

Flavors and Fragrances from the Past



By Shady Hasbun

Translated from Italian by Sabrin Hasbun

Aromatic herbs and spices enliven our Palestinian cuisine, making it richer, tastier, and never boring. They boost our senses and tickle our tastes. The light, warmth, and scent of our land emanate from their essence. From ancient times, humanity has invested in aromatic herbs and spices, as they have always been among the most valuable products, precious enough even to justify the opening of new trade routes all over the world. They were desired not only for their exotic and mysterious origin but also for their sacred powers, praised in ancient legends.

Herbs have always been used in numerous ways. Some herbs and spices, for example, were considered aphrodisiac, and the essential oils of many herbs were used as basic preparation for medicines, cosmetics, and perfumes. Essential oils were also burnt during rituals or to anoint holy objects. Even in the Bible their importance is highlighted: it is no coincidence that they are among the Magi's gifts to Jesus Christ. But also in *One Thousand and One Nights*, herbs and spices are essential in the metamorphosis of food: thyme, savory, parsley, bay leaves, basil, coriander, cinnamon, Persian cumin, ginger, cumin, and saffron are a constant presence in all dishes, especially fish, game, and boiled meat. In the magic Arabian nights, where the stars and the full moon shine on the domes of the mosques, herbs and spices with their scented temptation permeate the adventures of love and secret encounters.

Herbs and spices come from various parts of the plant: an herb is the green part or leaf of a plant, whereas a spice can be made with seeds, fruits, roots, stems, sprouts, fresh or dried bark,

Savor the amber, cloves, nutmeg, ginger, black pepper, and the most fragrant herbs, all at the same time.



or pistils. It is also possible to create spice mixtures, which are prepared all over the world due to their strong and recognizable flavors: five-spice powder from China, garam masala from India, *bharat* from the Middle-East, and *ras al-hanout* from Africa.

The sensory properties of food are some of the most influential factors when it comes to choosing what to eat, and herbs and spices thus play a decisive role in our nutrition and enjoyment. The senses of smell and taste are strictly linked: the latter is what makes us identify the flavor of the substance, whereas the former allows us to detect the molecules that





activate the olfactory receptors. These two senses, however, can help us do much more than just recognize food's organoleptic elements: they trigger our sensory memory, which is the shortest-term and deepest memory we have, and thus allows us to archive the feelings, emotions, or events that are linked to smells and tastes. In other words, tasting or smelling a dish can bring to mind a precise memory or emotional state in a much stronger way than can words or pictures. Herbs and spices can be used to express various things, and their language can change depending on who is using them or how they are used.

Another major difference between spices and herbs becomes apparent in the way they are consumed. Unlike spices, which are mainly used after a

drying process, herbs should be used at their peak moment of freshness, when their aroma is at its maximum level: it is better to add them raw at the end of a preparation in order to preserve the intensity of their flavor.

In the Mediterranean region, Greece was the first to discover the curative power of herbs and spices, which can positively influence our digestion, energy, and immune system. Herbs and spices affect our health and well-being more than we can imagine. Their therapeutic properties help to sustain our body's needs. In antiquity, herbs and spices were used not only for their aromas but also for food preservation: many herbs and spices are, for example, rich sources of antioxidants and contain therapeutic oils with antibacterial effects.



Basil: The word basil comes from the Greek and means royal, probably due to its use in oils and medicines for kings. Basil's flavor is refreshing and balsamic: for this reason, it is better to tear the basil leaves with the fingers rather than cut them with a knife. Basil aids digestion and strengthens the nervous system. It also helps improve the symptoms of headache and insomnia, and has anti-inflammatory and antioxidant effects. The most famous use of basil is in Genovese pesto.



Bay or Laurel: This bitter, spicy, and earthy-tasting herb is used by slightly breaking the leaves to allow the essential oil to be released. It stimulates the appetite as well as digestion, and it is also a good remedy for rheumatism and toothaches. Bay leaves are a symbol of strength and wisdom: for this reason, in ancient Greece a crown of bay leaves was awarded to competition winners. Bay leaves can be used for broths and stocks, and to aromatize meat and game.



Chives: In the past, chives were used for their medicinal properties rather than in cooking. They have a delicate oniony taste and anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties. They are good for cold sauces and salads, since it is always better to use them raw. Their small lilac flowers are also edible.



Coriander: Its aroma brings to mind orange and lavender, though it is not always pleasant. It has a sugary but acrid taste. It is possible to use both the leaves and the seeds. Coriander has antibacterial, detox, and immune-stimulatory effects, and it aids digestion by mitigating nausea and stomach pains. It is also known for its anticancer properties. Coriander is most well known as an ingredient of guacamole.



Dill: Resembling fennel, dill has a slightly bitter taste with a lemony note. It has a powerful diuretic and antibacterial effect. The essential oil inside the herb has relaxing and anti-inflammatory properties. Before entering the arena, Roman gladiators used to rub their skin with oil and macerated dill as a symbol of strength and endurance. Dill is ideal to aromatize salmon.



Lemon grass or citronella: This herb has a pleasant lemony aroma and should be used only raw, by breaking its leaves. It stimulates the appetite and is also energizing and antipyretic.



Marjoram: Similar to oregano, it has a delicate and sweet aroma, warm and slightly spicy. In ancient Greece it was a symbol of happiness, and if found close to a grave, it was believed that the deceased had found eternal happiness. Marjoram has relaxing properties and is beneficial for the digestive system. It is always better to chop it before using it.



Mint: With its refreshing taste and strong aroma that is sweet but slightly spicy, mint was used in ancient times to prepare ritual perfumes. Moreover, the menthol it contains calms and aids digestion with its antiseptic and anti-parasitic properties. It also fortifies the nervous system and relieves headaches. It is a decongestant and helps to dilate bronchi and alleviate coughs. There are two famous drinks made with mint: mint tea and mojito, the traditional Cuban highball.



Oregano: With its warm and piercing taste, oregano is an antioxidant and has protective and analgesic effects against stomach pains. Oregano naturally stimulates the appetite. It is also useful as a remedy for colds and flu, as well as for headaches and respiratory diseases. Some of the best recipes that use oregano include the Greek salad, called *Horiatiki*, with tomatoes, cucumbers, and cheeses.



Parsley: This antioxidant herb facilitates the well-being of the kidneys and the bladder, it acts as a diuretic and helps keep the bones healthy. High quantities of parsley may have abortive properties. Its moderate use, though, has no side effects. The most famous recipe is, without doubt, *tabbouleh*.



Rosemary: With its natural antiseptic, antioxidant, and anti-inflammatory properties, rosemary is useful against gum infections and sore throats. It is also known for its relaxing properties. In Spain, rosemary is considered the lucky herb and is used to keep away jinxes and hexes. This herb is perfect with roasted and grilled meat.



Sage: From a Latin word that means *healthy*, sage has always been considered an important herb in the medical field. It has a sharp aroma, similar to rosemary and lavender. It mitigates stomach aches but also improves our memory abilities. Sage leaves are perfect with legumes. In Palestine, sage is called *maramiyeh*. According to legend, a blooming bush of sage protected Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary (Mariam) from Roman soldiers. Sage tea is a traditional drink in all Palestinian villages. This herbal infusion is important not just for its cultural and convivial value, but also for its powerful healing properties.



Savory: Similar to thyme, but with a spicy note close to chili pepper, its Latin name means Satyr's herb. It is an antioxidant and good for the digestion. Savory is mainly used in legumes and soups.



Tarragon: Also known as estragon, due to the shape of its roots that resemble a dragon, its taste is intense, similar to anise and wild fennel. It is one of the herbs in the famous *Herbes de Provence* mix. The most well-known recipes that use tarragon are usually butter-based sauces such as *béarnaise* and *tartare*.



Thyme: In ancient Egypt, thyme was used for the mummification process. Its flavor is similar to oregano, with a warm and dry aroma. It is used as a remedy against asthma, bronchitis, cold, and flu. It is a natural tonic, antioxidant, and antibacterial agent. It combines perfectly with mushrooms and can be used with bay leaves and oregano as a favorite bouquet garni.* In Palestine, it is called *za'atar*, and no traditional breakfast would be complete without *zeit wa za'atar* – when freshly baked bread is dipped first in olive oil and then into a mixture of finely ground thyme, roasted sesame seeds, and lemon. Fresh *za'atar* is a favorite ingredient of *mu'ajjanat*, dough mixed either with onions or white cheese.

"Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food."

Hippocrates

Palestine's geographic position is characterized by rich biodiversity, as it lies between three continents and is influenced by various ecosystems: the Persian upland, the Mediterranean Basin, and the desert and Dead Sea region in the Jordan Valley. Palestine's land is the source of its life, fertile and abundant in herbs and plants. It is not without reason that the Palestinian people are traditionally considered skillful growers, deeply devoted to their land. Due to a range of issues, such as the expropriation of water resources, the establishment of settlements on fertile lands, the introduction of non-native crops, and the uncontrolled use of chemical fertilizer, many plants are disappearing every year, causing serious destruction of Palestinian natural heritage. Now more than ever, therefore, it is crucial to raise awareness of this topic and to encourage familiarity with and interest in Palestinian herbs.

The flavors and aromas of Palestine meet the gusto and tradition of Tuscany. Shady Hasbun's identity emerges from the encounter of these two gastronomic cultures and invites us to a sensorial journey all along the Mediterranean coast. A trainer and teacher in schools and academies, a key personality at Italian cooking events and on TV shows, Chef Shady represents modern culinary art as he constantly aims to discover new alchemies and experiences of taste and well-being. He can be reached at www.chefshady.com.

*A bundle of herbs usually tied together with string and mainly used to prepare soup, stock, casseroles, and various stews.