

THE SPICE OF LIFE



A variety of spices in India

Have you heard the saying, "Variety is the spice of life?" It means that without something different on occasion, life would become dull. Well, if you lived in Europe in the 1400s, this saying could be taken literally. Spices were extremely important, particularly in the lives of the middle and upper classes. Back in the 1400s, there were limited options for foods. Foods from North and South America had not yet been discovered by the Europeans. They didn't have potatoes, corn, chocolate, or

strawberries. That's just to name a few! There were dozens more they'd never heard of. Europeans had a diet with fewer vegetables, fruits, and starches. Meat was a staple of their diet. People would typically butcher in the fall. The meat was preserved with salt. Dried or cured meat in salt soon lost its appeal. Spices like pepper, clove, and ginger helped the bland food taste better.

That's why many explorers and their patrons wanted to find a better route to the "Spice Islands" in Indonesia, or Africa and India. Exotic flavors could be found and brought back to liven up their dinner tables! Of course, there were people living in the places where spices grew. Those people knew they had command of the spice trade, so they charged high prices. They knew the Europeans couldn't get the spices any other way. Most traders made the prices so high that only the rich could afford to eat a variety of flavors. To make matters worse, a series of religious wars shut down the traders' land routes. A sea route had to be found.

This need for spice drove the age of exploration. New ships built for rough waters and long voyages were developed. They were called **caravels**. The **astrolabe**, a way to chart a course using the sky and stars, was invented. Sailors also used the magnetic compass for navigation.

All of Europe wanted to bring home spices, but Portugal led the way. Portugal was a small country. It was relatively poor. The Portuguese people poured their knowledge and passion into sea trade and exploration. Portuguese explorers **Bartolomeu Dias** and **Vasco da Gama** became the first explorers to set up sea trade routes. They went around the southern tip of Africa, and even to India! Without these brave men, the food in Europe would have remained dull and bland. So would life. Not only did these sailors find a way to reach exotic lands, but they also found a way to chart the open seas. They met new people and learned about different cultures. They learned foreign languages. They left with an appetite for new flavors. They returned with a thirst for knowledge. Their advances sparked a wave of interest in the world. Old superstitions about the sea and its monsters were laid to rest. Thanks to these explorers and the desire for variety, Europe entered a golden age of exploration.

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Use evidence from the text to find the correct answer. Then, fill in the bubble of the correct answer.

1. Who was Vasco de Gama?

- A the King of Portugal
- B a spice trader
- C a Portuguese explorer
- D an Indian prince

2. What blocked land routes for spice traders?

- A a series of religious wars
- B avalanches
- C robbers and bandits who charged heavy prices to cross the routes safely
- D warring tribes

3. How was meat preserved in the 1400s?

- A freezing
- B only eating fresh meat
- C salting
- D picking in brine

4. How is an astrolabe used?

- A to carry spices
- B to navigate the sea using the sky and stars
- C to build ships
- D to preserve meat

5. According to the text, caravels were ideal for sea trade because...

- A They could withstand rough waters.
- B They could make long trips.
- C They had large sails.
- D Both A and B.

6. What was one spice used to improve the flavors of food in medieval times?

- A pepper
- B salt
- C basil
- D parsley

7. Typically, only the upper and middle classes had access to spices. Why?

- A Only they had time to take off from work to go to the regions of the world where there were spices.
- B Only they had money to buy the expensive spices.
- C Only the upper and middle classes had the right to buy spices.
- D The markets that carried spices refused to allow poor people or members of the lower class inside to purchase spices.

8. Why was the European diet limited?

- A They didn't have many new world crops like potatoes, strawberries, chocolate, etc.
- B They had limited access to other cultures and their foods.
- C They had limited access to exotic and flavorful spices.
- D All of the above

9. What two regions are specifically mentioned in the passage as destinations for explorers seeking spices?

- A Portugal and Africa
- B India and Portugal
- C Africa and India
- D Pakistan and Africa

10. According to the article, what else did traders bring back to Europe besides spices?

- A knowledge of the sea and new cultures
- B rare animals like tigers and elephants
- C knowledge on how to cure meat
- D potatoes and corn