Search for Flavours Influenced Our World

Myth, medicine and medieval tastes created a market for spices, the world's first globally traded product



Workers harvest pepper near Quilon, south India in the 14th century: The desire for flavor fueled building of empires. (Source: Marco Polo's Livre des merveilles)

The quest for spice was one of the earliest drivers of globalization. Long before the voyages of European explorers, spices were globally traded products. High prices, a limited supply and mysterious origins fuelled a growing effort to discover spices and their source of cultivation. Thus, spices were a global commodity centuries before European voyages. Desire for spices helped fuel European colonial empires to create political, military and commercial networks under a single power.

Historians know a fair amount about the supply of spices in Europe during the medieval period - the origins, methods of transportation, the prices - but less about demand. Why go to such extraordinary efforts to procure expensive products from exotic lands? Demand was great enough to inspire the voyages of Christopher Columbus and Vasco Da Gama, launching the first fateful wave of European colonialism. The desire for aromatic substances has had immense historical repercussions, the effects of which are being felt long after the vogue of spices has diminished.

So, why were spices so highly prized in Europe in the centuries from about 1000 to 1500? One widely disseminated explanation for medieval demand for spices was that they covered the taste of spoiled meat. Spices were more expensive than meat, and fresh meat was available, as suggested  by extant records of municipal ordinances prohibiting butchers from throwing unwanted animal parts and blood in the streets.  Medieval purchasers consumed meat much fresher than what the average city-dweller in the developed world of today has at hand. However, refrigeration was not available, and some hot spices have been shown to serve as an anti-bacterial agent. Salting, smoking or drying meat were other means of preservation.

Most spices used in cooking began as medical ingredients, and throughout the Middle Ages spices were used as both medicines and ingredients. Most spices were hot and dry and so appropriate in sauces to counteract the moist and wet properties supposedly possessed by most meat and fish. Merchant guilds that supplied spices were variously known as "spicers," "apothecaries," or "pepperers."

More than 100 medieval cookbooks survive today. In the Libre del Coch of Master Robert, written for the king of Naples, are about 200 recipes, 154 of which call for sugar, 125 require cinnamon, 76 ginger, and 54 saffron. Spices ordered for the wedding of George "the Rich," Duke of Bavaria, and Jadwiga of Poland in 1475 included 386 pounds of pepper, 286 pounds of ginger, 257 pounds of saffron, 205 pounds of cinnamon, pounds of cloves, and 85 pounds of nutmeg. Clearly, recipes from the era called for not only large quantities of spices, but also a great variety.

The demand for spices may then be said to combine a taste for strongly flavored food, a belief in their medicinal properties, and also the sense of well-being, refinement and health the fragrance was said to confer, similar to the claims made by those practicing aromatherapy in recent years. Once these varied properties were recognized or accepted, spices became objects of conspicuous consumption, a mark of elite status as well as markers of exquisite taste in all senses of the word.

Where spices came from was known in a vague sense centuries before the voyages of Columbus. Just how vague may be judged by looking at medieval world maps that attempt to incorporate information about Asia from the Book of Genesis, legends of the conquests of Alexander, Christian prophetic literature, especially regarding the apocalypse, and real and fabricated travel accounts such as those of Marco Polo and John Mandeville. To the medieval European imagination, the East was exotic and alluring. Medieval maps often placed India close to the so-called Earthly Paradise, the Garden of Eden described in the Bible.

Spices never had the enduring allure or power of gold and silver or the commercial potential of new products such as tobacco, indigo or sugar. But the taste for spices did continue for a while beyond the Middle Ages. As late as the 17th century, the English and the Dutch were struggling for control of the Spice Islands: Dutch New Amsterdam, or New York, was exchanged by the British for one of the Moluccan Islands where nutmeg was grown. Spices faded from European cuisine not only because of changing tastes, but also because ancient medical ideas lost currency, more exciting drugs arrived from the New World, and the prevalence of opiates rose. Nonetheless, spices' eclipse in later centuries should not obscure their role as the basis for the first large-scale global economic network and the force behind the first expansion of Europe.

*Paul Freedman is professor of history at Yale University.*