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Indian Food and a Short History of Spices

When it comes to Indian food, the first thing that comes to most people's minds is probably curry. Curry is thought to have derived from a Tamil word called "*kari*." Tamil is a language spoken by the Dravidian people of southern India and northern Sri Lanka. In Tamil, *kari* means sauce. It is basically a mixture of spices and herbs. This mixture (called curry powder) can change its ingredients from one region to another. It can be mild. Or it can be spicy. Regardless of what goes into the concoction, there is one thing for sure. When cooked with rice, meat, fish, or vegetables, curry powder gives the dish a unique, savory taste. It makes some of us want to eat more!



Of course, Indian cuisine is more than just curry. *Roti* is a round, flat, unleavened bread. *Dosa* is a thin, folded pancake. *Tandoori chicken* is marinated chicken chunks skewered and cooked in a type of clay oven called a *tandoor*. *Biryani* is flavored, orange-colored rice cooked with meat or vegetables. All of these are popular items that we can find in almost every Indian restaurant. What the four dishes, along with the rest of Indian foods, have in common is that they owe their flavors entirely to a wide variety of spices, such as cumin, coriander seeds, pepper, cloves, and turmeric.

Using spices in cooking has had a long history. It may go back as far as 52,000 years ago. Though we cannot know for sure how primitive men came across this practice, it is quite possible that it was by chance. Since then, spices have played a vital role in our diet. In earlier centuries, spices were considered very valuable. Thus, traders of seasonings were destined to become rich. Spice trading was long dominated by the Arabs. They transported their spices to Europe via Egypt. To protect their profits, the Arabs were always very vague about where they got their supplies. When asked, they would invent crazy stories to convince the listeners that they had to go through a lot of dangers to obtain the spices they were selling. They never told them that they got their goods from India, China, the Spice Islands (present-day the Maluku or Molluca Islands of Indonesia), and other nearby regions.

Spices were very hard to come by in Europe at the time. So the Arabs charged a lot of money for their products. During the Middle Ages, a pound of ginger was worth the price of a sheep. A pound of mace was equal to the price of three sheep or half the price of a cow. Pepper was the crown jewel of all spices. It was meted out peppercorn by peppercorn! The Arabs' monopoly on spices eventually came to an end after a young Venetian merchant named Marco Polo (1254 - 1324) traveled to China with his father and uncle. Along the way, the trio passed through many countries (including India and Indonesia) and saw where spices grew. When they later returned to Italy, Marco Polo spilled out the Arabs' long-held secret in his famous travelogue, *Il Milione*. His direct knowledge of Asia inspired European rulers to increase their trade with the nations in the Far East. Once they established their own routes, they no longer needed to rely on the Arabs as their middlemen. They now could go straight to the source and secure their own spices!

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It was against this historical backdrop of trying to get spices that Christopher Columbus decided to set sail from Spain in 1492. For his expedition, he chose India, the unofficial spice capital of the world, as his goal. Instead of traveling east as everybody else was doing at the time, he was convinced that he could get to India by heading west. After spending about 70 days at sea, he finally reached land. He thought that he had arrived in India. He had no idea that the land where he docked was actually North America. Columbus never brought back pepper, cumin, cardamom, or other spices commonly traded in India. He was credited for introducing the Caribbean's allspice to Europe.

Today, spices no longer cost a fortune. While they seem to have lost their glory and material value, they will never, however, lose their foothold in a kitchen. Especially an Indian one!

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Questions

- _____ 1. Curry powder is the only type of spice that Indians use in their cooking.
- A. true
 - B. false
- _____ 2. Which of the following spices was NOT originally from India?
- A. allspice
 - B. cumin
 - C. coriander seeds
 - D. pepper
- _____ 3. What is *roti*?
- A. a yogurt drink
 - B. a round, flat, unleavened bread
 - C. a thin, folded pancake
 - D. a spicy lentil and tomato soup
- _____ 4. Who were the major players in spice trading during the Middle Ages?
- A. the Arabs
 - B. the Chinese
 - C. the Indians
 - D. the Egyptians
- _____ 5. Which of the following about curry powder is correct?
- A. Christopher Columbus discovered it during his voyage to India.
 - B. It is a mixture of numerous spices and herbs.
 - C. It has the same mild taste all across India.
 - D. all of the above

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- _____ 6. What spice did Christopher Columbus bring back to Europe?
- A. pepper
 - B. allspice
 - C. saffron
 - D. vanilla
- _____ 7. When did humans begin to use spices in their cooking?
- A. about 1,000,000 years ago
 - B. about 20,000 years ago
 - C. about 38,000 years ago
 - D. about 52,000 years ago
- _____ 8. Before Christopher Columbus discovered America, from where did Europeans get their spices?
- A. India
 - B. Australia
 - C. Greenland
 - D. South Africa

