

A tale of three cities built on spice

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Albert Gea, Reuters

The Taste of Conquest: The Rise and Fall of Three Great Cities of Spice

Michael Kronld Ballantine Books 304 pages, \$34

In medieval Venice, a budding young entrepreneur with a few ducats jangling in his pocket could hop on a boat to Egypt. If all went well--fair winds, no pirates or shipwrecks --he would be back in a couple of months with several sacks of pepper, or piper nigrum.

The nobility and well-to-do folk all over Europe were prepared to pay huge sums for the privilege of seasoning their food with these wrinkly black seeds from Malabar on India's west coast. Ginger, mace, nutmeg, cinnamon and cumin were also much in demand, along with many spices that sound exotic to our ears, such as galingale, a form of ginger, zedoary, related to tumeric, and cubebs, a kind of pepper.

The reason, writes Michael Kronld in this witty and erudite book, was not to cover up the rancidness of the meat, as is often thought, but because this was how people liked their food. Spices also formed part of the physician's pharmacopoeia.

The Taste of Conquest looks at the history of Venice, Lisbon and Amsterdam, three cities whose fortunes rose and fell with the spice trade. As Kronld tells it, the legacy of the spice business is little more than some remarkable buildings and an enduring taste for exotic food among their inhabitants, such as rijsttafel, an elaborate Indonesian-derived buffet in the Netherlands, and

peverini, molasses and pep-per-scented cookies in Venice. In Portugal, it's evident in the cinnamon and sugar mixture sprinkled over custards.

But in an era before jet travel and refrigeration, spices were the perfect commodity: they took up relatively little space, so were easily portable. Even better, they required no preservation after the initial drying and would keep for years. But perhaps best of all, they were fashionable, a trend reinforced by the appearance in 1475 of what Kronld dubs the first celebrity cookbook. *De honesta voluptate et valetudine* (On Honest Pleasure and Good Health) was an international best-seller, going into multiple editions and several translations.

At first, the merchants of Venice prospered mightily from the seasoning business, with profits of 40% being considered normal. In contrast, the best returns bankers such as the Medici in rival Florence could hope for was about half that. Today, la Serenissima

is adorned with magnificent churches and palazzi, the spoils of the trade, but the city is little more than a gilded theme park, kept afloat by flocks of tourists.

In business terms, the Venetian Republic came a cropper because it failed to diversify and was thus caught flatfooted when tastes suddenly changed in the 17th century. France became the arbiter of fashion and a new cuisine arose, one that promoted blander, more natural-tasting food. Spices, if they were used at all, were banished to the dessert table. Tea, coffee and chocolate became all the rage.

It was a similar story in the Netherlands and Portugal, although the Dutch managed to get a piece of the new trade in luxury commodities. They also gave the world the first joint stock company, the Dutch East India Company. The VOC, named after its Dutch anagram, paid some of its early dividends in spices, which annoyed shareholders who were forced to dispose of the goods at fire-sale prices.

Today, the wheel has come full circle and the world is currently avid for spices of all kinds. The average North American consumes more pepper every year than a 15th-century aristocrat. The difference is that much of it comes from members of the capsicum family, principally the fiery chilies of Mexican and other Latin American cuisines, rather than from pepper. Spices are also consumed in mixes, such as rubs for steak, and are a major component of sauces, particularly salsas, which are more popular these days in the United States than ketchup.

They still grow piper nigrum in Malabar, but Vietnam has overtaken India as the world's top pepper producer and Guatemala has become its largest cardamom exporter, although locals wouldn't know what to do with it.

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