THE BOOK OF SPICE

FROM ANISE TO ZEDOARY

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AJOWAN

Trachypermum ammi

Ajowan, sometimes called ajave, carom, Ethopian cumin, omum and bishop's weed, is a member of the parsley family whose stripy red-brown seeds resemble large celery seeds and smell like a coarser, more acrid version of thyme. Ajowan's essential oil, pty-cholic, contains around 50 per cent thymol, a pungent phenol that works well as a fungicidal and antiseptic. As a result, much ajowan is grown for export – in India (mostly Rajasthan), Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan – so that the thymol can be extracted and added to toothpastes and perfumes.

But ajowan is a stomachic too and used in India, especially, as a remedy for diarrhoea, flatulence and other gastric upsets. Sometimes it is chewed whole; more often it is drunk in the form of 'Omum water', a close relative of the gripe water given to babies for colic. Most commercial brands of gripe water use dill or fennel rather than ajowan, and add alcohol.

Ajowan's culinary use is limited, but it crops up in Indian savouries and snacks such as the flatbread paratha and recipes that involve chickpea flour (besan), such as the Diwali snack besan sev – more-ish, mildly spiced sticks of besan. Sometimes, in Indian recipes, it is called lovage. The seeds are sold whole and crushed rather than ground.

The Anglo-Indian manual *The Complete Indian House-Keeper and Cook* (1888) recommends distilling your own Omum water using a pound of ajowan seeds per two quart bottles of water. 'In cholera season check all premonitory diarrhoea with twenty drops of chlorodyne in some ajwain water', the book suggests, though Edmund John Waring's *Pharmacopeia of India* from 1868, while praising ajowan for 'disguising the taste of disagreeable drugs' and relieving 'atonic dyspepsia', considers its powers against cholera to be 'very limited'.

Still, ajowan is supposed to be good for rheumatism, arthritis and (mixed with warm milk, garlic and sesame oil) earache; also asthma, phlegmy coughs and other respiratory disorders, and bad breath. Some pop-Ayurvedic manuals recommend rolling up a quantity of the seeds in cigarette paper and smoking them to relieve migraine. Non-smokers can achieve a similar effect by painting a paste made from crushed seeds onto their foreheads.

Ajowan is often described as being native to India, but Andrew Dalby points out that its Sanskrit name, *yavani*, means 'the Greek spice', suggesting that it arrived on the subcontinent 'by way of one of the Greek kingdoms of the Middle East'.[28] The Romans, who called it ammi, thought it was a variety of cumin, and it is sometimes added to the Ethiopian and Eritrean spice mix berbere (see *A Directory of Spice Mixes*, p. 237) – hence 'Ethiopian cumin'.

SEE ALSO: *Cumin, Dill, Fennel.*

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ALLSPICE

Pimenta dioica

The name reflects the flavour, a seeming compound of cloves, cinnamon and nutmeg, although the belief that allspice is the same as mixed spice (see *A Directory of Spice Mixes,* p. 249) persists in some quarters. Also known as pimento (from *pimiento*, Spanish for 'pepper': the substance Columbus initially believed – and desperately wanted – it to be), allspice is the dried, unripe fruit of *Pimenta dioica*, an intensely aromatic evergreen with a smooth, greyish bark and glossy, dark green leaves. Indigenous to the West Indies and Latin America, the trees only start to bear fruit around

the age of seven or eight, but hit their stride after their fifteenth year and continue to be active for the next hundred.

In the wilds of Jamaica's limestone hills *P. dioica* grows in clusters, the seeds having been dispersed by birds. But the tree used to be cultivated ornamentally in 'pimento walks' and on commercial plantations. In the nineteenth century most Jamaican plantation pimento was grown alongside other crops – sugar, for example, or tobacco or coffee, introduced to the island in 1728 by its then governor, Sir Nicholas Lawes – compared with which 'the labour demanded by pimento was thought to be minimal'.[29] One English account of Jamaican life from 1807 makes the harvest sound neat and systematic:

> The fruit is gathered by the hand; and one labourer on the tree, employed in gathering the small branches, will give employment to three below (who are generally women and children) in picking the berries; and an industrious picker will fill a bag capable of holding twenty pounds weight in a day.[30]

These 'industrious pickers' were slaves who would also have been charged with chopping down wild pimentos to free up land for other agricultural uses and satisfy the European and American demand for pimento umbrella- and walking-sticks. These were, a source tells us, 'manufactured into almost every variety of fanciful patterns by staining, carving, and other processes', pimentos possessing a rigidity that 'prevents their breaking or becoming crooked'.[31] Export returns for 1881 show that over 4,500 'bundles' of between 500 and 800 pimento sticks were shipped from Jamaica in the first three-quarters of the year. Small wonder legislation was introduced in 1882 to curb a trade widely felt to have spun out of control.

Once picked, allspice berries would be dried in the sun until they turned brown and the seeds inside them rattled. Jamaica's native Arawak and Taino peoples used the berries to flavour and

preserve meat, which they smoked over wooden-framed barbecues called *buccans* – the roundabout root (via the French *boucanier*) of the word 'buccaneer'. After Columbus landed on Jamaica on his second voyage to the New World in 1494, the practice was adopted by Spanish settlers and absorbed into their own meat preservation rituals, which resulted in *charqui* – the roundabout root (it is Quechua, i.e., a Peruvian word, rather than Spanish) of the word 'jerky'.

The Spanish brought with them thousands of West Africans to use as slaves. The fortunate ones escaped and either formed their own independent settlements or joined existing Taino ones in Jamaica's mountainous inland regions. They became known as Maroons – from the Spanish for fugitive, *cimarrón* – and aggravated the Spanish occupiers (and, later, the English) by staging regular raids on plantations, for which they were punished by deportation or worse.

Jerk-spiced meat is really Maroon food – an adapted amalgam of three different cooking traditions: Spanish, Taino and West African (specifically Ghanaian). But while its preparation drew on ancestral African methods such as wrapping the meat in leaves or burying it in a pit filled with hot stones so that it could steam in its own juices,[32] its four most important ingredients were local: thyme, which grows plentifully in Jamaica; the scotch bonnet pepper, which gives jerk seasoning its fiery kick; ginger, introduced to Jamaica in the early sixteenth century; and allspice, whose wood is burned in the smoking process and whose crushed or ground berries are added to the jerk marinade or dry-rub.

Whether you favour the 'wet' or 'dry' approach to preparing jerk is down to personal taste, and possibly your willingness to regard one approach as more authentic than the other. Helen Willinsky in her *Jerk: Barbecue from Jamaica* (1990) favours dry, but the wet seems now to be more popular, possibly because of the tenderising effect of the vinegar or soy sauce or citrus juice – whichever you prefer – on indifferent supermarket meat.

The strong sense of local pride that jerk engenders isn't surprising: its popularity represents the triumph of the militant tendency over an oppressive ruling class. As Winston Currie, owner of the Best Jerk Center in St Ann, Jamaica, told the *New York Times*: '[Jerk] is a dish that is ours, not coming from England like the patty, or from India like the roti.'[33]

Given how popular allspice was to become in England, it is curious how long it took to make an impact outside Jamaica and Mexico (where it was used in spice mixes for moles). It was certainly known in England in the early seventeenth century, as the word 'allspice' dates from 1621. An abundant supply was guaranteed after the British succeeded the Spanish as Jamaica's rulers in 1655, but at first low prices made it 'hardly worth the while of the proprietor of the fragrant trees to gather the berries'.[34] On 8 April 1694 Margaret Banks of Kingston Lacy, a country house in Dorset, spent 2 shillings on 4 oz. of nutmegs and 3 shillings on 4 oz. of cloves and mace. Yet a single shilling bought her half a pound – i.e., 8 oz. – of allspice.[35]

Between 1793 and 1807 the average quantity of allspice exported from Jamaica was a mere 1,767,500 lb. This rose to 5,347,900 lb. for the period between 1835 and 1838, and by 1858 had exceeded 9 million lb. Slavery having been abolished in 1835, an 1878 history of the island recommends that 'what was neglected by the slave-holding proprietor or his attorney [i.e., harvesting pimento] is well worth the attention of the free negro'.[36]

In England, allspice found favour in custards, pies and puddings. Its affinity with sweet, exotic fruits such as the pineapple – first cultivated in Europe in the early seventeenth century, then by the Victorians in glass-covered trenches called 'pineapple pits' – was recognised and admired. In Yorkshire, Jane Grigson tells us, allspice was known as 'clove-pepper' and used in curd tarts; also in Cumberland currant cake (aka 'squashed fly cake'), which Grigson remembers eating as a child while visiting relatives in the north-east of England.[37] A speciality of the North Yorkshire moors

was pepper cake, enriched with treacle and brandy, which 'probably gained its name from the use of Jamaica pepper or allspice',[38] though some recipes use nutmeg, caraway and ginger instead or as well.

Almost all European pickling marinades feature allspice as their principal spice. Oily fish such as herrings and mackerel turn rancid so fast that before the age of refrigeration they needed to be eaten or salted within a day of being caught. The pickling of these fish (and sprats, oysters, cockles and mussels) by marinating them in spiced vinegar was called 'caveaching' and was practised across Europe with only slight regional variations – for example, sometimes the fish were fried first in lard, or the raw fillets wrapped around onions, as in Danish rollmops. 'Sousing' involves poaching the fish in spiced vinegar before pickling.

Not so long ago, the trade in pickled herrings underpinned entire economies, turning small Scottish fishing communities like Peterhead into boomtowns. But rampant over-fishing between the early 1950s and the mid-1960s caused North Sea stocks to drop by over 50 per cent.[39] While in Britain the taste for pickled herrings has become a minority one in the last twenty years as the generations reared on them have died out, they remain popular in Scandinavia. In Sweden, matjessil is traditionally served on Midsummer's Eve, accompanied by sour cream, chives and dill-flavoured boiled potatoes.

Elizabeth David tells us that spiced, salted beef, another recipe where allspice is mandatory, is an English Christmas country-house dish. So it is – chef Rowley Leigh has called it 'plum pudding, a richly cloved ham and mulled wine rolled into one'[40] – but almost every country has a variant with its own unique qualities: biltong in South Africa, Turkish pastirma, Italian bresaola etc. Irish dry-cured beef, 'meticulously boned', had a reputation for never spoiling,[41] and for this reason was bought in huge quantities by the French, who shipped it out to the Caribbean to feed the slaves on their sugar plantations – until they realised New England salt cod

was cheaper. Salted beef and cabbage remains a popular Irish festive dish, albeit one more often served in Irish bars in America than in Ireland itself, where, according to *Irish Traditional Cooking* (2012) author Darina Allen, it is now 'almost a forgotten flavour'.[42]

In Britain and Ireland this salted beef was sometimes called 'corned beef', a term first used by Robert Burton in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). Note that 'corn' here refers to coarse grains of salt rather than anything to do with maize. From the Middle Ages onwards, saltpetre (potassium nitrate) was often used too to maintain colour. Tinned corned beef, the 'bully beef' of the First World War, is a whole other product and a whole other story: it was invented by the German chemist Justus von Liebig when he was looking for a cheap way to use up meat from Uruguayan cattle which had been slaughtered for their hides.

In *Pickled, Potted and Canned* (2000) Sue Shephard cites a delicious-sounding 1864 recipe for 'Melton Hunt Beef' in which a huge joint of ox is air-dried before being rubbed every day with a mix of ground allspice, bruised juniper berries, coarse brown sugar, coarse salt, black pepper, minced shallots and dried bay leaves. But this is not the end of it. Saltpetre, garlic and rock salt are added, and after ten days the joint is shaped and skewered, the final touch being a week of smoking over beech and oak chips and turfs of fern or grass.[43]

Wet-brined beef brisket is one of the archetypal Jewish foods – *pickelfleisch* in Yiddish. Hannah Glasse in 1747 refers to 'the Jews' way to pickle beef, which will go good to the West Indies, and keep a year good in the pickle, and with care, will go to the East Indies'. But *pickelfleisch* too was called corned or 'corn' beef. The craze for over-stuffed salt-beef sandwiches spread in the 1930s and '40s from New York to other American cities with significant Jewish populations: 'A strip of East Lombard Street in downtown Baltimore, once the centre of the city's Jewish life and dotted with delis, was nicknamed "Corn Beef Row".'[44] By the 1960s it had become a mainstream American food. *Pickelfleisch* is different from

pastrami, which was introduced to New York by Romanian Jews in the 1870s. In pastrami the beef is cured slightly before being smoked and coated with spices, garlic and red pepper.

Elizabeth David notes that 'there are those who use lavish quantities of [allspice] in Christmas puddings',[45] somehow making it clear that she would rather die than be counted among them. (David famously disliked Christmas, which she called the 'Great Too Much'.) As far as I can gather, the earliest written recipes for plum pudding, among them those of Eliza Acton and Hannah Glasse, privilege nutmeg and ginger over other spices, though in the Scottish journalist Christian Isobel Johnstone's *Cook and Housewife's Manual* (1862), published under the *nom de plume* Margaret Dod, 'a little allspice' is called for in her 'common small plum-pudding' – even if her more lavish Trinity pudding, garlanded with holly to deter witches, requires cloves, cinnamon and nutmeg.

SEE ALSO: *Cinnamon, Cloves, Nutmeg.*

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AMBERGRIS

Writing in 1783, the German physician Franz Xavier Schwediawer described ambergris as 'preternaturally hardened whale dung'. This isn't quite right. Nor is it exactly 'whale vomit', the phrase usually used by newspapers when they publish stories about the substance being found washed up on remote beaches – there are different metabolic processes involved.

To be clear: ambergris is a secretion from the intestines of sperm whales. Greyish-black, putty-like and with a sweet, musky, marine

smell, it was once thought to be a type of vegetable – the word translates as 'grey amber' – but the whale connection was suspected by many early commentators including Marco Polo, who witnessed ambergris-related whale-hunting on Soccotera (now Socotra, an island and archipelago in the Indian Ocean):

> The inhabitants find much ambergris upon their coasts, which is voided from the entrails of whales. Being an article of merchandise in great demand, they make it a business to take these fish; and this they do by means of a barbed iron, which they strike into the whale so firmly that it cannot be drawn out … They then drag it to the shore, and proceed to extract the ambergris from its belly, whilst from its head they procure several casks of [spermaceti] oil.

A rival theory held that ambergris was produced by a magical fountain at the bottom of the sea. Sinbad, in the *Arabian Nights*, combines both theories when he explains that sea beasts swallow crude ambergris from the undersea fountain only to vomit it up again: 'When it gets hot in their stomachs, they eject it from their mouths into the water, and it rises to the surface where it congeals and changes its colour.'

A 'spice' according to the medieval definition, ambergris is only produced by 1 per cent of sperm whales – that's 3,500 out of approximately 350,000 sperm whales in the world. This explains why it trades on the open market at over $20 a gram. Bear in mind that lumps weighing 50 pounds have been found washed up and you can see why the idea of it excites beachcombers so much.

Actually, ambergris increases in value as it ages during the course of its oceanic journey. As Christopher Kemp explains in *Floating Gold* (2012): 'It can ride the swell of the southern oceans for decades.' There is no substitute for this journey: 'Like wine in a bottle, ambergris slowly matures at sea. Gradually, a molecule at a time, it reacts with its surroundings until – oxidised by salt water,

degraded by sunlight, and eroded by wave action – it is beached somewhere along a remote and windswept coastline.'

Ambergris's use in modern perfumery is as a fixative – it helps the smell to stay on the wearer's skin. But in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it had a culinary application in cakes and soft drinks. John Fryer, travelling across Persia in the late seventeenth century, found that 'the usual drink is sherbet made of water, juice of lemmons and ambergreece'.

In medieval times, ambergris was supposed to stop epileptic seizures, aid childbirth and ward off the foul miasma believed to cause plague. In fact, in the aftermath of the Black Death of 1348, which killed almost a third of the population of Europe, the University of Paris recommended the use of portable aromatic dispensers called 'ambergris apples' – the French *pommes d'ambre* is the origin of the English word 'pomander' – which citizens could fill with their aromatics of choice, though the king and queen allegedly used chunks of pure ambergris.

Ambergris was one of four perfumed animal secretions beloved of merchants and apothecaries, the others being civet, musk and castoreum.

SEE ALSO: *Mummia*, *Myrrh*, *Spikenard*.

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AMCHUR (MANGO)

Mangifera indica

Different regions in India favour different souring agents. Cambodge (the pumpkin-like *Garcinia gummigutta*) is specific to Keralan fish cuisine, while kokum (*G. indica*) is mostly used in the