

THE SPICE ROUTE

SPAIN'S HERBS AND SPICES AND THEIR HISTORY

When it comes to spices, Spain has a long and rich history.

Way back in the 15th century, Spanish adventurers set out from Europe to establish new routes to the lucrative spice trade of the east. This was how Columbus ended up in America, even though he steadfastly insisted that it was indeed India.

Since those centuries now long past, the nation of Spain has developed its own thriving and bountiful spice and herb regions. The nutrient rich soils and varied climate cultivate a plethora of wonderful, aromatic offerings that are used the world over. Many of these herbs have grown in the wilds of Spain for centuries - longer in some cases - while the varying weather conditions provide a diversity of environments in which a wide variety of herbs and spices can prosper.

Many of the spices grown here today were introduced to the Iberian Peninsula in the immediate aftermath of Spain's 15th-century expansion into a world power. The subsequent profits of the spice trade saw Spain attain great wealth and influence in Europe and across the world. Today, you can visit the various spice and herb producing regions of Spain and see exactly how these wonderful condiments and ingredients make their way from the field to your plate.

SAFFRON

Saffron is commonly known as 'Red Gold', and that's not just because of the beautiful red lustre the spice carries. Saffron gained this name because it was - and still is - the most expensive spice in the world.

A large part of saffron's value comes from the fact that it is incredibly labour-intensive to harvest. It takes thousands and thousands of crocus flowers to create a single kilogram of the spice, making it something of a luxury. In order to obtain saffron, one must remove the stigmas of the fore-mentioned crocus flower - but each flower only has three. This means painstaking, delicate work that harvesters must do by hand, gently removing the stigmas from each flower one by one. Making things even more difficult, harvesting of the crocus flowers can only take place in October and November and, to ensure the most intense flavour, this all has to happen at dawn.

There are historical records showing that the Spanish have been cultivating Saffron for more than a thousand years with La Mancha most strongly identified with this vibrant, prized spice. The history of Saffron and the La Mancha region is tightly bound together and every year the town of Almagro holds the Festival de la Rosa del Azafrán (The Saffron Rose festival) to celebrate another successful harvest.

PIMENTÓN

When we talk about the riches that Spain built through the spice trade, we can no longer see coffers bursting with gold and treasures, but the legacy remains in the form of pimentón - known as smoked paprika to most.

Christopher Columbus himself brought this amazing, versatile spice back from the New World and today the fiery red condiment is an integral part of Spanish cuisine. Returning from his voyage, even though it wasn't the one he meant to take, Columbus was keen to show off the vibrant and hot peppers he



found in the climes of Central and South America, specifically Mexico and Peru, as he felt he had discovered something wonderful. He introduced these alien-looking plants to his monarch and, over time, the rich, hot peppers became the basis for pimentón.

A long-standing tradition grew from these beginnings, and today the harvesting and preparation of pimentón has become synonymous with Spanish culture and cuisine. In order to obtain the powder form of pimentón, there is a well-established process that big producers and small family outfits alike follow to this very day.

Harvested in the autumn, the peppers are placed in a smokehouse and dried with oakwood. The peppers are turned every day, with the smoking process taking two weeks to complete. Throughout this process, the peppers are slowly smoked and dried, which allows them to take on a unique flavour. At the final stage, the peppers are milled by stone wheels until nothing remains but fine, smoked pimentón. Extremadura in south-western Spain is one of the most well-known regions for the production of pimentón, as this is the area where monasteries first took to growing the peppers Columbus brought back from the New World. Another region famous for its pimentón is Murcia, with the spice from this area having a sweeter taste thanks to its exclusive use of the bola pepper variety.

LAUREL

Known as bay leaf to most British people, laurel is an ancient and potent herb that has been cultivated in the Mediterranean for thousands of years. Like many herbs, its value was tied to its alleged health-giving properties, but today it's mainly used as a great addition to slow-cooked dishes like stews, rice and meat. The Romans used laurel leaves as a crown, placing a circular wreath on top of the emperor or general's head when he returned from a successful campaign. Over time, the humble laurel came to symbolise victory and strength. The roots of this practice might lie in the history of ancient Greece which the Romans were so fond of. In Greek mythology, the god Apollo often wore a laurel wreath atop his head, as a synthesis of his

godly nature and the natural world. The Romans copied this idea and, eventually, the natural laurel wreath morphed into a gold reproduction – which you may have seen in popular representations of the Roman empire.

Today, the rich, hardwood of the laurel tree is still used in Andalusia for ornate woodwork, with this tradition coming from the ancient Arabian world. Laurel is a versatile, aromatic leaf and one that carries with it a vast amount of history. When consumed, the leaf is also thought to have a range of health benefits. It is thought to keep the digestive system functioning properly, have anti-inflammatory properties, relieve respiratory issues and reduce cholesterol.

ROSEMARY

Translated from Latin, rosemary becomes 'dew of the sea' and this fragrant herb has grown in the Mediterranean region for thousands of years. Rosemary is present in a considerable number of Spanish dishes, and it has a long history in both food and medicine.

In ancient times, the thinking was that burning bunches of rosemary purified the air and drove away 'bad humours' – what we today know as germs and viruses. The pungent, sweet smoke of burning rosemary had the status of a virtual wonder drug, capable of keeping illness at bay and healing the body. It also gained a reputation, perhaps from these ancient origins, as something witches would use when casting their spells. Today, the majority of people use rosemary solely in their cooking, and this versatile herb – technically a shrub – is an essential aromatic for a range of slow-cooked Spanish dishes. It goes particularly well with rabbit, goat and lamb, adding its own, nuanced tones to gamey meats. Rosemary is also used in tea for a refreshing, rejuvenating drink, and you may also see it mixed into jars of honey.

Rosemary is a versatile herb – you can drink it, eat it, burn it or bathe in it – and one intertwined with Spanish and Mediterranean history. Take the time to sample all of the spices and herbs you can during your time in Spain, because you're not just tasting a part of contemporary Spanish culture, they're an edible part of Spanish history.

