Merchants of Spice
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America's the newest port of call for India's five-thousand-year-old trade in hot stuff

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The modern spice trader is likely to be a recycled immigrant engineer, accountant or other gray-cell professional who rediscovered the gold hidden in the pot of cardamom, pepper and the various spice mixes called garam masala. Many of those now operating came here in the 60s as students to American universities. They soon found that the New World lacked the essential spices vital for their own cuisine. After all, without the spices, delectable sookhe aloo is just left-over potatoes. In spite of pursuing successful professional careers, a handful of these over-educated entrepreneurs dabbled with importing Indian groceries from the motherland to different parts of America. In the meantime, 1965 immigration laws changed to accommodate family reunification, and the floodgates were opened. As the Indian population burgeoned in America, the fortunes of the spice traders turned, too. All of a sudden, packets of imported chevda (a fried snack food) and toor daal (pigeon peas) and besan (chickpeas) became hot items, the building blocks to a comfortable house in the suburbs and a respectable bank balance.

The time was certainly opportune--America had become more

adventurous in its food habits, thanks to the influx of immigrants from many lands, and due to the wanderlust of Americans. As tourists in foreign lands, these travelers discovered the spices and cuisines of many ethnicities. Returning home, they tried to duplicate these tastes, and the result was a nationwide craze for hot and spicy. Suddenly chilies and salsas and tandoori (a clay-oven baked dish with spicy marinate) flavors were all the rage. It is a repeat performance of what had already happened in Britain where Indian spices brought about a revolution in the normally bland English cuisine, subjugating the Burra Sahibs ("big bosses") with hot pepper, turmeric and garlic.

Neither Gordhandas L. Soni, Archie Amin nor Kewal Oberoi came to America to sell spices, but they are today the founders of (respectively) House of Spices, Deep Foods and Chirag. They just happened to be in the right place at the right time when the need of the moment was for hot samosa (a vegetable filled pastry) and a sack full of atta (finely powdered wheat flour). They left their professions and became the modern merchants of spice.

Soni, of House of Spices, is the leader of the pack, the largest manufacturer of Indian food items in America. At his 110,000-square-foot warehouse in Flushing, New York, he processes every single day over a hundred items, including 12,000 pounds of chickpea flour and 300 cases each of ginger, garlic paste and pickles. And he repackages tons of spices. He has the distributorship of 1,600 items, ranging from canned goods to sherbets and mango pulp. Every week thousands of cartons of Indian spices, snacks and sweets are sent by container to states across the US. "I have enough supplies

here to feed the entire city of Mumbai for one meal!" chuckles Soni. Yet when he came to America as a 23-year-old in 1964 from Kerala, it was hard even to find another Indian on the streets, leave alone Indian spices in a store. After doing his masters in civil engineering in Fargo, North Dakota, he moved to New York and worked with the city as an engineer. He went to India in 1969 to marry and returned with his wife. As Mrs. Soni came to realize how rare Indian foodstuffs were in America, the couple decided to start a side business of importing small shipments of spices from India. A store was going out of business in Jackson Heights and Soni rented it for us$200 a month. He stored his shipments in rented garages and soon his fledgling business was soaring.

In 1974 the budding businessman had a nightmare experience when the US Food and Drug Administration seized and destroyed several shipments from India that had failed inspection. Soni determined to start manufacturing his own products and set up a modern plant to ensure quality control. Today House of Spices, Inc. has an annual turnover of several million dollars. While the headquarters are in Queens, the company has warehouses in Washington DC, Houston, Dallas, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Chicago. The company also operates retail stores, including Dana Bazaar and House of Spices; a vegetarian restaurant called Anand Bhavan; and Shamiana, a

wholesale outlet for Indian sweets.

The spice market is also being driven by the fast food phenomenon. A generation ago, there was no such thing as fast Indian food. But today the truth is that as increasingly more and more women join the work force worldwide, the need for packaged and precooked foods is being felt even in India. As domestic labor becomes harder to find, women are taking all the shortcuts these processed foods provide, and there is a flourishing industry in the home of authentic food, too--all of which require spices.

In frozen foods, the biggest is Deep Foods, which has astutely entered supermarkets with its Green Guru lines. Aware of the taste trends in America, it is promoting this line as vegetarian and vegan, all natural and cholesterol free. It offers not only Indian delicacies like Chana Masala (spiced chickpeas), Dal Rajasthan and Palak Aloo (spinach and potatoes) but also Mexican entrees and Asian favorites like Manchurian Dumplings.

If frozen food and fast food people have discovered the big bucks lurking in Indian food, so have the fancy chefs and fusion food artists. Whether it is London, New York or California, fusion--the combination of techniques of multiple cuisines--is the name of the game. Chic restaurants like New York's Tabla and Lespinasse are utilizing Asian spices in their upscale eateries. Indian food is hot right now and every month one seems to hear of a brand new restaurant opening in New York and California--and even remote Midwestern towns seem to have at least one tandoori place called Taj Mahal or some such exotic name.

All this is good news indeed for the new Merchants of Spice who are discovering fresh markets for their age-old spices. As hotels, restaurants, supermarkets and fast food joints--not to mention mainstream Americans--embrace Indian cuisine, the demand keeps growing. These spice traders also have a captive market in the one million strong Indian population, with thousands of Indian students on American campuses across the nation. As these young people marry and have families of their

own, they carry on their Indian culinary tradition.

For newer immigrants, the spice stores may seem an ideal business, for you require no English proficiency or academic skills to succeed. But the proliferation of stores is also a danger signal. As many new players enter the spice stakes, profit margins drop, and competition has become heavy. Many small stores do not survive. Others keep in business solely on the profits from a few high-income-generating items. At the recent International Fancy Food and Confection Show in New York, there were 1,600 specialty food companies from 42 countries showing 60,000 items ranging from beverages to condiments, sweets to savories. Each hoped to have a winner on their hands, the next trend food in America.

One end result of all this spice infiltration is that Americans are discovering that Indian food is much more than curry. In fact, curry does not exist in Indian cuisine! As Madhur Jaffrey told a reporter, "When people say, 'I love curry,' it makes my hair stand on end. Each region's food is spiced differently. Curry has become a symbol of

a nation of a billion people. When I think of curry, I think of a non-Indian using curry powder. When an Indian person talks, they'll name the specific dish.''

Despite the competition, many new entrepreneurs are jumping into the spice trade. Tom Vellaringattu of New York is a native of Kerala, professionally trained in Indian cooking at the Institute of Catering Technology in Chennai. His Spice 'N Flavor blends, which are manufactured in Cochin, come in twelve combinations and help lend a gourmet touch to quick meals. He pushes his products as all natural, with no preservations and no MSG.

Then there is the possibility of cracking the American mainstream. According to Snack Food & Wholesale Bakery, a trade magazine, snack makers attending the "Developing the US Market for Indian Snack Foods" seminar in December, 1998, discussed the possibility of Indian snack foods making it in the multimillion-dollar American snack food market. Reports Kimbra Postlewaite: "The participants reached an agreement that for

the chevda or boondi (deep-friend chickpea flour balls) to become the next Doritos (a best-selling Mexican-style corn chip), ethnic marketers should be willing to forge trade relationships with other small companies in order to compete against US snack food giants."

Indian snack food manufacturers were encouraged by similarities drawn between their current emerging market position and that of Mexican snack foods two or three decades ago. Writes Postlewaite, "One global snack player, Procter & Gamble, is already benefiting from the popularity of Indian snack foods in Europe with masala, tandoori and sweet and sour flavors of its popular Pringles potato crisp line in the UK."

Not only America and the UK are experiencing a upsurge in Indian spices and food. The Fancy Food Show included Cass Abrahams, a spice merchant from South Africa, presenting "Cape Malay cuisine," a unique style developed years ago when the indentured servants from Bengal and Indonesia and enslaved East African peoples introduced their spices into their Dutch masters'

cuisine. They even introduced achars or pickles, now spelled as atchar. Over the years, the achars have been transformed--now you have kumquat atchar, quince and peach atchar--unheard of in India. With the coming of apartheid, these descendants who spoke the trading language of that time, Malayu, were classified as Cape Malays. Their culture and cuisine was segregated, and, by one unanticipated impact of apartheid, thereby preserved.

Indians have been in the Caribbean for over 150 years where they initially came as indentured labor. Little surprise then that hot sauces from Trinidad were popular at the food show. Matouk company displayed several hot sauces including Kuchela, which is an exotic blend of unripened mangos, East Indian spices, and West Indian peppers--a volatile combination. The company has been making these hot sauces for 25 years, and they are a synthesis of African, Indian, European and South American influences. Yet another company, Karibbean Flavors, showed its line of hot sauces, many of them the staples of Indian food. The managing director, Ravi Shankar, is a regular at the Food Festival and his pepper sauces

include a West Indian hot sauce, ginger and garlic sauces, lime and pepper, and a tamarind sauce. The red and yellow Scotch Bonnet peppers make it piquant and uniquely West Indian.

Americans have taken wholeheartedly to Indian cuisine, and it's amazing how Main Street, USA, is also embracing it. Ann Davis Wilder, manufacturer of Vanns Spices in Baltimore, Maryland, has won gold medals in Chefs of America Awards for her spice blends. A South Carolina native, she credits India as the inspiration, because she developed a passion for Indian cuisine, particularly tandoori dishes. Dissatisfied with the spices and blends available in local markets, she frequented Indian and Asian spice stores. Through a series of experiments, she developed her own signature tandoori mixture. Her company now offers Tandoori Rub, Garam Masala, Vindaloo, Panch Phoran and even a sambhar (spice mix for dals) powder. Will the purists approve of these custom blends? According to Vanns' press material, her customer list includes Balducci's, Hilton Hotels, Zabar's, the British Embassy, Jacques Pepin--and even Julie Sahni, famed author of Classic Indian Cooking.

More than most realize, Indian cuisine is itself a result of outside influences [see more on the history of spices, page 22-23]. Eventually, all those strange new flavors became our own, part of the mainstream. The same will probably be true even in America, where one day we may see samosas, chaat and bhelpuri (a deep-fried pastry) being served in peddlers' carts, as Italian pizza and Arabian falafel and Mexican burritos are now sold. The wave has already started. Even as we speak, Indian favorites like chevda and sev (a chickpea noodle snack) are being made from American wheat, ghee is being processed from American butter, and our Indian chumchum (fresh cheese sweet) and gulab jamun (milk fudge balls in scented syrup) are being sculptured from American milk, nuts and sugar. It is only a matter of time before they, too, become part of the American culinary landscape, like Italian ices. The reality is that Indians have embraced the New World and made it their own. The desi Merchants of Spices are pickling and seasoning up the melting pot, giving it a tarka--a traditional spicing of sizzling mustard seeds, garlic and cumin--making the adventure of America all the more piquant, all the more aromatic.