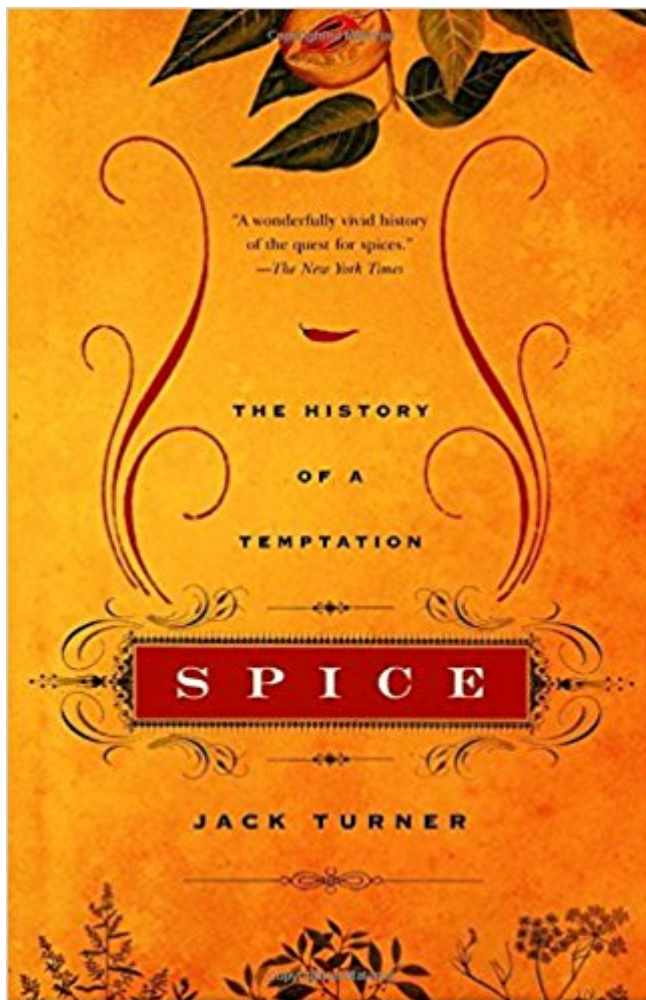


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# Spice: The History Of A Temptation



## Synopsis

In this brilliant, engrossing work, Jack Turner explores an era—from ancient times through the Renaissance—when what we now consider common condiments were valued in gold and blood. Spices made sour medieval wines palatable, camouflaged the smell of corpses, and served as wedding night aphrodisiacs. Indispensable for cooking, medicine, worship, and the arts of love, they were thought to have magical properties and were so valuable that they were often kept under lock and key. For some, spices represented Paradise, for others, the road to perdition, but they were potent symbols of wealth and power, and the wish to possess them drove explorers to circumnavigate the globe—and even to savagery. Following spices across continents and through literature and mythology, *Spice* is a beguiling narrative about the surprisingly vast influence spices have had on human desire. Includes eight pages of color photographs. One of the Best Books of the Year: *Discover Magazine*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *San Francisco Chronicle*

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

There was a time, for a handful of peppercorns, you could have someone killed. Throw in a nutmeg or two, you could probably watch. There was a time when grown men sat around and thought of nothing but black pepper. How to get it. How to get more. How to control the entire trade in pepper from point of origin to purchase. In *Spice: The History of a Temptation*, classics scholar Jack Turner opens up the whole story of pepper and its kind like a ripe melon. He brings the exotic scents of the East deep into the history of Western culture. Everyone knows a little bit of the story, how the desire

to control the spice trade drove Western nations deep into the heart of the Age of Discovery, the Portuguese sponsoring Da Gama's push to India; the Spanish underwriting the many attempts of Columbus to get to India another way. The Western madness for spice was just about peaking in this time, and spice would all too soon become--gasp--common, much like the afterthought condiment it is for so many today. Who thinks twice about pepper any longer? And yet, the history is long and glorious, and the window spice throws open on Western culture yields a glorious view. Jack Turner is a skilled tour guide and story teller. He starts his narrative with the 16th century quest for spice, then loops back into three main sections of text: Palate, Body, and Spirit. Turner has mined classic and Medieval literature for any and every possible mention of spice and demonstrates how fixated the West became from the time of Augustus in Rome through to relatively modern times. He winds his narrative through the way spice was used in the foods of the wealthy (and puts to sleep the nostrum about rotting food), as a medicine, a sex aid, and as an aromatic channel to the gods of the time and place. He ably demonstrates the constant underlying tension surrounding spice--that it was both attractive and repellent, that it represented fabulous wealth and power for some and, for others, an abhorrence of the exotic East that exists to this day. This is not an easy story to tell. But Turner makes it appear effortless. Pull a chair close to the fire, pour a draught of spiced wine, crack open Jack Turner's *Spice* and you'll read your way into the wee hours of the night. --Schuyler Ingle --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Spices helped draw Europeans into their age of expansion, but the Western world was far from ignorant of them before that time. Turner's lively and wide-ranging account begins with the voyages of discovery, but demonstrates that, even in ancient times, spices from distant India and Indonesia made their way west and fueled the European imagination. Romans and medieval Europeans alike used Asian pepper, cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg and mace to liven their palates, treat their maladies, enhance their sex lives and mediate between the human and the divine. While many of these applications were not particularly efficacious, spices retained their allure, with an overlay of exotic associations that remain today. Turner argues that the use of rare and costly spices by medieval and Renaissance elites amounted to conspicuous consumption. He has perhaps a little too much fun listing the ridiculous uses of spices in medieval medicine--since, as he notes in a few sparse asides, some spices do indeed have medicinal effects--and fails to get into the real experience of the people. His account of religious uses, on the other hand, paints a richer picture and gets closer to imagining the mystery that people found in these startlingly intense flavors and fragrances. It is this mystery and the idea that sensations themselves have a history that make the

entire book fascinating. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I found this book very enjoyable to read, with a wealth of information and a liberal sprinkling of humor. Turner provides insightful information on the historical value of spices and their many applications, dividing his monograph into thematic sections. My only complaint is with the somewhat shoddy physical construction of the book...it split down the middle after one reading and is separating from the spine, and I've noticed that my classmates are having the same issue. This, of course, does not reflect on the content of the book, but it is something I feel buyers should be aware of. I'll edit this later with a photo of the book and a link to my upcoming, much more thorough, review on WordPress.

This book starts with the exciting stories of Columbus and Vasco da Gama and their far-flung voyages to find the Indies. Of course, now we understand that Columbus gravely underestimated the westerly distance to Asia and instead bumped into the unknown (to Europeans) continent of America. Probably Columbus's main motivation was to discover the source of Eastern spices. Whoever controlled this trade could earn a huge fortune because Europeans paid astronomical values for them. Vast fortunes were to be made by anyone who could cut out the Arabs and Venetians - the classic middle-men of the spice trade to Europe. The book starts from this point and proceeds to try and answer the question: why were spices so incredibly valuable to Europeans? Aside from their rarity, beautiful smells and taste, there was something other-worldly about them, something exotic and unobtainable. The book is a very comprehensive analysis of this question and does very well at answering it. Along the way, there is a potted guide to Middle Age Europe, eating habits and hygiene, sexual mores, feasts, trade, and lots more beside. While I enjoyed the first half of the book immensely, I found it tough going by the middle. I loved the chapters on explorations and the fight for control of the spice islands themselves, but found myself wanting more. However, the book is well-written and well-researched, and is a joy to read.

I haven't gotten very far into the book (it is thick!), but so far I am very intrigued by the direction the author is taking as well as his style! Being Australian he seems more objective concerning events such as Columbus' discovery of the Americas because he has no personal, nationally historical interest. He's in it for the love of the subject. Discussion topics include a definitive understanding of 'Spice', as well as the varied powers attributed to it in the realms of politics, religion, and

aphrodisiacs! Overall, an interesting and scholarly read.

This book contains a tremendous amount of interesting information...but I think it's poorly organized and thus repetitive. The author riffs on this or that aspect of his subject, and his trajectory pulls him to tell the same story over and over again in slightly different words. I think the book could have been much tighter and stronger. (I prefer Kurlansky's history of salt and the book about the history of the world in six drinks.) But Spice does contain a tremendous amount of interesting information.

This is not the fastest easiest read, but it is fascinating and informative. It has some very interesting recipes too...I titled this review the way I did because I constantly come up with little facts remembered from this book constantly in the grocery store, watching TV, talking with friends, seeing anything to do with food or history. It's not all inclusive, but it is a big topic and what is there is definitely enlightening. Another reviewer mentioned that the book contained errors...I don't know if this is true, but the highlights of what I picked up appear to be true. It's also a fascinating look at how foods spread throughout the world. For instance I did not know that the potato, tomato, and pepper were all New World foods...that right, no Irish potatoes, Italian tomatoes, or Asian peppers before the 13th century! And did you know that for most of human history nutmeg and cloves came from 2 little islands to be traded across all of Asia, Africa and Europe? The book also does a good job of treating non-culinary roles including in religion, medicine, and social displays. It has led me to try burning cinnamon and I am strongly considering asking that cinnamon be burned at my funeral both for the historical significance, the tribute to immortality (the phoenix's nest), and for the lovely scent. The social aspect of spices and the psychological importance and significance is explored in detail. They are important because for so long they were of the unknown and exotic and this book treats that very well. And hey, it is because of this book that I just had to go find some galengal (turns out that I could not find a single store in Tucson that had it -- though I still need to try the Asian markets -- but that's what the internet is for, right?) I'd definitely recommend for the amateur food historian.

I am an avid reader of historical non- and fiction. It has been a while (a year? or so) since I have read a book so well written, informative, compelling and well researched as Spice. I knew that spice of all kinds were precious and essential for centuries, but I have never imagined how search for spice has driven explorers and how essential they were for different aspects of life centuries ago. That's the staple peppercorns and fragrant cinnamon of our every day. I'd recommend this book for

every avid, curious reader looking for exploring details of life in the Middle Ages, and I'd gladly read a new book by same author if only he decides to explore another historical topic.

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