

SPICES: SECRETS OF THE GREEK TABLE

by Elaine Gavalas

For thousands of years, Greeks have used spices to flavor and scent their foods, as well as for their calming, healing, and aphrodisiac qualities. Many prized spices, such as anise seed, *masticha*, and red pepper, are native to Greece. The use of spices in Greek cuisine, perfumes, medicine and religion remains as important today as it was to the ancient Greeks.

Since the beginning of recorded trading, exotic spices of the East, among them black pepper, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg, allspice and *mahlepi*, were brought by Arab caravans to spice bazaars in Constantinople and Alexandria, and then to the ancient Greek cities. Spices also came to Greek ports by ship from India and the islands of Ceylon and Molokai. Spices were so precious they were exchanged for gold or slaves.

Likewise, spices have been integral to Greek traditions, myth and religious rituals. In ancient Greece, spicy, honeyed wines were cherished for their mystical properties during Dionysian revelries and Eleusinian mysteries. They were also used for sacrificial rites, warding off the “evil eye” and, in love potions, attracting romance. The ancient Greek philosopher, Plutocrat, wrote of perfumed spices used during religious festivals and to “lull to sleep, allay all anxieties, and brighten the dreams.” Even today, spiced incense is burned during religious services in Greek Orthodox churches.

Greeks consider certain spices

essential for good health and use them for their medicinal qualities, in healing tonics and in food. As the ancient Greek physician, Hippocrates, proclaimed, “Let thy food be thy medicine and thy medicine be thy food.” Hippocrates, regarded as the father of modern medicine, used spices and herbs from the Greek countryside as a foundation for medical science and healing. Hippocrates’ famous spiced wine recipe, containing cinnamon, cloves, allspice and honey, was prescribed for many common ills and is used to this day.

Licorice-flavored mastic, called *masticha* in Greek, is perhaps the most famous indigenous Greek spice. The amber-colored mastic sap resin is tapped from the lentil bush (*Pistachio lentiscus*), and occurs only on the island of Chios. Although the bush has been transplanted to other tropical areas of the world, it will not produce the liquid that hardens into the mastic sap teardrops. This phenomenon has been the subject of much research; a recent published medical study shows that Chios mastic heals stomach ulcers.

Mastic resin is exported throughout the world for confectionery, distillery and pharmaceutical purposes. In Greek cuisine, *masticha* is used in cakes, cookies, drinks, liqueurs and candies. In the summertime, Greeks enjoy a *masticha* drink called *soumatha*. To make *soumatha*, a syrupy almond milk is made from pounded almonds, sugar and *masticha*, which is then mixed with an equal part of water. Pure refreshment!

Anise, called *glykaniso* in Greek, is another native spice and, like *mastic*, highly valued for its licorice-flavored seeds and plant. Anise is best known as the flavoring in the famous Greek liqueur, ouzo, but it is also commonly used in Greek pastries, tomato sauces and meat dishes. In Greek folk medicine, brews of anise seed are said to be good for your nerves.

Not as renowned but just as important are the red peppers grown for spice in Macedonia. The climate in this northern Greek region is uniquely suited to growing many varieties of peppers, called *piperi* in

MINT MAGIC

A discussion about Greek flavors wouldn’t be complete without mention of one of the most common herbal accompaniments: mint. In Greece, many varieties grow wild, including spearmint and peppermint (*diosmos*). Like spices, mint also has a history of thousands of years of use in Greek cuisine, medicinals, perfumery and religion. The ancient Greeks used fresh mint to scent their bathing water and dinner tables. Mint tea has long been used as a remedy for indigestion and stomach problems. And to this day, Greek Orthodox priests offer a blessing with bunches of fragrant mint, called *agiosmos*, dipped in holy water.

Mint has a sweet, cooling taste and is frequently used in Greek cuisine, including salads, meat and macaroni dishes, desserts, drinks, cakes and cookies. During hot summer days, a cool and refreshing cucumber salad called *tzatziki*, blended with yogurt and mint, is nearly ubiquitous.

Greek. Greek red spice *piperi* are intensely flavorful and aromatic. Unfortunately, red spice *piperi* are difficult to find as the art of cultivating and processing them is becoming lost to modern ways. However, ground red spice *piperi*, along with the imported black *piperi*, remains an essential ingredient in Greek cooking from soups to meats.

Mahaleb, *mahlepi* in Greek, is a more unusual Greek spice with a distinctive, fruity taste. The finely-ground *mahlepi* powder is made from the inner kernels of fruit pits of a native Persian cherry tree (*Prunus cerasus mahaleb*). For myself, as I'm sure for many Greeks, the sweet smell of *mahlepi* always suggests the aroma of freshly-baked *tsoureki*, a traditional sweet bread flavored with *mahlepi* and baked for Greek Easter. *Mahlepi* is also used in holiday cakes and cookies.

Legend tells us that saffron was created by Hermes, the Greek messenger god. For the early Greeks,

saffron (*krokos*) as spice, dye, and scent was rare and costly, prized by kings and queens. Homer writes of gods, goddesses, heroes, and royalty clothed in noble garments of saffron yellow hue. In modern-day Greece, saffron spice is used in specialty dishes, such as saffron cheese pies from Astypalaia made only at Easter.

Tantalizing and pungent all, cinnamon (*kanella*), cloves (*garifalo*), allspice (*aromatopeperi*) and nutmeg (*moshokarido*) have been prized as precious imported spices from the East and used in Greek cuisine since ancient times. These spices are frequently included in desserts, drinks, cakes and cookies. More unusually, as is not common in Western cuisine, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg and allspice are used in meat and macaroni dishes and tomato sauces, giving them a deliciously unique taste and aroma. For example, cinnamon lends its distinctive flavoring to meat dishes such as *kapama* (stews), along with

cloves, allspice and nutmeg for *pastistio* (baked macaroni) and *moussaka* (eggplant casserole).

The culinary spices most prized by the Greeks—*anise seed*, *masticha*, red and black pepper, *mahlepi*, saffron, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg and allspice—are as cherished today as they were millennia ago. For unique flavorings, try incorporating Greek spices into your own culinary creations.

“HIPPOCRATES” SPICED WINE ELIXIR

- 2 cups red or white Greek wine
- 1/4 cup honey (preferably Greek)
- 2 Tbs fresh lemon or orange juice
- 1 cinnamon stick
- 1/4 tsp allspice
- 1/4 tsp cloves

Combine all ingredients in a saucepan. Simmer over low heat for 15 minutes.

Remove the cinnamon stick and serve, hot or chilled.

Yield: 2 servings

