

Ethné and Philippe de Vienne

# SPICE HUNTERS

Recipe and Travel Notebook

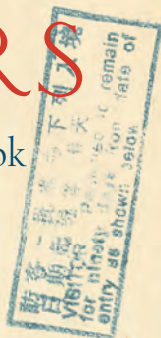
TRÉCARRÉ



Ethné and Philippe de Vienne

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Recipe and Travel Notebook



**TRÉCARRÉ**

Une compagnie de Quebecor Media



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Ethné and Philippe with  
Sudheer and his family.

Sunil, Philippe  
and his ever-  
present recipe  
notebook.



## Introduction

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We have been spice hunters since our catering days in Montreal during the 1980s. Our culinary heroes are people who cultivate, harvest and cook with the best spices the world has to offer.

We are profoundly committed to the authenticity of traditional recipes. When we travel, we cook with — and live among — the people whose communities we visit. For the past thirty years this *modus operandi* has been our greatest source of information, inspiration and innovation. It has also served as our apprenticeship as spice hunters and cooks. Equally motivating is the appreciation of our fellow Quebecers whenever we repatriate our gastronomic discoveries.

In this culinary notebook, you will find that our spice blends, recipes, photos, annotations and travel paraphernalia represent our approach to food and spice-sourcing. The first recipe of every chapter is authentic in every respect and is presented as we learned it. The subsequent recipes are inspired by the original flavours but were created for cooks with different ingredients at their disposal — demonstrating the genius of authentic blends.

The six blends in this collection are true to the flavours and tastes as we experienced them in their countries of origin. We are committed to using whole spices when we make our blends and recommend the use of a mortar and pestle or an electric coffee mill to grind the spices prior to using them in the recipes.

Bon appétit!



## Choosing and storing spices



Buying whole spices has many advantages. It is a fact that spices begin to lose their volatile oils as soon as they are ground: grinding them at the last minute allows you to enjoy all of their flavours. Many ground spices can contain salt, flour or rice, as well as other substances that may not even be listed as ingredients.

Not identifying other ingredients in ground spices is a deplorable but fairly common practice which explains the very cheap prices of some products on the market. It is important to note, however, that there are many companies that do sell ground spices that are pure, well-packaged and of good quality.

For over 200 years, the best ground spices have been sold in metal containers, which protect them from light and humidity. Today, quality ground spices are often sold secured in plastic wrapping that is then placed in an air-tight metal container. Traditional metal containers are far superior to plastic or glass packaging.

It is easy to buy good spices—simply follow your nose! If the initial smell of a spice or blend pleases you, it is highly likely that its flavour will too. It is essential to have faith in yourself, in your instincts and in your sense of smell. The best spice is the one that pleases you, and not necessarily the one whose popularity is the result of the latest advertising blitz or trend.



Air, light, humidity and excessive heat are the primary enemies of spices. Whole spices can be kept for many years in metal containers, provided they are placed in a drawer or cabinet away from any heat source. Well-packaged, ground spices kept under these conditions will keep their fragrance and taste for up to one year. In all cases, avoid storing spices next to stoves or windows.

## Grinding spices

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The best tools for grinding spices are an electric coffee grinder or a mortar and pestle.

When using a mortar and pestle, choose a mortar that is heavy and will therefore do the work for you. A small mortar must be held in place with one hand while the other hand manipulates the pestle with force. A relatively heavy mortar will not move, allowing the pestle to pound and grind the spices more efficiently. The best mortars are often made from granite, marble or volcanic stone.

Smooth stone mortars are ideal for reducing dry ingredients to a fine powder and are easily washed using soap and water. Mortars made of volcanic stone are better suited to crush the fibres of fresh herbs and spices. These types of mortars, however, should be washed under running water with a small brush, guaranteeing that there will be no soap residue in your next spice paste.

Electric coffee grinders are very fast and are appropriate for grinding most spices. Dry, hard roots like whole turmeric should not be put in a grinder, as the blades will break. It is best to use a mortar for these types of spices. To clean a grinder, add one teaspoon of coarse salt, pulverize and discard. A quick wipe with a damp cloth and your grinder is ready for another spice.

## Cooking with spices

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As with all ingredients, the taste and flavour of spices will change depending on the cooking method used.

The most popular technique is to add spices to hot oil or fat in a pan, infusing the cooking fat with the volatile oils of the spices. Whole spices are usually infused alone in hot oil. Once they caramelize, other ingredients are added, cooling the oil and preventing the spices from burning. Ground spices are usually pan-fried along with other ingredients, as they tend to burn easily on their own.





Another approach is dry-roasting spices. When spices are cooked on high heat without any oil or liquid, some of the volatile oils will evaporate and the spices will caramelize—transforming their flavour. To use this technique, sprinkle or rub spices on ingredients before grilling or roasting at high heat. Whole spices can also be grilled directly in a dry pan, free of fat or liquid. Once ground, the roasted spices will have an aroma quite different from fried or plain spices.

Raw spices untreated by heat add an excellent finishing touch on food, freshly ground pepper being the perfect example. For dishes that require a long simmering, it is preferable to add whole spices, which will then slowly release their essence. Raw ground spices lose their flavours rather quickly, so it is preferable to use them in dishes that require a shorter cooking time. For slow-cooking dishes, raw spices are usually added in the last phases of cooking.

## Spices: myths and realities ---

### \* HERBS ARE NOT SPICES

It is often assumed that spices are harvested exclusively from tropical plants. When cooking, any plant material whose main purpose is to modify the taste or flavour of food should be considered a spice.

Consequently, some barks, certain roots, various seeds, dried fruits and many fresh or dried herbs can be used as spices. Some spices are native to the tropics, others to temperate or even northern locations of the world. The most important thing for a cook to consider is the extent to which these spices can influence the taste and flavour of the particular dish.

### \* SPICY MEANS HOT

Most spices, with the exception of peppers, chilies and a few others, are not, in fact, hot. Many are bitter, some are sweet and others are acid or neutral; all are aromatic. Spicy food is always flavourful, but not necessarily hot.



**\* EATING SPICY FOOD CAN BE DETRIMENTAL  
TO YOUR HEALTH**

The opposite is true. Numerous studies have proven what traditional medicines have known for centuries: spices are beneficial to our health! Many diseases common to the Western world are rare in countries where cooking with spices is an integral part of the daily diet.

**\* IN THE OLD DAYS, SPICES WERE USED TO MASK  
THE TASTE OF SPOILED FOOD**

This is highly unlikely. Until the 19th century, imported spices were prohibitively expensive and were therefore only consumed by the wealthy. It is doubtful that the rich would have, in turn, eaten food of inferior or questionable quality. The poor, on the other hand, used local, aromatic plants to enhance their dishes. In fact, spices were used to help with the preservation of food as well as to enhance its flavour. The greatest contribution made by spices to date, however, is their ability to break the monotony of everyday cooking. This last role is of immeasurable importance to those of us who have to cook with increasingly bland agro-industrial ingredients.

**\* IT IS DIFFICULT TO GAUGE SPICES**

Tasting while cooking is still the most pleasurable and accurate way of determining if a dish is spicy enough. As with salt or pepper, add spices gradually and stop once there are enough to your taste. The biggest mistake, though, continues to be not spicing enough! We often add too much salt or sugar, and underspice our food, assuming that flavours will develop as they cook. Quite the opposite is true, especially when the cooking process is prolonged. One should not fear, but dare, when it comes to spicing.

Live long and cook well!