spices is one thing that every good homemaker insists upon. Yet, who would think that pepper, allspice, tumeric, vanilla, cardamon, cloves, cinnamon, garlic, mustard and saffron, only to mention a few of the 157 varieties, have historical backgrounds that would satisfy anyone’s appetite for romanticism?

Pepper, the most ancient of this noble family, once ranked with gold in value. When Alaric the Goth captured Rome in 408 A.D., he demanded 5,000 pounds of gold and 5,000 pounds of pepper in ransom. Imagine “be-tunicked” tax collectors scouring the country for unpaid pepper, for at this time both rent and taxes were settled with pepper.

They may not realize it, but John L. Lewis and Harry Green have pepper to thank for their present positions. The first labor union ever to be formed was the “Guild of Peppers,” founded in England in 1154.

A treasure before and during Cleopatra’s time and sought by history’s most daring Vasco Da Gama, pepper topped the list of luxuries for several hundred years, gracing royal tables at only the most regal functions. But, since the 18th century, pepper has suffered a terrific downfall. Its days with gold are gone forever. Today pepper goes to make our dogs and tamales hot!

Pepper is a product of the tropical Piper nigrum plant of Java and Sumatra, but the United States is the biggest pepper-consuming country in the world. It is popular with the homemaker not only because of its taste, but also because of its keeping ability. It does not shrink nor deteriorate and is never attacked by insects.

Would you ever dream that the source of one of the most used spices was the dried unripe fruit of a beautiful evergreen tree? The spice that most people believe to be a mixture of every other spice has just this source. The name allspice was given because of its likeness in odor and taste to a mixture of cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg.

Imported from the West Indies into Europe about 1601, allspice, also known as pimento and Jamaica pepper, was first used as a substitute for cardamon. The saplings of the pimento are excellent for walking and umbrella sticks. At one time the allspice industry was seriously threatened when the pimento saplings were being cut down in great quantities and made into canes.

Picture a street cleaner pushing his cart, picking up papers in one hand and shaking nutmeg onto the street with the other. The first mention we have of this spice is in 1195 when it was actually used to fumigate the streets. Nutmeg was very costly in those days, and it was used as a sanitary measure only when some high personage came to town. Then it was strewn about the streets and burned in piles at the intersections. At that time, also, nutmeg was recommended as a cure for insomnia.

As the name spice includes all aromatic vegetable products used in flavoring foods and drinks, our bottle of vanilla, though we may never have thought of it as such, is really a spice. Long before the discovery of America it was used by the Aztecs to flavor chocolate. Introduced into Europe about 1510, it was used as a perfume several centuries before its culinary value was appreciated.

It was not until 1876 that the artificial means of producing it was discovered. A man by the name of Tiemann found that he could produce this same flavor from a glucoside he found in the sapwood of certain pine trees. An equal amount of this artificial vanilla can be purchased for about one thirtieth the cost of the natural vanilla.

The vanilla fruit is the product of a climbing orchid. You probably never associated your orchid corsage with a bottle of vanilla.

Another flower, the lily, has in its family a source of spice. But sit tight and prepare yourself for a shock. The spice of the lily family, believe it or not, is none other than that seasoning of seasonings, garlic! Its true origin has never been known.

Saffron, used in ancient times by the Egyptians in all religious ceremonies, by the Greeks as a lotion for making their hair yellow and by the Babylonians as a perfume and cosmetic, is rarely used today. It has a pungent flavor and could be used to advantage in many a dish. The Spanish use it in their trim Spanish rice, but its existence is not appreciated as it should be.

The quantity of spice that centuries ago might have caused a world war, can today be bought for fifty cents, a year’s supply of whole black peppers, thyme, bayleaf, sage, clove, nutmeg, cinnamon, marjoram and mustard. With such a supply, what homemaker could help but enjoy blending spices to produce pleasing dishes? The so-called “good cook” need never fear trying new spice mixtures. The only little saying to remember when using spices is “fine seasonings accent but never dominate the flavor of the original food.”