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Spice of life



FROM THE OPEN KITCHENS OF MICHELIN-STARRED RESTAURANTS TO DORM KITCHENETTES, A BLAND DISH IS ARGUABLY A CHEF'S WORST NIGHTMARE.

Often, a dash of seasoning makes all the difference, yet raid the pantries of the everyday cook and the most rudimentary spices and herbs are nowhere to be found. Informed by a childhood spent on his parents' small herb nursery near Sydney, years of experience in the spice and herb trade, and countless travels to spice farms from Bhutan to Zanzibar and beyond, Ian "Herbie" Hemphill knows a thing or two about these undervalued culinary gems, starting with this mythbuster: not all spices are hot.

"Overuse of the word 'spicy' to even denote food that has been 'spiced,' say with cinnamon or cardamom, has given people the idea that spices are hot," says Hemphill. In fact, spices — anywhere from the buds of a plant to the stigma of a flower — fall into five basic categories: sweet (e.g. cinnamon), pungent (star anise), tangy (tamarind), hot (pepper) and amalgamating (paprika), whereas herbs, the leaves of a plant (e.g. thyme) are said to be savoury. It would be an understatement to say that Hemphill — one of Australia's foremost authorities on spices and herbs and owner of Herbie's Spices, a well-stocked shop in the Sydney suburb of Rozelle — boasts extensive knowledge on the subject. One need only flip through *The Spice & Herb Bible*, Third Edition (2014, Robert Rose Inc.), the latest version of his hefty award-winning tome, to gauge the extent of his appreciation for what is largely responsible for the underlying flavour of a dish. So how does one amass enough knowledge to fill an 800-page book?

"Everything I have learned has been from experience, research and the generosity of farmers, traders and food scientists in sharing their knowledge with me," says Hemphill. But he first gleaned lessons from his parents. "Growing up with herbs and

spices all around me, my mother constantly experimenting and developing recipes, and earning pocket money by helping my dad picking and packing herbs. Through these activities, I think I absorbed a passion, or should I say obsession, for spices and herbs, as if by osmosis."

While Hemphill briefly trained as an actor at The National Institute of Dramatic Art in Australia, soon after he followed in his parents' footsteps and became managing director of the family's spice and herb business and the Singapore-based company to which his parents sold their enterprise when they retired in 1986. Three years later, he went on to work as a marketing manager specializing in spices and herbs at the corporate level before opening Herbie's Spices with his wife Elizabeth Hemphill in 1997. His travels to spice farms — most of which are small, family-owned and harvested by hand — have been equally, if not more, enlightening.

"The most edifying and consistent discovery I keep making is just how much work and dedication goes into the growing, harvesting and production of spices," says Hemphill. "If consumers understood this, they'd happily pay five times as much for good quality spices."

Though the seemingly vast world of spices and herbs boasts exotic fare — according to Hemphill, huacatay, not unlike cilantro, can be used in ocopa sauce and to flavour pork, lamb and goat much like Andean cuisine — the expert recommends that wary cooks ease into it.

"One of the easiest and most satisfying spices to get on to is sumac. It is great on avocado or tomato sandwiches, sprinkled over salads or rubbed onto red meats, especially lamb before cooking," says Hemphill. "Smell, use your imagination and don't be afraid to experiment." ✱