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**Flavorings in Context:
Spices and Herbs in Medieval Near East**

Abstract

Throughout history, the approach towards imported spices varied from culture to culture. In medieval and early post-medieval Europe, where spices became an exotic object of temporary desire, they were often used unskillfully and in a haphazard manner. In the Ottoman Constantinople, unlike in Europe, it was the moderate use of spices, and not overdosing them, that became a manifestation of status. As deliberate paragons of refinement, the Ottomans depreciated what they considered uncivilized ways of their Arab provincial population, heavily seasoned diet included. Indeed, to a foreign observer, the Arabic-Islamic cookery might have appeared irrationally overseasoned. But the way the medieval Arab urbanites used spices was not a result of their surrender to changeable vogue, or the need to show off.

Some decades ago, Maxime Rodinson stated that the fashion for cooking with spices had been inherited from the Greco-Roman world, and suggested that the rule referred also to the Muslim culture.¹ Indeed, the Romans were the first Europeans to eat pepper on a regular basis and the first to systematically import Oriental spices to the West. Moreover, it is possible that Roman soldiers, while marching across Europe and carrying spices to the northernmost and westernmost reaches of the Roman world,

¹ Maxime Rodinson, *Venice, the Spice Trade and Eastern Influences on European Cooking*, in: Maxime Rodinson, A.J. Arberry and Charles Perry, *Medieval Arab Cookery: Essays and Translations* by Maxime Rodinson, A.J. Arberry and Charles Perry, Blackawton 2001, pp. 202–204.

popularized their use on the continent.² But although the Romans conquered the Near East, too, apparently they were not the ones who unveiled the world of Oriental spices for Near Easterners. The Greeks did not do it, either, even though Greek medicine and dietetics contributed significantly to shaping the Arabic-Islamic medico-culinary ways. True, the Baghdadi “new wave” cuisine³ derived some of its inspiration from the Greek world, but the taste for spicing seems to have been inherited from the Indo-Persian world rather than from Greco-Roman one.⁴

The correlation of spices with politics, economy and medicine notwithstanding, the approach towards imported spices varied from culture to culture. They could, for instance, become an exotic object of temporary desire, depending on changeable vogue. In such a case, spices were often used unskillfully and in a haphazard manner. An exemplary model of this is approach of the Europeans, among whom craze for Oriental spices lasted from at least the twelfth century till about the end of the sixteenth century. Throughout that time, spices, and particularly pepper, were considered an absolutely indispensable foodstuff, worth spending fortunes, facing the vicissitudes of traveling half-way round the world, and waging overseas wars. Using spices in Europe was a matter of prestige, ostentation and, sometimes, *raison d'état*. But when Europe finally got sated with Oriental flavors in the late Renaissance, and when blandness became a much desired feature, spices were rejected and reduced to a position of almost needless accessories, implying bad taste.⁵

The style promoted by patrons of the Ottoman cuisine was radically different. The Ottomans, apparently inspired by moderate spicing of the Byzantine cuisine,⁶ made of modesty the standard. This was, by the way, one of the very few gestures made by the Ottomans towards modesty. In fact, the Ottomans never rejected exotic flavor – in Constantinople Oriental spices were considered prestigious ingredients, too. But, unlike in medieval and early post-medieval Europe, it was the moderate use of spices, and not overdosing them, that became a manifestation of status.⁷ The Ottoman chefs seasoned food

² For the presentation of the history of spices in antiquity see Jack Turner, *Spice: The History of a Temptation*, New York 2004, pp. 57–97.

³ The term “new wave” cuisine refers to the cuisine which emerged in early-Abbasid Baghdad as a result of a process based on intensive borrowing from the Persian culinary traditions and interlacing them with elements derived from the Greek medical lore and the Bedouin Arab cooking ideas. The term was first used by Manuela Marín and David Waines, *The Balanced Way: Food for Pleasure and Health in Medieval Islam*, “Manuscripts of the Middle East” 4 (1989), p. 124.

⁴ For discussion on spices and herbs in ancient Egypt see William J. Darby, Paul Ghalioungui and Louis Grivetti, *Food: The Gift of Osiris*, London–New York–San Francisco 1977, II, pp. 791–807.

⁵ Fernand Braudel, *The Structures of Everyday Life. The Limits of the Possible*, New York 1981, pp. 220–224. For an excellent presentation of various aspects of spice use in medieval Europe see Turner, *Spice*, passim; see also Jean-Louis Flandrin, *Seasoning, Cooking, and Dietetics in the Late Middle Ages*, in: Jean-Louis Flandrin and Massimo Montanari (eds.), *Food: A Culinary History*, New York 1999, pp. 313–327.

⁶ See, for example, Andrew Dalby, *Flavours of Byzantium*, Blackawton 2003, pp. 43–52, 177–179.

⁷ Hedda Reindl-Kiel, *The Chickens of Paradise. Official Meals in the Mid-Seventeenth Century Ottoman Palace*, in: Suraiya Faruqi and Christoph K. Neumann (eds.), *The Illuminated Table, the Prosperous House*, Würzburg 2003, p. 83. The Ottoman restraint in the use of flavoring seems to be confirmed by other scholars

lightly, just to enhance its natural flavor. This moderate use of spices became a symbolic expression of the Ottoman culinary sophistication – it distinguished the “Ottoman” from the vulgarity and lack of refinement of what “further south.” Further south lay Anatolia with its southeastern part bordering on the Arab provinces⁸ and, still further, the Arab provinces.

Before it was changed into the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire in the early sixteenth century, the Arabic-Islamic Near East gave rise to a refined culinary culture. This culture developed in two major centers of the region. One was Abbasid Baghdad, the birthplace of the so-called “new wave” cuisine,⁹ a cradle of the Arabic-Islamic high cooking tradition and the first culinary capital of the Arabic-Islamic civilization. In the early medieval world no city could equal “Baghdad’s capacity to satisfy the gastronomic demands of the leisure class with a ready supply of every imaginable food commodity.”¹⁰ After Baghdad was razed to the ground by the Mongol army in 1258, the honor of being a culinary capital of the region was smoothly taken over by Cairo which, having become “the largest urban conglomeration outside China,”¹¹ soon flourished as a continuator of the Baghdadi cooking tradition.

Apparently, what this Baghdadi-Cairene menu offered did not necessarily fit the flavor preferences of the Constantinopolitan Ottomans – even though their cosmopolitan culinary culture shared many elements with the Arabic-Islamic cuisine. The Ottomans, as deliberate paragons of refinement and continuators of the Byzantine high culture, clearly depreciated what they considered uncivilized ways of their Arab provincial population, heavily seasoned diet included.¹²

Indeed, as far as seasoning of food was concerned, the Arabic-Islamic cuisine was not modest at all.¹³ In the beginning of seventeenth century a Western visitor to

dealing with the subject of Turkish/Ottoman cookery; see for example, Sami Zubaida, *Rice in the Culinary Cultures of the Middle East*, in: Sami Zubaida and Richard Tapper (eds.), *A Taste of Thyme: Culinary Cultures of the Middle East*, London–New York 2000, p. 96; Richard Tapper and Sami Zubaida, *Introduction to Zubaida and Tapper, Taste of Thyme*, p. 8. See also Ersu Pekin and Ayşe Sümer (eds.), *Timeless Tastes: Turkish Culinary Culture*, Istanbul 1999, p. 191, where the use of fresh herbs in Turkish vegetable dishes is said to be “generally restricted to mint with courgettes and dill with broad beans in the pod”.

⁸ Cf. Zubaida, *Rice*, p. 96; Tapper and Zubaida, *Introduction*, p. 8.

⁹ Marín, Waines, *Balanced Way*, p. 124.

¹⁰ Waines, *Caliph’s Kitchen*, p. 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

¹² In this context, one can hardly avoid comparing the Ottomans’ insisting on restraint in the use of flavorings with the conduct of some French aristocrats who, fed up with the pomp of Louis XIV’s court, started to cherish simplicity so much as to invent the concept of “good taste”; cf. Margaret Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities and Meaning of Table Manners*, Harmondsworth 1993, p. 70.

¹³ For an excellent discussion on the use of perfumes, spices and condiments in medieval Arab cooking see Françoise Aubaille-Sallénave, *Parfums, épices, et condiments dans l’alimentation arabe médiévale*, in: Manuela Marín and David Waines (eds.), *La alimentación en las culturas islámicas. Una colección de estudios editados por Manuela Marín y David Waines*, Madrid 1994, pp. 217–249.

Cairo noticed that “they put spices in food without grinding them and openhandedly.”¹⁴ True, to some foreign observers the Cairene cookery might have appeared irrationally overseasoned. But the way the medieval Arab urbanites used spices was not a result of their surrender to some temporary mania, or the need to show off. For the Cairenes, like for the Europeans and the Ottomans, Oriental spices were exotic, too. While, however, the Europeans desperately tried to understand foreign ingredients and adapt them to their cookery, the Cairenes, like the Constantinopolitan Ottomans, did not have to bother about such complicated problems too much. Both the Ottomans and the Cairenes used imported spices in accordance with the culinary systems they had adopted. While the Ottomans followed the Byzantine guidelines in this respect, the Cairenes simply accepted what the Baghdadi culinary standard recommended. As such, the Ottoman and Arabic-Islamic attitudes towards Oriental seasonings were surely not as genuine as those of Indians or Chinese. But, at the same time, the Arabic-Islamic way of using these seasonings was not as mannered as the medieval European custom.

The Ottomans, however, were excessively concerned about trifles, and were very careful to be perfect in following the rules of the style they adopted. As this style obliged them to season food lightly, they could not use spices in a spontaneous or unstudied manner. The culinary culture embraced by the Near-Eastern urbanites was, on the other hand, more flexible and carefree. Naturally enough, food in medieval Near East was seasoned in an artless, generous and, in this sense, natural manner. In practical terms, this meant that the natural flavor of food did not matter so much. Moreover, with the substantial ingredients serving as flavor carriers and a pretext to use spices, herbs, fragrances, salt, sugar and souring agents, the significant part of the natural flavor of meat, fish or vegetables was efficiently suppressed. It was the composition of flavors that mattered more. What was just enough for the Cairene or Baghdadi consumers must have been definitely much too much by the Ottoman criteria.

The Greco-Islamic dietetics hardly encouraged generosity in using spices in cookery. Al-Isrā’īlī warned against excessive use of spices, and recommended “to use only as much as is needed to change the food’s bad taste and its hateful smell, because overusing spices dries moisture from food, makes it tough, and disallows digestion.”¹⁵ Interestingly, neither the cookery books nor the manuals for market inspectors did insist on that rule. Instead, both the *haute cuisine* chef and the bazaar cook were supposed to “use plenty of spices.”¹⁶ Due to the relativity of terms such as “plenty” or “excessive use” in the

¹⁴ “(...) because they are not expensive”; Johann Wild, *Voyages en Egypte de Johann Wild, 1606–1610*, Cairo 1973, p. 183.

¹⁵ Ishāq Ibn Sulaymān al-Isrā’īlī, *Kitāb al-ağdiya wa-al-adwiya*, ed. by M. aṣ-Ṣabbāḥ, Bayrūt 1992, p. 164.

¹⁶ Ibn al-Uḥuwwa, *Kitāb ma’ālim al-qurba fī aḥkām al-ḥisba*, Al-Qāhira 1976, p. 174; *Kitāb waṣf al-aṭ’ima al-mu’tāda*, in: Charles Perry, *The Description of Familiar Foods [Kitāb Waṣf al-Aṭ’ima al-Mu’tāda]*, in: Rodinson, Arberry and Perry, *Medieval Arab Cookery*, p. 303 (although the *haute cuisine* cook was instructed to be moderate in “*hawāmiḍ* dishes, that have their own broth”).

present context, it is actually impossible to judge whether the medieval Near-Eastern cuisine overdosed seasonings.

The wisdom suggesting that “there should be thrown only as much of spices as necessary,”¹⁷ as formulated by Galen, is universal. In the daily kitchen practice, the Cairene or Baghdadi chef was usually given a relatively free hand as far as quantities of seasonings were concerned. In accordance with the flexible Galenic criterion, many recipes (though not all) recommended adding to the dish “as much spices as needed with it,” or “as much as necessary on it,” or to throw “salt and spices as needed,” or “as much as it will bear,” etc. Although such instructions may seem careless, it was not the case. The city cooks knew pretty well how much spices their preparation “will bear,” if only because they usually specialized in one kind of food throughout their lifetime. Sometimes, however, the spicing norm was minutely written down, as in the case of the bazaar fish fryers who for every 10 *raṭls* of fish prepared in a deep pan (*ṭāḡin*), were obligated to add a precise quantity of spices (*abzār*): “1/8 *ūqiya* of pepper, 1/8 *qadaḥ* of caraway, 1/8 *qadaḥ* of coriander, 1/3 *ūqiya* of garlic, 1/8 *ūqiya* of sumac, as well as 1/8 *raṭl* of good oil, 1/2 *raṭl* of *ṭaḥīna*, 1/2 *raṭl* of lemon juice, 5 bundles of parsley, and 1/2 *raṭl* of roasted Syrian walnuts, crushed.”¹⁸

However, the same dish prepared by two different cooks according to the same guidelines could not have tasted or smelled exactly the same. The proper seasoning was a matter of the cook’s class, proficiency, expertise and honesty, as he could easily cheat on spices. His flavor preferences, his mood on a given day, and the local conventions mattered, too, as did his cleverness in avoiding cunning trickeries of spice dealers. After all, neither *abzārīyyūn*, or spice and herb retailers, nor *‘aṭṭārūn*, or herb, spice and perfume dealers and, at the same time, druggists and healers, were renown for their honesty.¹⁹

The Arabic-Islamic culinary corpus assumed the accessibility of a wide variety of seasonings. Their list would form the bulk of any guide to the Old World’s aromatic plants even today. Except, probably, rosemary, lovage, oregano and savory, one can hardly find a spice or herb that is not mentioned in the Near Eastern cookery books.²⁰

¹⁷ Al-Isrā’īlī, *Agdiya*, p. 167.

¹⁸ Ibn Bassām al-Muḥtasib, *Nihāyat ar-rutba fī ṭalab al-ḥisba*, Baghdad 1968, p. 56. In post-XII century Egypt *raṭl* equaled ca. 450 g while *ūqiya*, or 1/12 of *raṭl*, equaled ca. 37, 5 g; *qadaḥ* equaled ca. 0,94 liter (lesser *qadaḥ*) and 1,88 liter (larger *qadaḥ*); see Walther Hinz, *Islamische Masse und Gewichte*, Leiden/Köln 1970, pp. 29, 35 and 48 respectively.

¹⁹ ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān aš-Šayzarī, *Kitāb nihāyat ar-rutba fī ṭalab al-ḥisba*, Al-Qāhira 1946, pp. 48–55 (Engl. trans. R.P. Buckley, *The Book of the Islamic Market Inspector*, Oxford 1999, pp. 65–69); Ibn al-Uḥuwwa, *Ma’ālim*, pp. 199–206; Ibn Bassām, *Nihāya*, pp. 96–104; Ibn al-Ḥāḡḡ al-‘Abdarī, *Al-Madḥal ilā tanmiyat al-a’māl bi-taḥsīn an-niya*, Al-Qāhira 1929, IV, pp. 71–76, 92. For references to Sūq al-‘Aṭṭārīn in Cairo see André Raymond and Gaston Wiet, *Les Marchés du Caire. Traduction annotée du texte de Maqrzī*, Al-Qāhira 1979, p. 91, n. 6; for references to Sūq al-Abāzira and Sūq al-Abzārīyyīn see ibid, p. 201, n. 4; see also Dietrich, “‘Aṭṭār,” *EI2*, I.

²⁰ The Maghrebian-Andalusian cookery books were not considered in the present study. For the herbs, spices and fragrances used in medieval Maghreb see Aubaile-Sallenave, “Parfums,” *passim*.

The mentioned species include: anise (*anīsūn*),²¹ asafetida (*hiltīt*), basil (*rayhān*, *habaq*),²² bay leaves (*waraq rind*), betel (*tanbūl*, *tanbul*; *Piper betle* L.), caraway (*karāwiya*), cardamom (*qāqulla*), small cardamom (*hāl*), cassia (Chinese cinnamon, *dār šīmī*), Ceylon cinnamon (*qirfa*), cloves (*qurunfil*, *kubbāš qurunfil*), coriander – both dry seeds and fresh leaves (*kuzbara*, *kusbara*, *kusfara*), cubeb (*kubbāba*), cumin (*kammūn*), dill (*šabat*), fennel (*šamār*), fenugreek (*hulba*), fruit of the ash-tree (*lisān ‘usfūr*),²³ galangale (*hulanḡān*, *hūlanḡān*),²⁴ ginger (*zanḡabīl*), licorice root (‘*irq sūs*), mace (*bisbāsa*),²⁵ madder (*fuwwa*), mint (*na’na’*), mustard (*hardal*), white mustard (*hardal abyad*), myrtle (*ās*, known in Egypt as *marsīn*),²⁶ nigella (*šūnīz*), nutmeg (*jawz at-ṭīb*), parsley (*baqdūnis*), pepper (*fulful*, *dār fulful*), purslane (*riḡla*, *baqla ḡamqā’*), rocket (*ḡarḡīr*),²⁷ dried rosebuds (*zīrr ward*), rue (*sadāb*), saffron (*za’farān*), spikenard (*sunbul*),²⁸ sumac (*summāq*), tarragon (*ṭarḡūn*), thyme (*za’tar*, *ša’tar*), turmeric (*kurkum*), zedoary (*ḡidwār*).²⁹ To these must be added fragrant parts of some plants and fruits, such as citron leaves, bitter orange or lemon peel, rose petals, aloes-wood, camphor (*kāfūr*), mastic gum (*maṣṭikā*),³⁰ as well as fragrances such as rose-water (*mā’ al-ward*), ambergris (‘*anbar*) and musk (*misk*), the latter two being of animal origin. Sometimes, the recipes called for some very local varieties, such as Maghrebian caraway, Maghrebian thyme, Iraqi musk, Iraqi roses, Syrian rosebuds, Syrian coriander, saffron from Byzantium (Ar-Rūm), Byzantine (Rūmī) myrtle, or mustard from Acre.

But the Arabic-Islamic cookbooks may be a little bit misleading as far as the actual use of exotic spices is concerned. Compiled of recipes of a very cosmopolitan provenience, they sometimes may point to items which were not used in the Near-Eastern kitchens on daily basis. Many of them appear only in few recipes. Such is the case of anis, asafetida, cardamom, tarragon, fennel, fenugreek, madder, betel, basil, myrtle, licorice root, zedoary, or turmeric, which must have been used only occasionally. Those, however, which are referred to particularly often must have been essential in forming the smell and taste of the Baghdadi, Cairene, or Damascene cuisine: Chinese cinnamon, Ceylon cinnamon,

²¹ According to Al-Isrā’īlī, *Aḡḏiya*, p. 380, *anīsūn* was identical with *hulba hulwa*.

²² Apparently, there were many species of the plant; see Moses Maimonides, *Glossary of Drug Names*, in: *Moses Maimonides’ Glossary of Drug Names: Maimonides’ Medical Writings. Translated and annotated from Max Mayerhof’s French edition by Fred Rosner*, Haifa 1995, pp. 38–39, nn. 47, 48.

²³ See Rosner, *Maimonides’ Glossary*, pp. 74–75, n. 91; p. 166, n. 212.

²⁴ *Alpinia officinarum* Hance.

²⁵ Dried aril of nutmeg fruit, or *Myristica fragrans*.

²⁶ Rosner, *Maimonides’ Glossary*, p. 12, n. 10; cf. Perry, *Familiar Foods*, p. 408, n. 17.

²⁷ *Eruca sativa*, a type of arugula, also known as rocket, garden rocket, rocket salad, rugola, rucola and rockette.

²⁸ Ar. *sunbul* is applied to a number of fragrant plants or, rather, their roots. It can refer to muskroot, or the root of *Ferula sunbul*, known for its musky odor and a bitter aromatic taste. Its action and uses are the same as asafetida. Both “sunbul” and “muskroot” can also refer to spikenard, *Nardostachys grandiflora* (or *Nardostachys jatamansi*), also called *nārdīn*, nard, a flowering plant of the Valerian family.

²⁹ *Curcuma zedoaria*.

³⁰ Resin of *Pistacia lentiscus* shrub.

pepper, mint, thyme, coriander, cumin, caraway, ginger, saffron, mustard, camphor, mastic and rose-water.

The medieval Arabic-Islamic cuisine generally avoided the so-called masalas, or pre-prepared, ready-to-use mixes of ground spices.³¹ The cook “only ground as much spices as he used, lest they lose their strength.”³² On the Indian subcontinent such mixes were also used only occasionally, as Indian cooks realized that spices not only lose their strength if stored in their pre-ground form, but also take different lengths of time to release their flavor. When coriander, which is slow-releasing, turmeric, which is quick to impart its flavor, and cumin, which is apt to burn, are thrown into hot oil simultaneously, they tend to cook unevenly. This, in turn, brings about the risk of flavoring the dish with a slightly burnt or a slightly raw taste.³³

For the Near-Eastern cuisine, India was not only a source of Oriental spices but presumably also an indirect source of inspiration regarding the way of using them. It is difficult to say how well the Cairene or Baghdadi cooks realized the subtleties regarding the flavor-releasing time of various spices. As far as culinary theory is concerned, herbs and spices could not be thrown into the pot haphazardly in the Arabic-Islamic cuisine. According to recipes, they could be added to the dish either in the very beginning of the cooking process,³⁴ or gradually during the cooking. Spices could be also mixed with the meat minced for meatballs or with the stuffing for lamb or fish. Rose-water, camphor and sometimes, cinnamon and mint, were sprinkled over the ready or nearly ready dish. Sometimes some spices (such as coriander, ginger, pepper, galangal) were tightened up in a piece of linen cloth and thrown into the pot, to be taken out after appropriate time. Sometimes certain spices were to be pounded fine, sometimes grated, while at other times some of them were thrown in an unground form, a practice which surprised one Western traveler so much.³⁵ Sometimes it was advisable that some seeds (such as nigella, cumin or coriander) were toasted before using, while some fresh herbs, such as mint or green coriander, could be added chopped or in bundle – although dried leaves were used, too.

Generally, different categories of food preparations required different sets of flavorings. Thus the flavorings used in sour meat stews (*ḥawāmid*) usually included – apart from

³¹ In fact, apart from spices and herbs cited directly by their names, the recipes often call for enigmatic spice mixes known as *aṭrāf/aṭrāf aṭ-ṭīb* (lit. “tips of scent”; see Maxime Rodinson’s explanation of the term, *Studies in Arabic Manuscripts Relating to Cookery*, in: *Medieval Arab Cookery*, p. 132, n. 5), *afwāh/afwāh aṭ-ṭīb* (lit. “mouths of scent”) or for *abzār/abzār*, simply “spices.” Sometimes also the term *ḥawā’iğ* (“necessities”) is used (cf. Charles Perry’s explanation regarding *aṭrāf aṭ-ṭīb* and *afwāh aṭ-ṭīb*, *Familiar Foods*, p. 284). However, it is difficult to define whether the mixes were pre-ground or not.

³² *Wasf*, in: Perry, *Familiar Foods*, p. 303; *Kanz al-fawā’id fī tanwī’ al-mawā’id* (*Medieval Arab/Islamic Culinary Art*), ed. by Manuela Marín and David Waines, Beirut 1993, p. 5.

³³ Lizzie Collingham, *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors*, Oxford 2006, pp. 142–143.

³⁴ Which, by the way, harmonized with Galenic suggestion to throw spices in “in the beginning of cooking”; see Al-Isrā’īlī, *Ağdiya*, p. 167.

³⁵ Wild, *Voyages*, p. 183.

alliums – mint, Chinese cinnamon, coriander, pepper, ginger, mastic, and saffron.³⁶ Very often, the ready dish was sprinkled with rose-water. Mint, saffron, ginger and rose-water, always present in sour stews, were absent from the non-sour ones (*sawādiġ*), which were dominated by Chinese cinnamon and coriander, often accompanied by mastic and, to a lesser degree, by cumin.³⁷ As for fried dishes (*qalāya*), the composition of seasonings used in them usually included Chinese cinnamon, coriander, saffron, unspecified “spices,” occasionally ginger, pepper and mastic. The so-called *muṭaġġanāt*, improperly but conveniently translated as “deep-pan dishes,” usually required Chinese cinnamon, coriander, pepper and mastic, too; unlike in fried dishes of the *qalāya* type, in *muṭaġġanāt* caraway and mint were also added. Chicken preparations were generally seasoned with Chinese cinnamon or Ceylon cinnamon, dry coriander, mastic, very often with dry or fresh mint, sometimes also with *murrī* sauce.³⁸ Sweet chicken stews, similarly to puddings and sweets, constituted those rare examples of preparations to which no seasoning, apart from musk, rose-water and, occasionally, saffron, was added. As for fried fish, its basic set of flavorings included pepper, caraway, coriander, sumac, and parsley. These ingredients were also fundamental in preparing fish stuffings and fish sauces, and formed a composition to which thyme, Chinese cinnamon, mint, rue, saffron, mustard seeds and ginger could also be added. Sometimes, as in the case of a sauce meant for fried and salted fish, the aromatic composition of raisins, mustard, vinegar, garlic, oil, saffron, ginger, cinnamon, pepper, mint, rue and honey was sharpened and enriched with galingale and aromatic spikenard. Fried salted fish could be simply sprinkled with coriander and cinnamon.

What is intriguing, the Oriental spices as used in various combinations in the Arabic-Islamic cookery rarely included cloves, even more rarely cardamom, almost never fenugreek and never turmeric. The absence or infrequent use of these spices, all of them essential for making most of the curry mixes, must have deprived the Near-Eastern food of the aroma so typical for the Indian cooking.³⁹ At the same time, combining Oriental spices

³⁶ These were added to the dish after the scum was removed from the pre-boiling of meat – sometimes only a part of what was needed, at other times all of it.

³⁷ Unlike in sour stews, in non-sour preparations meat was often pre-cooked by stir-frying with spices, either in tail fat or in sesame oil. In some dishes, meat was first stewed, together with a part of spices and vegetables, until water evaporated and only then the rest of spices and vegetables was thrown in and covered with water.

³⁸ *Murrī* was a very particular relish comparable to soy sauce and to Roman *garum*. Its months-long production process consisted, generally speaking, in leaving pounded unleavened bread, mixed with rotten barley and some seasonings, in the heat of the Near Eastern summer sun. For a detailed discussion on *murrī* see David W a i n e s, *Murrī: the Tale of a Condiment*, “Al-Qantara” 12/2 (1991), pp. 371–388; also idem, *Caliph’s Kitchen*, p. 25; idem, *The Culinary Culture of al-Andalus*, in: S.K. J a y y u s i (ed.), *The Legacy of Muslim Spain*, Leiden 1992, pp. 725–738; A u b a i l e - S a l l e n a v e, *Parfums*, pp. 217–249; N a s r a l l a h, *Annals*, pp. 579–582.

³⁹ Although it should be kept in mind that cardamom and cloves, almost always together, were added to tonic beverages and electuaries. They were also ingredients of spice mixes (*atraf at-ṭīb*) which, used relatively rarely in food preparations, were more frequently added to tonic concoctions, too. As for turmeric (*kurkum*), it is not called for in any of the recipes included in the “Cairene” cookery books. Nevertheless, it was not unknown: the *hisba* manuals mention it as an ingredient used by apothecaries in a sophisticated process of adulterating saffron and as an item being itself adulterated by spice retailers with pomegranate skins. As turmeric was believed to have certain medicinal values, it must have been used almost exclusively for pharmacological purposes.

with spices and herbs of the Mediterranean, gave the local food a particular flavor for which a blend of cinnamon and mint, perfumed with rose-water, seems to have been the most distinctive.

Artless and relatively not fashion-oriented, the Near-Eastern spice consumption could not always avoid constraints imposed by various external or domestic circumstances. The flavoring habits of the Cairenes were first put to test in the fifteenth century when spice prices became considerably unstable due to the games played with the Alexandrian wholesalers by the Holy See, the Venetians, and the Mamluk state.⁴⁰ Predictably enough, the fluctuation in spice prices intensified after the Portuguese discovery of the route around the Cape in 1498, an event which made European maritime traders avoid the Red Sea-Cairo-Alexandria route.⁴¹ But the process of abandoning the reefy Red Sea, and the transshipment in Cairo, was not as smooth and uninterrupted as it may seem to have been. In fact, the Indian spice trade via the old route experienced stages of revival before it finally declined. During some three or four decades which followed 1550, there were periods when the Red Sea ships carried no lesser quantities of spices as before 1498. All the loads were again transferred to Cairo, from where they traveled, as before, to Alexandria.⁴²

Actually, the prosperity of the spice trade via the Red Sea and Cairo came to an end only after the Middle Ages were over. Europe, satiated with spices after centuries of frantic consumption, now changed its predilections. Spices became commonplace, and with time fell out of favor. What interested the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century cooks was the salt-acid taste combination of classical cookery, based on oils, capers, and anchovies. Hot, spicy, and fragrant food, so appreciated in the High Middle Ages, was now condemned as overly stimulating and likely to arouse dangerous passions and lusts.⁴³ The spice prices fell but at the same time coffee, having charmed everybody,

⁴⁰ By introducing the system of state monopoly for spices, the Mamluk sultans Barsbāy (in 1420-ties) and Hušqadam (who followed the monopolistic policy in 1461–1467) contributed to creating significant insecurity in the international and domestic spice market. The effect of their decisions was twofold: one, the Kārimī merchants, until then chief spice wholesalers of this part of the world, could no longer prosper; and two, the price of imported spices was raised, as from now on they would only be sold and bought through the sultan. For details on spice trade in medieval Egypt, and on Kārimī merchants, see Eliyahu A s h t o r, *Levantine Trade in the Later Middle Ages*, Princeton 1983, pp. 370 ff.; idem, *Spice Prices in the Near East in the 15th Century*, JRAS 1976, pp. 26–41; Walter J. F i s c h e l, *Les Marchands d'épices sous les sultans mamlouks*, "Cahiers d'Histoire Égyptienne", 1955, vol. VII, 2, pp. 81–147; idem, *The Spice Trade in Mamluk Egypt*, JESHO 1958, No. 1, pp. 157–174.

⁴¹ The route around the Cape of Good Hope was not the only one in the post-XV-century world to compete with the Red Sea-Cairo-Alexandria route. Some decades later, the transoceanic route between Mesoamerica and Asia was established, with Acapulco as its main destination station. The Oriental goods, carried via Manila from China, supplied the newly-emerged Mesoamerican market and, above all, the newly-born Spanish-Mexican cuisine. See Susana O s o r i o - M r o z e k, *Meksyk od kuchni. Książka niekucharska*, Kraków 2004, pp. 171–172.

⁴² For the vicissitudes of Levantine spice trade in XVI century see Fernand B r a u d e l, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1996, I, pp. 556, 564–568.

⁴³ The new cooking style chimed with new scientific theories of digestion that envisaged the process as one of fermentation rather than combustion. See Collingham, *Curry*, pp. 134–135; cf. Roy S t r o n g, *Feast: A History of Grand Eating*, Orlando 2003, p. 140.

became the most sought-after and fashionable consumable luxury. As both Europe and the entire Near East surrendered to the vogue willingly and totally, coffee started to prevail in the domestic and international operations of Cairo markets. With coffee trade replacing spice trade, spice merchants steadily decreased in number, making room for coffee merchants.⁴⁴ Paradoxically, now it was the Europeans who supplied Alexandria with pepper and Oriental spices, although the Cairene market itself was probably still supplied with the merchandise imported via the Red Sea and the Suez.

All the ups and downs of the post-medieval spice trade coincided with the Ottoman occupation of Cairo, the development which placed the spice-loving Cairenes between the rock and the hard place. On the one hand, the decreasing quantities and rising prices of Oriental spices discouraged them from continuing the habit of using the favorite flavorings in a liberal way. On the other hand, there were Ottoman officials who detested overdosing of spices, and whose example radiated down into the society, through Egyptian elites collaborating with them. The two factors gradually modified and transformed the Cairene cuisine which switched into moderate seasoning of food, having with time become more Turkish than mediaeval Arabic.

⁴⁴ See Suraiya Faroqhi, *Coffee and Spices: Official Ottoman Reactions to Egyptian Trade in the Later Sixteenth Century*, WZKM 1986, vol. 76, pp. 87–93; Nelly Hanna, *Making Big Money in 1600: The Life and Times of Isma'il Abu Taqiyya, Egyptian Merchant*, Cairo 1998, pp. 70, 79, 81. For spice trade in later epochs see André Raymond, *Artisans et commerçants au Caire au XVIIIe siècle*, Cairo 1999, I, pp. 69–73; 129–136; 174–179.