

Herbs & Spices

Aromatics! That is the essential element that herbs and spices provide our palates when we dine upon the food that is placed before us. Herbs and spices are a fundamental part of medieval cuisine. They are just as important if not more so in medieval cuisine as they are in modern cuisine. One will find that in most recipes that come down to us from the time period we study, either an herb or a spice could be found in its list of ingredients. Today we will explore a number of the herbs and spices that color the vast array of dishes of the Middle Ages.

What are herbs and spices?

Herbs and spices are aromatic plants that are used in food and medicine. It is easy to group these two categories together by this nature. Yet there are some differences between herbs and spices. There were two historic routes by which spices and other trade goods came from the eastern part of Asia to Europe, sailing routes in the Indian Ocean and the Silk Road. It was the search for spices and other goods that led Christopher Columbus to sail westward to find a new route to India and the Spice Islands to try to establish direct trade for these goods as opposed to buying them from those who had a monopoly on the trade. Herbs, however, are common in almost any of the gardens of the day. Thus, a good working definition of herbs are the fresh cuttings of aromatic plants that are used in cooking or medicine. A good working definition of spices are the dry portions of aromatic plants that are notably trade goods.

There is a common fallacy that herbs and spices were used to cover up the bad taste of rotting meat. This misconception of the use of herbs and spices has been readily disproved. The sell of butchered meat was highly regulated in the Middle Ages, it only being able to be sold the day or and the day after the animal was slaughtered. Just as the modern palate likes food rich in flavor and spiciness, so did the medieval palate. Spices, especially, were a symbol of wealth, and a show of wealth was not just common, but expected in medieval times.

Herbs and spices were used to counter the imbalance of a particular food, according to the theory of humors. This theory is based on the assumption that humans and their food are made up of the four elements of air, fire, water and earth. These elements appear as the four humors, blood, bile, phlegm and black bile. People and food were classified by these humors as being hot or cold, moist or dry, and the herbs and spices were used to balance these natures. A food that was considered hot and dry would be cooked with an herb or a spice that was considered cool and moist. It is theories such as these that linked food so closely with medicine and medical treatments.

Following is a list of selected herbs and spices; it is by no means conclusive.

Herbs

Basil

Basil originated in India, whole plants being imported into Europe. Basil was considered a sacred plant in India, and in many places it was customary for the King to cut the first Basil of the season using a golden sickle. By the Middle Ages, Basil was making its way northward into France. Basil is a pungent herb that is related to mint.

Hop

Hop or hops are well known for their bitter taste and preservative properties. It is for this reason it is used in the manufacture of beer. But it is presumed to be a native plant of temperate Europe and western Asia. Two 16th century sources have references to hop being used in salads. Hop was well know for it's medicinal value, and its fresh shoots were eaten like asparagus.

Laurel

The laurel leaf, or more commonly known as the bay leaf, is a very significant symbol historically. It symbolized victory and achievement. The Laurel tree is native to the Mediterranean region and is rich in the mythology of that region. The laurel leaf gives off a bitter taste that is enjoyed in many soups, stews and sauces. The laurel leaf also has a rare quality of being as nearly strong in flavor dry as it is fresh, making it a commodity to areas that cannot obtain it fresh.

Mint

Mint has several varieties that grow, but it seems to have originated in the Mediterranean areas. Mint has a strong taste that is very popular to this day. One particular variety of mint, Pennyroyal, is an effective flea bait, its aroma attracting the fleas and then suffocating them to death.

Mustard

Mustard is one of the plants that today I would classify as both an herb and a spice, but by the definition I set above I will categorize it as an herb. Mustard was being cultivated or grown throughout Europe in the middle ages, and was growing wild in good portions of Europe, Africa and Asia in prehistoric times. The name for this plant derives from the old French word *moutarde*, which is a sauce made with the ground up seeds from this plant. Mustard has an unusual property in that it doesn't get its pungent taste until the seeds are crushed. Mustard was most notably used in sauces, some highly recognizable to be like Mustard that can be found in the markets today.

Onion, Garlic, Chive & Leek

I group these four herbs together because they are very similar in nature. These herbs can be traced back to biblical and Egyptian times. In a battle in 1030 at Stiklastad near Trondheim, it was reported that warriors with stomach wounds were fed onions. If the smell of onions came from the wounded area shortly thereafter, it was assumed that those warriors had perforated intestines and would soon die.

Oregano & Marjoram

Oregano, or wild Marjoram is native to Northern Europe; its close relative sweet marjoram is native to North Africa and southwestern Asia. Herbs like Oregano have medicinal properties as well, used as antiseptics and stomach-cures. It also contains antioxidants that are natural food preservatives, forestalling the spoilage of fats and oils.

Wormwood

Wormwood is an herb that is native to Europe and was well known in ancient times. Wormwood has been described in Greek and Roman medical texts, notably as an aid to digestion. In fact the English name for this plant was derived on the idea that it eliminates "stomach worms". There exists a recipe dating back to the first century on wormwood wine. Wormwood imparts a bitter taste, and such bitters were popular in brewing as can be noted by the use of hops in the modern brewing of beer today.

Spices

Cinnamon & Cassia

Cinnamon & Cassia have been treated jointly as far back as history can show us. It was rather difficult to separate the two from each other. At times they were thought to be part of the same tree, but today we know that true Cinnamon is native to Ceylon and Western India, where as Cassia is native to Southern China and Burma. Cassia is the milder of the two spices and the one that is marketed in many countries as "Cinnamon". True Cinnamon, or Ceylon Cinnamon is considered to be the finest.

Ginger & Galingale

Ginger is the rhizome of a plant that is native to Southeast Asia. Unlike many spices that were expensive because they were rare, ginger was expensive because there were large quantities available and it was high in demand in Roman times. The availability of ginger decreased significantly after the fall of the Roman Empire, only to have resurgence after Marco Polo help to reestablish trade between Southeast Asia and Europe. Galingale is a root that was used in medieval cuisine that is in the ginger family which comes from Southern China.

Nutmeg

The Nutmeg plant gives us two spices, instead of one. A covering surrounds the core of the nutmeg, this covering is known as mace. The hard core is what we know as the spice nutmeg. Nutmeg is native to Moluccas, one of the Indonesian Spice Islands. It was reputed that nutmeg taken as a medicine prevented memory loss, dizziness and blood in the urine.

Pepper, Grains of Paradise and Cubebs

Long Pepper, Black Pepper, Grains of Paradise and Cubebs are all similar in taste. Long Pepper being the strongest in taste it and the most expensive of the three is native to India as is Black Pepper. Grains of Paradise, a species of cardamom, is native to Africa and considerably cheaper in medieval times to either Long Pepper or Black Pepper. Another relative to pepper, found in medieval cuisine is cubebs, they are native to Indonesia.

Saffron

Saffron is probably the single most expensive spice to be found. Ounce for ounce, it can be as expensive as gold in some markets. Saffron comes from the dried stigmas from a flower in the iris family called the saffron crocus. It is thought that saffron originated in Asia Minor, and was used in ancient times and widely used in the Middle Ages. Saffron is used both as a dye and a spice, its intense color giving a bright yellow hue.

Sugar

Sugar may be surprising to a number of people to see on this list, but it is a spice like any other. The most notable thing about sugar instead of being bitter and spicy like so many other spices, it is sweet instead. Sugar cane is native to India, and by the 4th century production of solid sugar was well known in India.

Sources

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