The Spice of Life!

A

When thinking of the most popular restaurant dish in the UK, the answer 'chicken tikka masala' does not spring readily to mind. But it is indeed the answer, often now referred to as a true 'British national dish'. It may even have been invented by Indian immigrants in Scotland, who roasted chicken chunks (tikka), mixed them with spices and yoghurt, and served this in a bowl of masala sauce. The exact ingredients of the sauce vary from restaurant to restaurant, but the dish usually includes purced tomatoes and cream, coloured orange by turmeric and paprika. British cuisine? Yes, spices have come a long way.

B

Spices are dried seeds, fruit, roots, bark, or vegetative parts of plants, added to food in small amounts to enhance flavour or colour. Herbs, in contrast, are only from the leaves, and only used for flavouring. Looking at the sources of some common spices, mustard and black pepper arc from seeds, cinnamon from bark, cloves from dried flower buds, ginger and turmeric from roots, while mace and saffron are from seed covers and stigma tips, respectively. In the face of such variety, it is becoming increasingly common for spices to be offered in pre-made combinations. Chili powder is a blend of chili peppers with other spices, often cumin, oregano, garlic powder, and salt. Mixed spice, which is often used in baking, is a British blend of sweet spices, with cinnamon being the dominant flavour. The ever-popular masala, as noted, could be anything, depending on the chef.

C

Although human communities were using spices tens of thousands of years ago, the trade of this commodity only began about 2000 BC, around the Middle Last. Farly uses were less

Reading Passage One has seven paragraphs, A-G.

Choose the correct heading for Paragraphs B-G from the list of headings.

List of Headings

i	Uses of spice
ii	Spices for cooking
iii	Changing leaders
iv	A strange choice
v	Preserving flavours
vi	Famous spice routes
vii	The power of spice
viii	Some spices
ix	Medicinal spices
x	Spice providers

1. Paragraph B

2. Paragraph C

3. Paragraph D

4. Paragraph E

5. Paragraph F

6. Paragraph G

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connected with cooking, and more with such diverse functions as embalming, medicine, religion, and food preservation. Eventually, extensive overland trade routes, such as the Silk Road, were established, yet it was maritime advances into India and East Asia which led to the most dramatic growth in commercial activities. From then on, spices were the driving force of the world economy, commanding such high prices that it pitted nation against nation, and became the major impetus to exploration and conquest, It would be hard to underestimate the role spices have played in human history.

D

Originally, Muslim traders dominated these routes, seeing spice-laden ships from the Orient crossing the Indian Ocean to Red Sea and Persian Gulf ports, from where camel caravans transported the goods overland. However, although slow to develop, European nations, using aggressive exploration and colonisation strategies, eventually came to rule the Far East and, consequently, control of the spice trade. At first, Portugal was the dominant power, but the British and Dutch eventually gained the upper hand, so that by the 19th century, the British controlled India, while the Dutch had the greater portion of the East Indies (Indonesia). Cloves, nutmeg, and pepper were some of the most valuable spices of the time.

E

But why were spices always in such demand? There are many answers. In the early days, they were thought to have strong medicinal properties by balancing 'humours', or excesses of emotions in the blood. Other times they were thought to prevent maladies such as the plague, which often saw prices of recommended spices soar. But most obviously, spices flavoured the bland meat-based European cuisines. Pepper, historically, has always been in highest demand for this reason, and even today, peppercorns (dried black pepper kernels)

Complete the sentence.
*Choose **NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS** from the passage for each answer.*

Saffron, from the small _____ **7**

of flowers, has a _____ **8**

, and is mostly grown in _____ **9**.

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remain, by monetary value, the most widely traded spice in the world. However, saffron, by being produced within the small saffron flower, has always been among the world's most costly spice by weight, valued mostly for its vivid colour.

F

Predictably, the majority of the world's spices are produced in India, although specific spices arc often produced in greater amounts in other countries. Vietnam is the largest producer and exporter of pepper, meeting nearly one third of the world's demand. Indonesia holds a clear lead in nutmeg production, Iran in saffron, and Sri Lanka in cinnamon. However, exportation of such spices is not always simple. Most are dried as a whole product, or dried and ground into powder, both forms allowing bulk purchase, easier storage and shipping, and a longer shelf life. For example, the rhizomes (underground stems) of turmeric are boiled lor several hours, then dried in ovens, after which they are ground into the yellow powder popular in South-Asian and Middle-Eastern cuisines.

G

However, there are disadvantages in grinding spices. It increases their surface area many fold, accelerating the rate of evaporation and oxidation of their flavour-bearing and aromatic compounds. In contrast, whole dried spices retain these for much longer. Thus, seed-based varieties (which can be packaged and stored well) are often purchased in this form. This allows grinding to be done at the moment of cooking or eating, maximising the flavour and effect, a fact which often results in pepper 'grinders', instead of 'shakers', gracing the tables of the better restaurants around the world.

Source: Cambridge IELTS Practice Test 1

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