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Origin of Spices

Absent a nuclear energy deal, it appears the upcoming Bush visit to India will lack masala, a catchall Indian term that also describes excitement and verve. But here's some good news on the real masala front: Spices are hot in the United States today. Americans, whose food is said to consist of the good, the bland, and the ugly, are peppering their cuisine with more spices than ever before. According to a recent report, annual spice consumption in the country has doubled from 2 lbs per person to 4 lbs over the past two decades. A burgeoning immigrant population and Americans adventurous on the culinary front are both contributing to the idea that spice is the variety of life.

George "Dubya" Bush is a conservative not just in the political sense but also in matters gastronomic. Unlike his predecessor Bill Clinton, saucy tales of whose pre-heart trouble gluttony is the lore of kitchens in Washington DC's Bombay Club and Delhi's Bukhara, Bush is not known to have succumbed to any spicy blandishments. Even his father, Bush41, is more adventurous, seeking out the Peking Duck Restaurant in Virginia in moments of nostalgia for his stint as the U.S ambassador in Beijing. But give Dubya a double cheeseburger any day, and he will chomp it down, confident that he can burn it off on the treadmill next day. The man is a fitness maniac.

I don't know if India and the U.S can spice up their ties with a nuclear deal, but anecdotal evidence and field reports suggests they are definitely cranking it up on the masala front. The Baltimore-based McCormick, which is the world's largest spice company, recently named its Top Flavors for 2006, and I noticed "Chai" in the list, along with saffron, sesame and patrika.

Chai is not exactly a spice as we know it, but trust the Americans to make a meal of such sensibilities. "Chai" spice, in McCormick's book, is a blend of cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, and pepper (C3P). I wouldn't complain; McCormick not only invented the tea bag, but is among the biggest spice buyers from India.

C3P was precisely the stuff that Christopher Columbus set off to find in India when he stumbled on America, where Native Americans were not exactly hot on spices. Back in the east though, sea lanes were thick with spice rush ever since Herodotus wrote, "cinnamon grows in deep lakes, near the homes of flying animals."

By the middle of the second millennium, European merchant ships were bumping and grinding each other. The story goes that litigants in Europe used spices from India to bribe judges. Not even the good fortune of Bostonian Elihu Yale, whose stint as Governor of Madras resulted in rich pickings from the spice business and led to the endowment of Yale University, seduced the Americans to the zing and zest of oriental flavors. Years later, they invented pepper spray.

Well, things are finally being righted it seems. Grocery stores are reporting that spices are flying off the shelves as Americans graduate from familiar ingredients such as parsley, rosemary, oregano and thyme to the more bracing cumin, coriander, cardamom and the like. Although many of the spices originally exclusive to India and the east are now grown in the west, there isn't a match to some of our stuff. McCormick still swears by Malabar cardamom and Telicherry pepper, although I was dismayed to see Spanish saffron ranked ahead of the Kashmiri produce.

The question remains how to turn George W into a spice guy. Seekh and ye shall find: a Bush kabab might be a start.
