How the British Fell in Love with Food

Compiled by Lewis Esson

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Extract

1990 to 1994

Home & away. In *search* of exotic *flavours*

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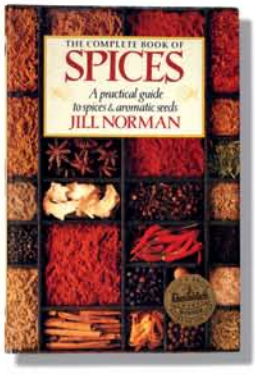
Jill Norman

Jill Norman's *The Complete Book of Spices* won both a Glenfiddich and an André Simon Award and has enjoyed many years of success in several countries. Jill's expertise in herbs and spices has reached such a wide audience that she is frequently asked to identify spices, sent in small amounts to her by people all over the world. Recently, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* asked Jill to be their expert to update all of their entries on herbs and spices. Jill also created the Penguin Cookery Library in the 1960s and 1970s, bringing many first-class authors, such as Elizabeth David, to the list.

Chillies

The Complete Book of Spices
Dorling Kindersley
1990



Members of the capsicum family, chillies and sweet peppers come in all shapes, sizes and colours, ranging from tiny, pointed, explosively hot birds-eye chillies, to large, fleshy peppers with a mild flavour. Indigenous to Central and South America and the West Indies, they had been cultivated there for thousands of years before the Spanish conquest, which eventually introduced them to the rest of the world. Columbus wrote that in the Caribbean island of Hispaniola axi (an Indian name for capsicum) was stronger than pepper and that people would not eat without it. On Columbus's second voyage in 1495, de Cuneo wrote: "In those islands there are also bushes like rose bushes, which make a fruit as long as cinnamon, full of small grains as biting as pepper; those Caribs and the Indians eat that fruit like we eat apples."

In 1569 the celebrated doctor Nicolas Monardes wrote at length about chillies and their successful adoption in Spain in his book on plants of the New World. Echoing him, the 17th-century herbalist John Parkinson noted that in Spain and Italy chillies were: "set in pots about the windowes of their houses". He also listed 20 types of capsicum, describing them as olive-shaped, heartshaped, spear-like, cherry-shaped, and "broad and crumpled".

Today there are probably 200 different types of chillies grown in all parts of the tropics. They are used ripe, when they may be red, orange, yellow or purple, and unripe, when they are green. When buying fresh chillies, make sure they are crisp and unwrinkled. Ripe chillies are available dried, crushed, flaked and ground, and form the basis of many products. With pepper, ginger and turmeric, capsicums are the most widely cultivated spice crops today.

CULTIVATION

Distribution India has long been the largest producer of chillies and is a major exporter, along with Mexico, China, Japan, Indonesia and Thailand. All these countries are also great consumers of chillies. Sri Lanka, Malaysia and the United States are the main importers.

Appearance & growth Chillies are grown in the tropics from sea level to altitudes of 2,000 m (6,600 ft). Sweet peppers and chillies will grow in warm temperate zones too, but are susceptible to frost, and so are cultivated from seed in nurseries and transplanted later. *C. annuum* and *C. frutescens* are believed to come from one original species, so the two types are frequently confused. The *C. annuum* plant usually grows to 30 cm–1 m (1–3 ft) high. Most sweet peppers, as well as some of the hot varieties, come into this group. *C. frutescens* is a perennial plant, which grows up to 2 m (6 ft); this species includes most of the small, pungent forms of chilli.

Harvesting Green chillies are picked three months after planting; other varieties, such as cayenne, are left longer to ripen. The harvest usually lasts three months. After picking, the chillies are either dried in the sun or artificially. Most chillies are grown annually as they become smaller and less pungent after the first year.

Aroma & taste Chillies have little aroma, but they vary in taste, from mild to fiery hot. Generally, the large, round, fleshy varieties are milder than the small, thin-skinned, pointed types. Capsaicin, the pungent principle that gives chillies their kick, is present in the seeds, veins and skin in varying amounts. depending on the species and the state of ripeness. Try removing the seeds and the veins to reduce fire.

USES

Culinary In the tropics, chillies enhance the bland flavour of the staple foods: rice in India and Southeast Asia, beans and corn in Mexico, and cassava in South America. They provide the heat in curry powders, are used in pickling spice, in pepper sauces, chilli oils and essences. Chilli extracts are even used in ginger beer and other drinks. Caution: When handling chillies, wash your hands well and avoid touching your eyes, and any sensitive areas or cuts.

Medicinal Fresh capsicums are rich in vitamin C: they help in the digestion of starchy foods and may be taken as a tonic. Caution: in large doses, chillies may cause stomach and intestinal burns. Even when taken in small quantities, chillies can burn: soothe a sore mouth with plain rice, bread or beans. Do not drink: it will make the burning worse.

Ceviche

In this Mexican hors d'oeuvre, the fish is tenderized by marinating in lemon juice for several hours.

Serves 4

175 g (6 oz) salmon
175 g (6 oz) brill or turbot
175 g (6 oz) cod fillet
juice of 2–3 lemons
1–2 fresh green chillies, seeded and finely chopped
1 small mild onion, chopped
½ avocado, peeled, stoned and cubed
2 tomatoes, skinned, seeded and chopped
125 ml (4 fl oz) olive oil
handful of coriander leaves, chopped
salt and pepper

Remove any skin or bones from the fish and cut the flesh into small cubes. Put the cubes into a dish with the lemon juice, turn to coat all the fish and leave to marinate in the refrigerator for a minimum of 5 hours.

Drain the lemon juice from the fish and combine with the chopped vegetables, olive oil and coriander.

Season with salt and pepper to taste and pour over the fish in a serving dish. Leave in the refrigerator until ready to serve.

Shami Kebab

Serves 4

500 g (1 lb) minced lamb
50 g (2 oz) yellow split peas
1 small onion, chopped
4 cloves garlic, chopped
1 tsp ground cinnamon
1 tsp chilli powder
1 tsp garam masala
small bunch of coriander leaves, chopped
handful of cashew nuts, chopped
a little salt
2 eggs
30 ml (2 tbsp) lemon juice
oil for deep frying

Combine the minced lamb, split peas, onion, garlic, spices, chopped coriander, cashew nuts and a little salt.

Mince or process briefly to blend thoroughly. Stir in the eggs and lemon juice.

Divide the mixture into eight. Wet your hands and form each piece into a small flattened ball.

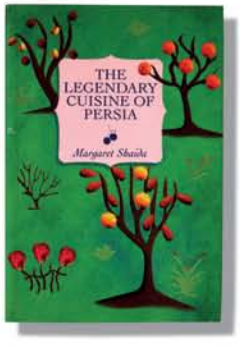
Heat the oil in a deep fryer and fry the kebabs in two batches. Turn once and cook until brown on both sides, about 3–4 minutes. Serve hot or at room temperature, garnished with more chopped coriander leaves.

Margaret Shaida

Margaret Shaida was born in the United Kingdom but married an Iranian and lived in Iran for twenty-five years. There she learned Persian cooking techniques from her mother-in-law, her friends and her extended family in their own kitchens. As a result, she wrote one of the best surveys of this important cuisine. In *The Legendary Cuisine of Persia*, she includes much information on the cultural history of Persia as well as the techniques required for reproducing the recipes in the home kitchen. The book won the Glenfiddich Food Book of the Year Award in 1993.

Bread
First Things First

The Legendary Cuisine of Persia
Lieuse Publications
1992 / Grub Street 2000



Such is the importance of bread (*nân*) in the cuisine of Persia that the first chapter of a seventeenth-century book written by the chef of the royal kitchens of the Safavid Court was given over to bread alone. As the author pointed out, 'bread precedes all other food'. There seems little reason to break with tradition here. Bread is the staple food of the Iranians in all regions, except for the narrow Caspian littoral in the north where rice supplants it. It makes an appearance at every meal, be it the most splendid banquet or the humblest repast.

Persian poetry has many references to the staff of life, and it is always treated with the greatest respect. Even today it is a sin to allow bread to fall to the ground or to drop 'beneath the feet'. Bread is never thrown away. A sufficient quantity is bought fresh every day and consumed immediately, or if not, then certainly it will be eaten up at the next meal. Dried bread is broken into pieces and added to soups and stews, dunked in tea, or ground into breadcrumbs.

> Here, with a loaf of Bread beneath the Bough,
> A flask of Wine, a Book of Verse – and Thou
> Beside me singing in the Wilderness –
> And Wilderness is Paradise enow.

In many regions, bread is used in place of cutlery and is thus vital in the eating process. Most modem Iranians cannot contemplate a meal without bread and there are dozens of different types to satisfy all tastes: soft thin breads to accompany kebabs, wholemeal breads to eat with savoury dishes, thicker breads to eat with cheese and herbs, soft sweet breads or crispy breads to eat with tea. They are unlike the loaves of the West in that they are 'flat' breads, but they are all, without exception, well leavened and light. At least four of them are nationally popular.

Bread is rarely made in urban homes in Iran today. Every city block has two or three specialist bakers who prepare one type of bread three times a day: in the morning for breakfast, at noon for lunch and in the evening for dinner. Each bread serves a specific purpose and will be bought to suit the meal that is being prepared in the home.