

The starting point for European expansion had nothing to do with
the rise of any religion or the rise of capitalism—but it had a
great deal to do with pepper.

Henry Hobhouse

Seeds of Change: Five Plants That Transformed Mankind

This book is about the demand, really the *craving*, for spices in Europe during the Middle Ages, from roughly A.D. 1000 until 1513, the year the Portuguese finished their exploration of the Moluccas, or Spice Islands, the source of nutmegs and cloves, in what is now eastern Indonesia. Through their research on the spice trade, historians have shown how the supply of

spices was affected by price, warfare, and changes in trade routes. But there is less understanding about the demand side: *why* spices were so popular in the first place, why they were sufficiently sought after for traders to bring them to Europe from what seemed the farthest corners of the world. There was only the vaguest understanding of where India, the great spice source and entrepôt, was located and no knowledge at all until the fourteenth century about other lands where spices grew, such as Java, Sumatra, or the Moluccas, yet the desire of European consumers for spices was strong enough to draw precious aromatic commodities from distant and unknown places.

Much of their allure had to do with the use of spices to flavor a sophisticated cuisine. Medieval European food, or at least that enjoyed by the more economically comfortable classes, was perfumed with a great variety of spices. The recipe collections of the era provide evidence of a fashion for spicier food than Europe has ever enjoyed since the Middle Ages ended. The fierce demand for spices, however, was caused by needs beyond simply gastronomic preferences. Spices were considered unusually effective as medicines and disease preventives; they were burned as incense in religious rituals and distilled into perfumes and cosmetics. Prized as consumer goods by the affluent, spices were symbols of material comfort and social prominence. The medieval infatuation with spices, encouraged by their mysterious origins and high prices, stimulated attempts to find the lands where they originated and to take over control of their trade. The need for spices fueled the expansion of Europe at the dawn of the modern era.

Desire, fashion, and taste move empires. If, as Adam Smith plausibly claimed, the two most important events in world history were the nearly simultaneous voyages to America by Columbus and around Africa to India by Vasco da Gama, then the European desire to find a route to the spices is among the most significant forces the world has known.¹

In the modern era too, consumer demand affects people across the globe, so that drug addiction in America has an impact in Afghanistan or Colombia; the value of diamonds has disrupted African countries, including the Congo, Angola, and Sierra Leone. The interaction of everyday preferences with great shifts in global economies was the background in the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries for the rise of transatlantic slavery in order to supply Europe with sugar, indigo, tobacco, and cotton, just as the demand for oil drives so much of today's political balance or imbalance of power.

Of all the world's commodities, spices most dramatically affected history because they launched Europe on the path to eventual overseas conquest, a conquest whose success and failure affects every aspect of contemporary world politics. The passion for spices underlies the beginning of the European colonial enterprise, a force that remade the demography, politics, culture, economy, and ecology of the entire globe.

The desire for spices, however, was already waning before European colonial expansion reached its zenith. By the eighteenth century, European food preferences had dramatically changed in favor of a richer but blander taste, and spices were no longer associated with healing or the sacred. The spice trade became unimportant. Even though today spices have a role in fusion cuisine and in cutting-edge food trends, they long ago ceased to be of global economic significance. In the summer of 2004, Hurricane Frances destroyed the nutmeg crop of Granada, the largest producer of this spice, yet the world financial system did not tremble. In fact, it took no notice whatsoever. A once great commodity is now a mere flavoring. Timothy Morton put it cogently in his book *The Poetics of Spice*: "Yesterday's banquet ingredient becomes today's Dunkin' Donuts apple-cinnamon item."² It therefore requires some effort to understand why spices would have been so vitally important and so passionately desired in the past. This book is intended to depict cinnamon and other spices at the height of their fame, when they enchanted Europe and set in motion its creative and destructive campaigns overseas.

The most popular explanation for the love of spices in the Middle Ages is that they were used to preserve meat from spoiling, or to cover up the taste of meat that had already gone off. This compelling but false idea constitutes something of an urban legend, a story so instinctively attractive that mere fact seems unable to wipe it out.³ Actually, spices don't do much to preserve meat compared with salting, smoking, pickling, or air curing. The bad taste of spoiled meat, in any event, won't be substantially allayed by spices, or anything else.

The myth of spices as preservatives runs up against the actual conditions of perishability. Americans usually assume that in the absence of modern refrigeration meat will spoil almost immediately, but, particularly in the cool climate that dominates much of Europe, this is simply not the case. Some meat, such as game, was in fact supposed to age before being ready

to cook. Master Chiquart, chef to the count of Savoy in the early fifteenth century, instructed purveyors to get the game they had gathered to the court well enough in advance to allow it to hang sufficiently (up to a week or so) before preparation.⁴ He was not worried about freshness or a just-in-time delivery system.

In the Middle Ages fresh meat was not, in any event, all that hard for the reasonably affluent to obtain. In an overwhelmingly agricultural society, where cities were surrounded by farms without substantial intervening suburbs, plenty of animals were available. People of even moderate means had their own land in the country and kept livestock. Butchers were closer to the wholesale side of processing than are their modern descendants. In back of the store, they slaughtered most of what was sold in the front. Medieval town ordinances all over Europe denounced and attempted to regulate (with apparently only limited effect) butchers who fouled the streets with blood or unwanted entrails of animals they dispatched. Anyone who could afford spices could easily find meat fresher than what city dwellers today buy in their local supermarket.

Spices were very expensive, and meat was relatively cheap. According to the household accounts of the earl of Oxford in 1431–32, an entire pig could be had for the price of a pound of the cheapest spice, pepper.⁵ An account left by the steward of the Talbot family in Shropshire shows that the monthly cost of spices was almost exactly the same as expenditures for beef and pork combined. For the fiscal year 1424–25, the family consumed seventeen pounds of pepper, fourteen pounds of ginger, and seventeen pounds of other spices, including three of saffron.⁶ Given the cost, trying to improve dubious meat with cloves or nutmeg would have been perverse, something like slicing Italian white truffles (currently upward of eight hundred dollars per pound) to liven up the taste of a fast-food cheeseburger.

This simple explanation for the popularity of spices doesn't work—it had nothing to do with the perishability of meat. A truer account involves the prestige and versatility of spices, their social and religious overtones, and their mysterious yet attractive origins. Versatility is especially significant because, as previously stated, spices were not used just for cooking. They were regarded as drugs and as disease preventives in a society so often visited by ghastly epidemics. Spices were considered not only cures but healthful in promoting the body's equilibrium. In particular they helped balance the

internal fluids, or humors, that affected both wellness and mood, so they were not only medicinal but luxurious and beautiful. Spices soothed and cheered, creating a refined environment of taste and comfort. They could be consumed in edible form or breathed as perfume or incense. The odor of spices wafted through houses fumigated with burning aromatics, as a kind of predecessor to aromatherapy. Churches were also permeated by the odor of resinous spices, especially frankincense, used in the celebrations of the Christian liturgy.

The symbolic overtones of spices linked fragrance to health and even to sanctity. The holiness of saints was demonstrated by the wonderful odor of spices that they exuded in life and even, contrary to the usual way of corpses, in death. As Chapter 3 will show, the Garden of Eden, the terrestrial paradise, was supposedly perfumed with spices and functioned as the true home of these wonderful aromatic products.

The location of paradise in the East, according to most Christian geographers, contributed to the already alluring images of India and East Asia held in the West. That spices came from Asia was further evidence of their magical qualities, bolstering the attraction conveyed by their expense, mystery, and sacred overtones. According to medieval legends, the Three Magi who visited the newborn Jesus were kings of Oriental realms who brought with them two spices, frankincense and myrrh, along with gold as signs of tribute (wealth) and worship (sacredness). The attraction of the East as both exotic and sacred is apparent in a story told by Thomas of Cantimpré, a thirteenth-century encyclopedist who also wrote biographies of saintly contemporaries. He describes an unusually austere bishop who received a magnificent silver cup filled with nutmegs. The bishop sent back the silver goblet, but he made an exception to his rule of refusing gifts and accepted the nutmegs, saying that he did so because they were “the fruit of the Orient.”⁷

Once the notion of spices as not merely useful but somehow wonderful took hold, their importance was enhanced by the need to show off. As with all prestigious consumer items, spices were effective in claiming, conveying, and confirming social status, but they therefore had to be consumed in a public and ostentatious manner.

THE SOCIAL VALUE OF SPICES

Medieval levels of ostentation could be quite impressive. In 1476 a series of banquets marked the marriage of Duke George “the Rich” of Bavaria with Princess Jadwiga of Poland. Records of the feast describe the startlingly large quantities of spices that were required: 386 pounds of pepper, 286 of ginger, 207 of saffron, 205 of cinnamon, 105 of cloves, and a mere 85 pounds of nutmeg.⁸ Some of these spices may have been given away as presents, and certainly the feasting went on for days, but the quantities are nevertheless staggering. Beyond cuisine preferences, and certainly beyond mere necessity (as in the preservation of meat), spices here represent a calculated display of wealth, prestige, style, and splendor.

The modern French philosopher Gaston Bachelard observed that “the conquest of the superfluous is more spiritually exciting than the conquest of what is necessary. Man is a creature of desire, not a being motivated by necessity.”⁹ The truth of such a statement depends on circumstance, specifically the ability to enjoy choices above mere subsistence, but the power of unnecessary desire is at the heart of any explanation for the appeal and cost of luxuries. Spices were not as conspicuous as clothes, fine horses, tapestries, and other medieval aristocratic props, but they were as important and delightful as symbols of noble graciousness and status. They were objects of desire but not simply frivolous. Just as with silk clothes, hunting accoutrements, or titles and lineage, spices were luxuries that conferred well-being but also social distinction. Only out of a kind of reverse snobbery or world-renouncing simplicity could a person of high rank fail to serve highly spiced meals to guests. It was not a preference but an obligation. Spices weren’t necessary for subsistence, but they were required in order to demonstrate and maintain social prestige.

Part of the gratification afforded by aromatic products arose from their fragrance, flavor, and perceived healthfulness, but they were also items of conspicuous consumption, which can be defined as the enjoyment of things that are less satisfying when consumed in private than when displayed to one’s friends and associates. Jean of Hauteville, a satirical poet of the late twelfth century, criticized spices in the course of a diatribe against both gluttony and pride. A Norman who resided in England, Jean wrote his *Archithrenius* (Prince of Lamentations) as a moralistic denunciation

of contemporary customs in the form of an imagined allegorical journey. His young protagonist visits the land of Venus and then the territory of gourmandise, where the “stomach-worshippers” live. According to Jean, the already vicious excessive love of food is made even worse by adding to it the passion for status seeking. Cooking is judged by the expense involved, he lamented, not on the basis of flavor. The best condiments are those that are the most costly, so that gluttony (a base but natural instinct) is further corrupted by arrogance or pride (a perverse, unnatural vice).¹⁰

However much moralists and advocates of simple and sensible living complain, the flaunting of fashionable and expensive goods is a constant social fact. What changes is the nature of such goods. What provides status and pleasure in one historical period may not carry over into the next. True, there are some enduring forms of prestige objects, such as fine clothing or jewelry, that mark class distinction even when specific fashions change: there has never been a time when rubies weren’t precious. Most goods, however, rise and fall in perceived social value. Sometimes this is the result of a more generalized affluence or a price decline, so that a freezer was an emblem of prosperity in the 1950s but is no longer, and chicken is now cheap whereas it was considered a treat in the 1920s. As this is being written, flat-screen televisions are making the transition from show-off to routine items.

In some cases fashions simply change. Cuban cigars are still prized (and expensive), but most tobacco products and their accompanying paraphernalia including pipes, ashtrays, and lighters have lost their status over the past twenty years. Fur coats are not what they once were, because of changing attitudes toward animals. Hot chocolate was all the rage in the eighteenth century and has left souvenirs of its importance in fine porcelain collections, but elegance in the world of chocolate has moved to exclusive or artisanal candies, while the beverage is now mostly just for children.

Spices in the Middle Ages were marks of status and success, but they occupy this position no longer, and have not for several centuries. Serving a highly spiced meal in Europe today might show cooking skills or a willingness to try out risky dishes, but the spices themselves confer no particular social distinction. Some medieval luxuries (silk, jewels, and gold) retain their prestige in the contemporary world, while the allure of others (saints’ relics or unicorn horns, for example) requires from us an effort at conceptual reconstruction. Some of the magic of spices was the intrinsic appeal

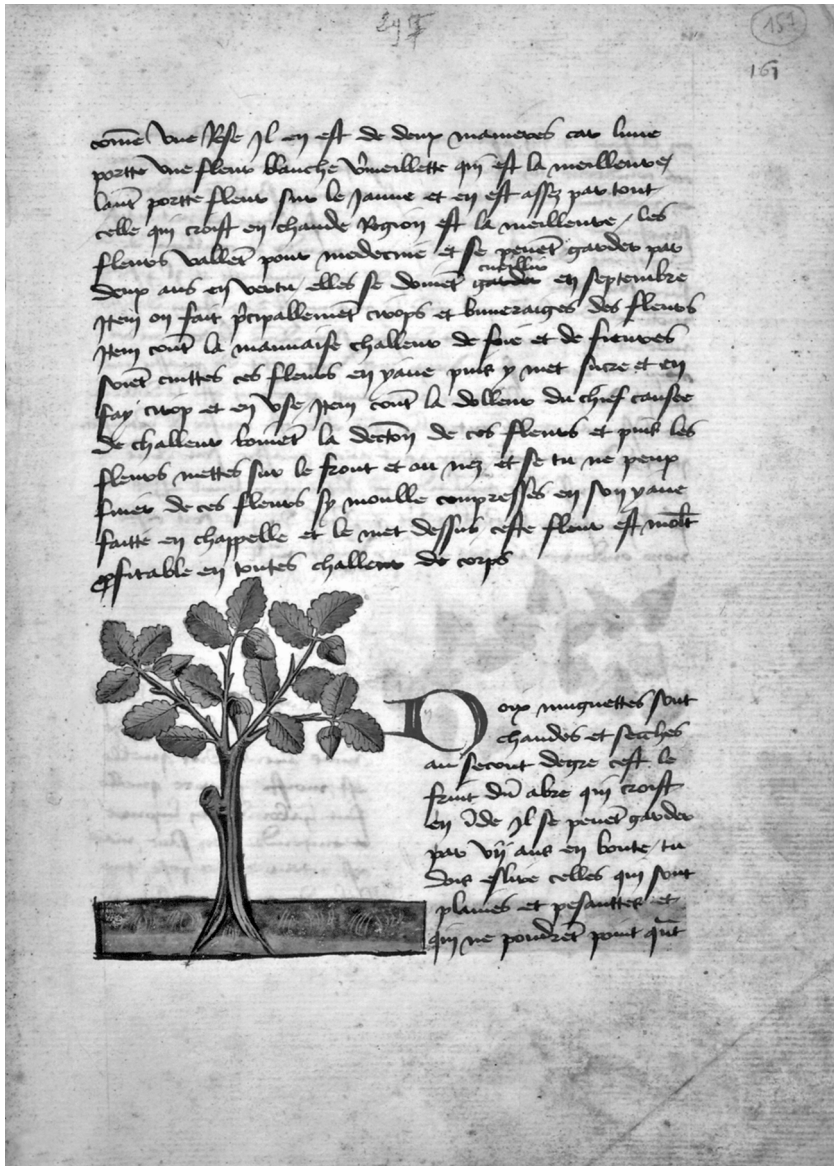
of fragrances and the pleasurable flavor sensations they offered. The desire for spices was additionally stimulated by external factors, by their rarity. Even if spices were readily available, for a price (markets, spice sellers, and apothecaries carried all manner of exotic products), they were seen as rare because they came from far away and their origins were mysterious. Above all, they were expensive, ranging from merely costly (pepper) to the fabulously expensive (ambergris and aloe wood).

IMPORTED AND DOMESTIC AROMATICS

In the Middle Ages in Europe, spices were aromatic items of commerce with a high unit cost (that is, price per pound) imported from distant lands. They were not bulk goods like salt or lumber, nor were they domestic European items, such as herring or woolen cloth. Because of the time it took for spices to arrive from their usually unknown sources, people conceived of them as dry: as leaves, fruit, bark, or resins whose fragrance was not destroyed by the long voyage. This is a crucial difference between spices and herbs, with which they are often categorized both in cooking and in medicine. Herbs as well as spices impart flavor and aroma, but herbs were thought of as green and fresh even if they might be dried on occasion. Herbs like parsley, sorrel, or borage were used in both cooking and medicine. Many, such as mandrake, digitalis, or rue, were exclusively or primarily medicinal. Some were gathered in fields and woods, while others were cultivated, but they were above all familiar, literally part of the European landscape.

Spices, on the other hand, arrived in dried or semiprocessed form. Until the end of the thirteenth century, when Marco Polo visited India and other parts of southern Asia, Europeans were completely unfamiliar with pepper, nutmeg, or cloves in their botanical form or fresh state. Even ginger and its cousins like galangal and zedoary must have been considerably dried out after a journey that would have taken at least a year. Manuals of drugs, now often known as “herbals,” contained illustrations that were accurate as far as European herbs were concerned, but completely fanciful in their depiction of tropical spices.

Because they were gathered or cultivated locally, herbs did not have great commercial value. They were sold at markets, so they were not completely



A fanciful depiction of a nutmeg "tree," from the *Livre des simples medecines*, manuscript copy made in the fourteenth century.

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devoid of economic significance, but herbs were not comparable in price to spices, which were imported, sold in special stores, and measured out in small, expensive quantities to all save those, such as the stewards of George the Rich, who could buy them by the wagonload. Chapter 2 examines spices used as drugs, discussing the curative properties of spices and how these differed from herbs. Suffice it to say here that both spices and herbs were considered powerful medical tools, but applicable to different areas of need, with herbs having a wider use in such things as love potions and poisons.

Saffron is an exception to the definition of spices as imported aromatic products, since it grew locally but was nevertheless viewed as exotic and was breathtakingly expensive. The dried stigmata of a variety of crocus (*crocus sativus*), saffron probably originated in the Middle East (Iran and Kashmir are the leading growers of saffron now). In the Middle Ages saffron grew throughout the Mediterranean world and was particularly associated with Tuscany, where there were major markets in Pisa and San Gimignano.¹¹ At the end of the period, the eastern part of Spain started to gain the reputation it continues to hold as the source of the best-quality saffron. Unlike almost all other medieval spices, the saffron crocus was easily adapted to different soils and climates. As the English place name Saffron Walden attests, even northern Europe could produce a crop. The difficulty with saffron and the reason for its expense is in the tedious labor of harvesting just the stamen and the astronomical number of tiny threads necessary to make up a standard unit of measurement. Saffron was used as it is now in flavoring various dishes, but also as incense, as a coloring agent, and, probably most importantly, for its medicinal applications.

A few spices were native to Europe, but usually in very restrictive ecological zones. Mastic, for example, an aromatic resin, is produced by a species of acacia that grows only on the Aegean island of Chios. Most spices, however, came from much more distant climes, from “India” as conceived in the European imagination, but, as will become apparent, that geographical term could encompass a tremendous amount of real and imagined territory.

SPECIAL SPICES OF THE MIDDLE AGES

The best impression of what exactly the term “spices” meant to medieval traders comes from handbooks of how to do business composed by expe-

rienced merchants. These compendia of weights and measures, proverbial wisdom, and market lore tend to include lists of spices and advice on how to assess their quality in wholesale transactions. The longest such list appears in a commercial manual composed shortly before 1340 by Francesco Pegolotti, a Florentine banker who had experience in Cyprus, a great center for European imports of Eastern spices. Pegolotti's *La pratica della mercatura* itemizes 288 spices (*speziere*) amounting to 193 separate substances (many come in several forms: three kinds of ginger, two grades of cinnamon, and so on).¹² For our purposes we can leave aside some of the so-called spices such as alum (used to fix dyes so that the colors won't run), or wax (eleven varieties). Pegolotti included these because he tended to consider any nonperishable imported good as a spice. Ninety percent of Pegolotti's list consists of fragrant plants and a few animal products, some edible, some used more commonly as medicines or perfumes. Without exhausting ourselves in the minutiae of this spice directory, it is worth exploring its categories to see some of the less familiar exotics and the aura of desire and value surrounding them.

Edible Spices

The four major spices in commercial terms were black pepper, cinnamon, ginger, and saffron. Nutmegs and cloves were very expensive, but they were also ubiquitous in medieval recipes. These spices account for a large percentage of what was imported into Europe and sold for culinary purposes, but there are many spices that were common, if not as prevalent as these, that are almost or completely unfamiliar now outside their homelands. Pegolotti mentions an astounding range of spices even by today's sophisticated culinary standards. His list includes galangal, for example, an aromatic root related to ginger, now barely known in Europe and North America, and only through Thai cuisine at that. In the Middle Ages this was an expensive but widely available spice used in sophisticated cooking, and at the same time featured in pharmaceutical handbooks. According to another commercial manual, this one from Catalonia, the buyer of galangal should make sure the root is "heavy" (meaning probably not completely dried out), yellow in color both inside and out, and, most important, that the flavor is strong when bitten into, "otherwise it is worthless."¹³ Another spice often called

for in medieval recipes is long pepper, which is not in fact related to black pepper. Its dried fruit is extremely pungent, black, and rather large, the size of dry catfood or kibble. Beyond East and South Asia it is now completely unknown, having dropped out of European cuisine by the eighteenth century. Zedoary, another aromatic root related to turmeric, has also vanished outside India, but it was mentioned in medieval European cookbooks and its aroma was thought sufficiently attractive for it to be included among the fragrant plants in the magical garden of love at the opening of the popular allegorical poem *The Romance of the Rose*.¹⁴

Among the new and fashionable spices of the medieval period was what the French called “grains of paradise,” known more prosaically as malagueta pepper. Like long pepper, this spice is not in fact related to black pepper. It is sharp and peppery, dark red, and grows in West Africa. It was first mentioned in Europe in the thirteenth century, and the designation “grains of paradise” seems to be an early example of a commercial marketing and branding campaign. Grains of paradise enjoyed a tremendous vogue in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. By the time the Portuguese found the African regions where it grows, the fashion was waning; grains of paradise were headed for European oblivion by the close of the sixteenth century.¹⁵

The most important new spice (that is, a spice unknown to the ancient world) was sugar, destined for a prominent life of its own as a commodity, but an expensive import during the Middle Ages. Although sugar is not exactly aromatic, it qualified as a spice according to the medieval classification of imported goods and drugs since it was exotic, sold in small quantities, valuable, and credited with marvelous properties.

The Greeks and Romans had relied on honey, a much less powerful sweetener than cane sugar (obtaining sugar from beets and other plants is a modern development). Sugar began as another import from India, but by the fifteenth century sugarcane was being cultivated in Spain, Sicily, the Canary Islands, and the eastern Mediterranean. In the modern era sugar has become a cheap, fundamental ingredient in sodas, desserts, and candy, and a critical additive for processed foods from salad dressings to barbecue sauce. In the medieval period it was a luxury, first considered a medicine but later frequently enhancing a great variety of dishes, not just desserts, which were not yet distinct from other courses by reason of their sweetness.

Pegolotti lists thirteen varieties of sugar commonly sold, including rock candy, sugar scented with roses or violets, and sugar from Damascus, Babylon, and Caffa (a Genoese port in the Crimea). Sugar has a seductive flavor that retained its importance in medicine even as it was becoming accepted and later required in cuisine. Then as now, sugar disguised the bitter taste of medicine, but it was also useful as a way of preserving the often volatile ingredients of drugs. Medicines were combined with sugar and by heating and cooling rendered into a variety of textures: gummy, hard, paste-like, soft, or chewy. These sugared medicinal preparations, known as “electuaries,” are the origin of candy and many similar confections combining sugar and spice.¹⁶

Beginning with the eighteenth century, sugar ceased to be considered a drug and changed from a mere food flavoring (what we understand as a spice) to an essential basic ingredient. At the same time, the end of medieval culinary practices meant that sweet dishes were separated from savory ones, so that the last course (dessert) came to be defined as sugary. In some respects, therefore, the Middle Ages used sugar more widely across the menu than now, but overall in much smaller quantities.

Drugs

While medieval lore taught that every edible spice had some purported medical use, the spices so far mentioned were all most often found in food preparations. There were other spices that were predominantly for medical purposes. Lists of medicines and their uses do not limit themselves by any means to common condiments, but rather demonstrate a fascination for strikingly exotic “spices”—dried, fragrant, and expensive imports with attributed medical value. Thus Pegolotti cites among his spices two kinds of opium and a botanical known as dragon’s blood (extracted from the plant genus *Dracanea*), a medicine and red dye. A commonly mentioned panacea was “tutty,” charred scrapings from inside chimneys. According to Pegolotti, tutty was imported from Alexandria, so obviously a routine European chimney would not suffice. Tutty was considered a spice as it was nonperishable, imported, fragrant (after a fashion), sold in small quantities, and expensive.

Among the strangest of Pegolotti’s spices is *momie*, also known as *mumia*

and informally in English as mummy. The fundamental drug handbook known from its first (Latin) words as *Circa instans* (dating from 1166) defines mummy as “a kind of spice collected from the tombs of the dead”—but not just any dead people, only those whose bodies have been specially embalmed. Mummy, which was thought to be effective in stopping bleeding, was an exudation from the head and spine of the corpse resulting from decay combined with the spices used in the preservation process. The meaning of mummy is therefore not wrapped-up corpses from the era of the Egyptian pharaohs, but rather a substance produced by embalmed but not completely dried-out corpses that were old, no doubt, but not necessarily ancient. In its way mummy was definitely aromatic, if not particularly delightful in its fragrance. Indeed, Pegolotti notes that mummy should have a foul odor and a pitchlike consistency, or else it’s inferior. Mummy was imported from Egypt and the East, regions whose embalming techniques were perhaps considered more medically effective.

Medicinal Perfumes

The border between fragrance and drugs was porous and ill-defined. Among the rarest and most expensive spices listed in herbals and merchant’s handbooks are perfumed substances used primarily as medicines, things like balsam, an aromatic resin from a plant native to Arabia. Its sap was credited with marvelous healing properties but also with high spiritual powers. Balsam was called for in Christian rites involving anointment, such as baptism, the ordination of priests, and the consecration of bishops.¹⁷ Another Arabian resin, frankincense, was (and remains) the principal ingredient in the censuring rituals of the Catholic and Orthodox churches. In keeping with the versatility characteristic of spices, frankincense was also used as a medicine, to scent houses, and to perfume banquets.

The most esteemed (and staggeringly expensive) medicinal perfumes were four animal products: ambergris (from sperm whales), castoreum (from certain kinds of beavers), musk (from a small Tibetan deer), and civet (from a kind of wild cat). Of these, ambergris was the most important and the most mysterious.¹⁸ Ambergris was coughed up by sperm whales and could be found washed up on Indian Ocean beaches (usually in East Africa because of the winds and tides). The connection with whales was dimly and

A Medical “Spice”: Mummy

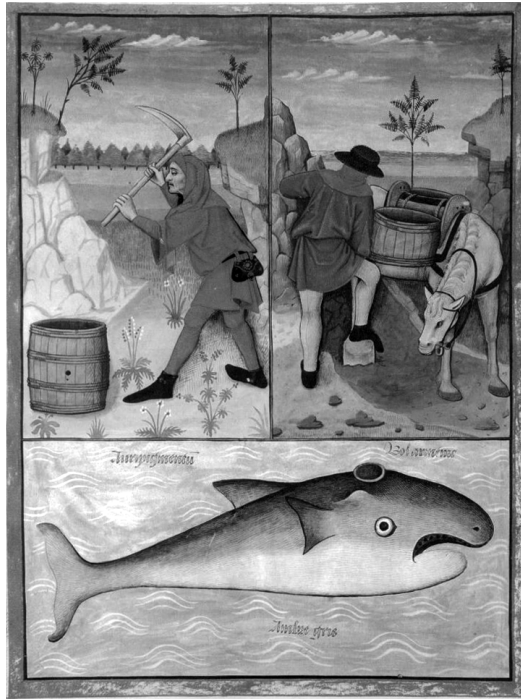
Mummy is hot and dry in the second degree, according to Constantine’s testimony. Some say that it is cold because it binds, but this is not true, for many cold and dry substances relax while many hot and dry substances bind. Mummy is a spice or confection found in the tombs of people who have been embalmed with spices, as they used to do in ancient times, and as the pagans near Babylon still do. This mummy is found near the brain and the spine. You should choose that which is shining, black, bad smelling, and firm. On the other hand, the white kind, which is rather opaque, does not stick, is not firm and easily crumbles to powder, must be refused.

Mummy has binding qualities. If a compress is made of it and the juice of shepherd’s purse herb, it stops excessive nasal bleeding. . . . Furthermore, to treat spitting of blood through the mouth because of a wound or a malady of the respiratory organs, make some pills with mummy, mastic powder, and water in which gum arabic has been dissolved and let the patient keep these pills under the tongue until they have melted, then let him swallow them.

From the *Livre des simples médecines*, the fifteenth-century French translation of *Circa instans*.

inconsistently understood. Some Arab authorities ignored whales altogether and asserted that ambergris came from a fountain at the bottom of the sea or that it was a kind of marine fungus. In the *Arabian Nights*, Sinbad says it comes from an island spring but is then consumed by sea monsters and vomited up. Pharmaceutical manuals, such as *Circa instans* and its French translation from the 1400s, the *Livre des simples médecines*, were more confident that it was produced by whales. Marco Polo informs his readers on the basis of his knowledge of the Indian Ocean that ambergris comes from whales, and in one version of his travels he describes whale hunting off the island of Socotra.¹⁹

Ambergris tends to be gray and surprisingly lightweight in relation to its mass, resembling an aromatic version of pumice. It has a compelling smell that seems to combine perfume, the sea, and some primordial animal



Gathering nonbotanical medicines, including a whale representing ambergris, as shown in an illustration by Robinet Testard in the *Livre des simples médecines*, ca. 1490. (National Library of Russia, St. Petersburg, MS Fr. V. VI., fol. 143v)

scent. It was often confused with amber, another lightweight substance often found on beaches. The word for “amber” and “ambergris” is the same in most languages, and our term “ambergris” comes from the French for “gray amber.” Ambergris was supposed to be helpful in combating epileptic seizures, but its main use was as a hygienic perfume. According to medical treatises, it relieves suffocation of the womb and helps in childbirth just by the effect of its wonderful scent. Ambergris was especially prominent in attempts to ward off the plague by resisting the foul miasma thought to be its cause.



At this point, with such strange and fabulous animal substances as ambergris, we may seem to have strayed far from the narrow definition of spices as condiments, but the point of the chapters that follow is to trace the many complementary but diverse meanings spices held in the medieval period. They were not just for cooking but were employed in different ways as health and consumer items. In Chapter 1 we begin with their most obvious use, in cooking, showing what sorts of flavors were held in esteem by medieval connoisseurs and what kinds of spiced dishes were considered standard. The second chapter describes spices in their medicinal applications, as drugs to cure illness and as aromatic preventives. Beyond their direct utility in treating or repelling illness, spices were ingredients for perfume in an age that was dazzled by fragrances. Spices were credited not just with healing but with a kind of spiritual power. Chapter 3 concerns fragrance, describing how the mysterious origins and aromatic powers of spices were associated with paradise, religious transcendence, and the immaterial world.

Having established the basis for the medieval love of spices, the remaining chapters look at the consequences of this infatuation. Chapter 4 considers the spice trade, the routes of supply and how merchants, scholars, and economic strategists thought of the lands beyond the familiar borders of Europe. Chapter 5 focuses on medieval theories about rarity, scarcity, and why spices were expensive. Here geographical theories were mobilized to further the desire to obtain spices directly from the still mysterious territories where they were grown and to avoid the Muslim intermediaries who were not only economic rivals but religious enemies.

The image of spices as marvelous and their links to spiritual refinement were contested by those who believed their expense and seductiveness were emblematic of human foolishness, even sinfulness. Chapter 6 shows how moralists and literary writers viewed the passion for spices as a triumph of greed and pride in social status over modest restraint and common sense. That spices came from so far and at such cost, yet were consumed in a matter of moments, made them perfect symbols of wasteful ostentation. The final two chapters describe the denouement of the medieval love of spices, a desire that continued despite the warnings of moralists and that directly inspired the voyages of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries that concluded the Middle Ages and began the process of European expansion.

In all of this the mysterious was mixed with the practical. Spices were

used in cookery and in medicine, but their popularity and importance went beyond utility. They were marvelous and mysterious—aspects of the world’s secrets and miracles along with saints, strange animals, extraordinary natural events like earthquakes, or mythical natural phenomena including rivers of stones or lands of darkness. The quest to discover the lands where the spices grew was practical in an economic sense, but also part of the medieval desire to fathom the secrets of the earth.²⁰ The story of spices is about how people lived in the past, their views of the marvelous, and how they thought they could discover and exploit the beauty of the world.