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### **TRICKS OF THE TRADE**

CUMIN is delicious and very popular in its powdered form. Unscrupulous traders sometimes mix in some ground coriander seed, which is cheaper, so look carefully at the colour before buying ground cumin. If it has been blended with a cheaper seed, the colour will be a dull brown, and the flavour will be flatter, but if it is 100% ground cumin, it will be a greenish, khaki shade. Your tastebuds will thank you for choosing this one.

WHY are some paprikas and chilli powders more silky smooth than others? These fruits are members of the capsicum (chilli pepper) family, and are all configured more or less in the same way as a capsicum. Good quality paprika or chilli is achieved by grinding the flesh and seeds of the partially air-dried fruits, having removed the woody stem, before going through a dehydrating chamber. Most of the seeds are ground with the fruit, to help retain the colour. Top quality paprika powders can go through up to seven successive rolling mills to ensure absolute smoothness.

PEPPERCORNS are sometimes very attractively shiny with a healthy-looking glossy appearance. Don't be fooled; these are too good to be true and have gone through a process of "reconditioning." As farmers sell their pepper harvest by weight, they are sometimes tempted to sell them before the required amount of dehydration has taken place. (The more moisture, the heavier, and the more kilos to sell.) After a few months, the peppercorns develop a coating of mould on them because of the excessive moisture, and this is remedied by spraying the peppercorns with oil to disguise the mould. Once "reconditioned", the peppercorns are sold on as quickly as possible by the trader to an unsuspecting buyer.

**POWDER TO PASTE – CURRY PASTE IN A FLASH** Why carry water and glass home from the shop? If you want a curry paste, here's what to do. Finely chop onion and garlic, or puree in a processor. Add the curry powder of your choice, add water in approximately equal quantity and stir to make a dry, stiff paste. Add about half the amount of oil as you used water, and stir to a paste. Add tomato paste or powder if you wish. Voila!

### **THE NAME GAME**

MASALA simply means mixture, so garam masala, chaat masala, fish masala, tandoori masala, are all spice mixes. All curry powders could be called masalas. The most common, *garam masala*, usually contains fennel, cinnamon, caraway, black pepper, cloves and cardamom, but can vary from region to region within the Indian sub-continent, and often contains coriander and cumin seeds.

CORIANDER leaves are called *cilantro* in North and South America. The seeds are still called coriander in these countries, so the name used identifies which part of the plant is required.

DUKKAH and ZA'ATAR – what's the difference? We find many people tend to put these two products into the same mental pocket. In fact, all they have in common is sesame seeds and a friendly relationship with bread. *Dukkah* is of Egyptian origin, and contains crushed nuts of some kind (almonds, hazelnuts, pistachios or peanuts are commonly used), mixed with toasted sesame seeds, coriander and cumin powders, salt and pepper. *Za'atar* is popular in Middle Eastern areas such as Syria, Israel and Lebanon, and is a mixture of thyme, sumac, toasted sesame seeds and salt. Pieces of bread can be dipped into olive oil and then into dukkah for a delicious snack, while za'atar comes into its own sprinkled over flatbreads that have been brushed with oil.

KALONJI is known by enough alternative names to make your head spin. This little black, pungent flavoured seed is popular in North Indian dishes and often features on the top crust of Turkish bread. Other common names are *Nigella*, *Onion Seed*, and *Black Cumin Seed*. Only the first of these is correct, the others being misnomers which, by constant popular misuse, may some day be accepted.

CASSIA and CINNAMON are both sweet-flavoured spices taken as bark from a tree, but the trees are cousins in the botanical world. Cinnamon, (*C. zeylanicum*) is a medium-sized tree native to Sri Lanka, and the harvesting of the tender under-layer of bark called *Cinnamon* is a true skill. The paper-thin pieces are layered together to make a flaky scroll called a quill. Cassia, (*C. Cassia*) is grown in SE Asia, where the plantation trees are felled, after which the full thickness of all bark is removed. Cassia quills are of one single strong layer which is usually too hard to break between the fingers. While true cinnamon is gentle and softly fragrant, cassia has an immediate zesty aroma with lively sweetness and an underlying bitterness and heat which becomes noticeable if you use too much.

### **THIS GOES WITH THAT ... PERFECT MARRIAGES**

Roasted, peeled and chopped beetroot ... whole cumin seeds  
 Steamed cauliflower ... toasted sesame seeds, fennel pollen  
 Pan-fried chicken fillet ... freshly-ground coriander seeds  
 Cheese on toast ... smoked paprika  
 Barbecued eggplant slices ... rosemary, garlic and paprika  
 Steamed spinach ... nutmeg  
 Baked pumpkin ... ginger, nutmeg or ground cumin  
 Oven-roasted tomatoes ... sumac  
 Peas ... mint, lemon myrtle or lemongrass  
 Mashed potatoes ... toasted sesame seeds or thyme  
 Steamed buttered carrots ... ajowan, celery or dill seeds  
 Prawn, lobster or crab salad ... fennel seeds or anise myrtle

- BEANS are notorious gas producers – the more you eat, the more wind your system produces. This is because our small intestine has trouble digesting the carbohydrate of beans, but the problem can be prevented by using a little *asafoetida* during cooking. This much-maligned spice is often used by legume-loving Indian vegetarians. Just add a pinch, or quarter teaspoon, per cup of dried beans or lentils.
- CHANGE your cuisine by changing the spices that you use. If you're making a rice dish, try these versions, using pre-cooked rice and a "stir-fry" method:

For Moroccan, add Ras el Hasnout, cumin seeds, pine nuts, coriander leaves and chopped preserved lemons.

For Persian, add Persian spice, mint, barberries, fresh pomegranate seeds and saffron

For Indian, add Biryani spice, cardamom pods, saffron, a cinnamon quill broken into two, a few cloves, cashews and raisins

For Asian, add Nasi Goreng mix, chopped lemongrass, ginger, a pinch of galangal powder, shredded omelette and coriander leaves.

For Caribbean, add Jerk Seasoning, capsicum strips, corn kernels and chilli.

- WHAT if you've added too much *chilli* to your dish? You can reduce the burn by adding a little sugar, sweet paprika and ground coriander seed, tasting as you go so as not to damage the balance of your flavours. Cream or coconut cream will tame the heat, as will chopped fresh capsicum. If these measures don't work, cut your losses and consign your fiery offering to the bin.
- REDUCE salt in your diet by using our salt-free blend, Zalt, or ground celery seed, sumac and za'atar to flavour your food. Sumac and za'atar (a blend including sesame seeds, thyme and sumac) are not salt-free, but your salt intake will be less.