

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #168

A Curious History of Spice

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[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:12] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:22] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about The Curious History of Spice.

[00:00:29] In this episode we will learn about what spices actually are, why they became so popular, when countries literally went to war over them, and the impact that the spice trade had on the world we live in today.

[00:00:45] It is a really interesting topic, and I hope you'll enjoy it.

[00:00:49] Before we get right into today's episode, I want to remind you that you can become a member of Leonardo English and follow along with the subtitles, the transcript and its key vocabulary over on the website, which is leonardoenglish.com.



A Curious History of Spice

[00:01:05] Membership of Leonardo English gives you access to all of our learning materials, all of our bonus episodes, so that's more than 160 different episodes now, as well as two new ones every week, plus access to our private community where we do live events, challenges, and much, much more.

[00:01:25] Our community now has members from over 50 countries, and it's my mission to make it the most interesting place for curious people like you to improve their English.

[00:01:36] So, if that is of interest, - and I can't see a reason why it wouldn't be - then the place to go to is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:45] Now, if there is one thing we probably all [take for granted](#)¹ in life, it is spice.

[00:01:54] On almost any restaurant table in Europe you would find a little container with salt and pepper, the stuff is literally given away for free with a meal.

[00:02:04] And most supermarkets have an extraordinary collection of spices, from cinnamon to oregano, [nutmeg](#)² to lavender, it is possible to buy almost any spice for a relatively small amount of money.

¹ consider something as an unquestionable certainty

² the fruit of a tropical tree used as a spice



A Curious History of Spice

[00:02:20] But it hasn't always been like this. And indeed, spices, even the most common and cheapest today, used to be incredibly expensive, the [preserve](#)³ of the richest in society.

[00:02:35] The history of how they went from rich man's luxury to something we can all [sprinkle](#)⁴ on our food is fascinating.

[00:02:44] But before we dive right into the history, it's worth asking ourselves what we actually mean by spices, where spices grow, and what spices actually are.

[00:02:56] To start off with, let's clarify one thing. Salt is not a spice, it's a mineral, it is Sodium Chloride.

[00:03:04] A spice is part of a plant. It normally comes from the seed, from the [bark](#)⁵, the fruit, or the [root](#)⁶ of the plant. It's different from a herb, which typically comes from the leaves or flowers of a plant.

[00:03:19] And why do we eat spices?

[00:03:23] Why do we put them on our food?

[00:03:25] Well, because we like the taste, of course.

³ something that is reserved only for a particular group

⁴ drop a few pieces of something

⁵ the hard outer material covering a tree

⁶ the part of a plant or tree that grows down into the earth



A Curious History of Spice

[00:03:28] Whether you are the sort of person who puts [tonnes⁷](#) of chillies on their food and gets excited by a [vindaloo curry⁸](#), or if you are the sort of person who just likes a little bit of pepper with their food, almost everyone [consumes⁹](#) some amount of spice.

[00:03:45] And if you consider sugar to be a spice, which by some it is still considered to be a spice, then there is probably spice in almost everything you eat.

[00:03:56] To put it simply, spices make food taste better.

[00:04:00] How much spice you like on your food probably depends on where you are from, and where you grew up.

[00:04:07] If you are from a northern European country, like I am, then you might have grown up eating not very much spicy food, and this is of course one of the great criticisms of much of northern-European food - that it doesn't taste of anything.

[00:04:24] But if you are from, let's say southern India, west Africa, or Mexico, then you are probably used to having a relatively spicy diet.

⁷ a lot of

⁸ a spicy sauce popular in India

⁹ eats



A Curious History of Spice

[00:04:35] There is, as you no doubt know already, a [correlation](#)¹⁰ between how close to the equator a country is, how hot that country is, and how much spice is traditionally used in its cuisine, in its cooking.

[00:04:50] Why, you might ask.

[00:04:52] Well, there are several theories about this.

[00:04:55] The first and most obvious is that this is where spices grow, so obviously these cuisines had primary access to them, and they became part of the style of food preparation.

[00:05:10] There are also theories that using spices in food makes you [sweat](#)¹¹, and [sweating](#)¹² helps you cool down (which of course is [handy](#)¹³ if you are living in a hot climate).

[00:05:23] Another theory is that, because spices contain [antibacterial](#)¹⁴ properties, they were used to [preserve](#) meat and food, which would go bad more quickly in hotter climates.

¹⁰ a connection between two facts

¹¹ cause the salty liquid from the body to pass through the skin

¹² causing the salty liquid from the body to pass through the skin

¹³ useful and convenient

¹⁴ effective against bacteria (harmful microorganisms)



A Curious History of Spice

[00:05:36] The theory goes that people who used spices on food **tended**¹⁵ to live for longer, because their food wouldn't have bacteria in it, and they would teach their children to use spices to **preserve** food, and thus spice became part of their cuisine, and they developed a taste for it.

[00:05:55] While we might never know the real reason, and food historians still don't agree on the reason for this, there was a clear division between the regions, between the parts of the world that had and used spices, and the regions that didn't.

[00:06:12] And this division is key to our story, and helps us understand how the spice trade **shaped**¹⁶ the world we live in today.

[00:06:23] There is evidence of spices being **prized**¹⁷, of them being highly valued, almost since the beginning of time.

[00:06:31] When archaeologists were examining the **mummified**¹⁸ body of the Egyptian **pharaoh**¹⁹, Ramses II, who died in 1224 BC, they found two **peppercorns**²⁰ inside his nose.

¹⁵ were likely

¹⁶ had a great influence on

¹⁷ highly valued

¹⁸ preserved or saved from rotting away using special oils

¹⁹ a ruler in ancient Egypt

²⁰ berries used as spices



A Curious History of Spice

[00:06:46] We know that the Egyptians would bury [valuable](#)²¹ possessions with their [pharaohs](#)²², and this gives us an indication of the importance of pepper, over 3,000 years ago.

[00:06:59] The Romans and Greeks used any spices, and food flavourings, that they could get their hands on.

[00:07:06] Roman soldiers would be paid partly in salt, giving us the word [salary](#)²³.

[00:07:12] As we already clarified, salt is a mineral, not a spice, but Romans weren't worrying too much about the [distinctions](#)²⁴ between the two.

[00:07:21] The point here is about quite how much value was placed on something that nowadays is practically free, or at least is a tiny cost for most people.

[00:07:33] Certainly, I imagine if your employer was to suggest that part of your salary was to be paid in salt, you would probably not be too happy about it.

[00:07:45] In the Middle Ages, as the trade routes between Europe and the rest of the world started to develop, spices started flowing to Europe.

[00:07:55] And one spice in particular: pepper.

²¹ of high value

²² ruler in ancient Egypt

²³ a fixed amount of money paid to an employee

²⁴ differences



A Curious History of Spice

[00:07:58] In a world where different states all had different [currencies](#)²⁵, and where there was no [centralised](#)²⁶ financial system, pepper also [doubled up](#)²⁷ as a currency, as a [borderless](#)²⁸ form of money.

[00:08:13] It kept for quite a long time, it didn't go bad, and it was easy to weigh.

[00:08:20] For example, early in the 12th Century the Venetians, aware of the importance of staying on the right side of the Holy Roman Emperor Henry V, presented him with a gift of pepper that weighed 50 lb in weight, or 23 kilos.

[00:08:38] You might think that a gift of 23 kilos worth of pepper wasn't a great gift, but this was incredibly valuable, pepper was incredibly expensive compared to what pepper costs today.

[00:08:53] To give you an example of the change in cost and therefore [affordability](#)²⁹ of pepper, here are some examples of how much it costs in terms of labour, of how long an average man would have to work to buy half a kilo of pepper.

²⁵ kinds of money

²⁶ controlled by a single authority

²⁷ used in another way

²⁸ without being limited by borders or by a state's area of control

²⁹ the ability to be bought related to its cost



A Curious History of Spice

[00:09:10] In England, in the year 1250, it would take an average [manual labourer](#)³⁰ about a week to earn enough money to buy half a kilo of pepper. So this gift of 23 kilos of pepper would have been almost the annual [salary](#) of a [manual labourer](#).

[00:09:27] By the year 1400 it would only take 2 days, so the cost of pepper had more than [halved](#)³¹.

[00:09:35] This didn't mean that most [manual labourers](#)³² would be able to afford pepper, but the cost had reduced, and it wasn't completely [out of reach](#)³³.

[00:09:46] By the 16th century the cost had reduced further, and a bag of pepper was found [preserved](#)³⁴ on the body of one of the sailors of the Mary Rose, the [magnificent](#)³⁵ ship of King Henry VIII, which [sank](#)³⁶ in the year 1545.

[00:10:03] In terms of the use of spices in Medieval England, they really were a [status symbol](#)³⁷.

³⁰ a common worker whose job involves working with the hands

³¹ reduced by half

³² common people whose job involves working with the hands

³³ beyond the ability to buy it

³⁴ kept as it was

³⁵ great, beautiful and impressive

³⁶ went to the bottom of the sea

³⁷ something that shows someone has money or importance



A Curious History of Spice

[00:10:09] Salt and pepper were expensive, and spices were a way of [showing off](#)³⁸ your wealth, of [showing off](#) how rich you were.

[00:10:19] With it being a [feudal](#)³⁹ society, one dominated by kings and queens at the top, and everyone else below in a sort of pyramid, this meant huge [extravagant](#)⁴⁰ meals by the kings and queens, which were a way of displaying power and [status](#)⁴¹.

[00:10:37] The king and his followers literally consumed a high proportion of the spices brought from the East to London.

[00:10:45] Take, for example, King Edward I, who was King of England from 1272 to 1307.

[00:10:52] When he returned from fighting the neighbouring Welsh at the end of the 13th century, his officials spent over £1755 on spices – a huge sum at the time.

[00:11:07] To help give you an idea of the scale of this, his spending on spice was similar to the total annual income of one of his top [aristocrats](#)⁴², or [earls](#)⁴³ – so, that's one of the 12 richest people in the kingdom of England at the time.

³⁸ showing something in order to attract attention

³⁹ belonging to a social system controlled by rich people of high social rank

⁴⁰ very expensive and impressive

⁴¹ social standing

⁴² people belonging to the higher social class

⁴³ British noblemen



A Curious History of Spice

[00:11:24] So in today's money we are talking millions of euros, just on spices.

[00:11:31] You might be asking yourself, why were spices so expensive, when they are so cheap now?

[00:11:38] Why did it cost the equivalent⁴⁴ of a week's wages⁴⁵ to buy half a kilo of pepper when it might take half an hour's wages to buy it now?

[00:11:48] The main reason was because the supply of spices from the East to Europe was tightly⁴⁶ controlled by traders.

[00:11:56] Pepper would have come primarily from Kerala, in southern India. It would have been transported across the Indian Ocean, up the Red Sea, through Alexandria, and up to Venice.

[00:12:09] There was a large cost involved in the transportation, and lots of different merchants involved, each taking their cut⁴⁷, each taking their percentage, and each getting rich through the trade.

⁴⁴ the same amount as

⁴⁵ the money earned by an employee

⁴⁶ firmly, strongly

⁴⁷ a share of the profits



A Curious History of Spice

[00:12:22] Given how **prized** spices were, given how in demand and valuable these spices were, it was no surprise that various different European countries thought, “well, why don’t we just go to where the spices are and take them for ourselves?”

[00:12:41] The first European countries to make a real effort to do this were Spain and Portugal.

[00:12:47] They had been forced to buy spices from the Venetian merchants, and thought if they could go directly to the **source**⁴⁸, they would be able to **cut out**⁴⁹ the middleman and **secure**⁵⁰ more spices at a better price.

[00:13:02] They were right.

[00:13:04] The Portuguese were the first, and in 1498 the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama set off from Europe to India, sailing around the Cape of Good Hope at the tip of Africa.

⁴⁸ the place something comes from

⁴⁹ exclude, do without

⁵⁰ succeed in getting something



A Curious History of Spice

[00:13:18] Much to his surprise, he discovered a highly **sophisticated**⁵¹ **harvesting**⁵² and trading operation: cinnamon and pepper were already the major exports from this **fertile**⁵³ and beautiful part of India.

[00:13:32] Da Gama had found the **source**, and this was to be a huge **blow**⁵⁴ for Arab traders.

[00:13:40] 6 years before Vasco Da Gama, another man had **set off**⁵⁵ representing the Spanish King, King Ferdinand.

[00:13:48] That man was Christopher Columbus, and he too had been looking for a **source** of Indian spices.

[00:13:55] As we know, he didn't find it, he went the wrong way and found the Americas instead, leaving India open to the Portuguese.

[00:14:05] The **subsequent**⁵⁶ years saw different European countries **squabble**⁵⁷, battle for power over different spice-producing regions in south East Asia.

⁵¹ very well designed and advanced

⁵² the activity of gathering and collecting spices

⁵³ capable of producing lots of plants

⁵⁴ a hard hit or something that causes difficulty

⁵⁵ started on a trip

⁵⁶ following

⁵⁷ argue, compete over something



A Curious History of Spice

[00:14:16] A **hotspot**⁵⁸ for this was a collection of around 1000 different islands in Indonesia called the Maluku Islands, better known as the Spice Islands.

[00:14:27] These islands saw **fierce**⁵⁹ competition between the Portuguese and the Dutch, and as you might imagine, severe **persecution**⁶⁰ of the local **inhabitants**⁶¹, who were at best forced to **harvest**⁶² spices for little to no money, and at worst, **brutally**⁶³ killed.

[00:14:47] In 1609, the British also got involved, taking over control of one of the islands, and **threatening**⁶⁴ to **disrupt**⁶⁵ the Dutch **monopoly**⁶⁶.

[00:14:58] The Dutch, **eager**⁶⁷ to maintain their **monopoly**, later offered to give the British an island on the other side of the world in exchange for leaving one of The Spice Islands they had under their control.

⁵⁸ a place where fighting is likely to happen

⁵⁹ wild and intense

⁶⁰ unfair and cruel treatment

⁶¹ the people who lived in that place

⁶² collect

⁶³ in a cruel and violent way

⁶⁴ seeming likely to

⁶⁵ interrupt

⁶⁶ the exclusive control of a trade

⁶⁷ wanting very much



A Curious History of Spice

[00:15:11] What was the island that the Dutch offered the British, you might be asking yourself?

[00:15:16] It was a small island just off the east coast of America called Manhattan.

[00:15:24] This must surely [go down](#)⁶⁸ as one of the greatest [swaps](#)⁶⁹ in history, a great [bargain](#)⁷⁰ for the British.

[00:15:32] As trade routes developed even further, and traders realised that spices could be grown elsewhere, prices started to fall, and not only did the spice trade become not as [immensely](#)⁷¹ profitable as it previously had been, but spices became more and more [affordable](#)⁷² to normal people in society.

[00:15:54] Britain was left with Manhattan, which is now one of the most valuable pieces of land in the world. The Dutch were left with Pulau Run, an island which is not particularly valuable.

[00:16:06] Of course, a lot of this early spice trade was [enabled](#)⁷³ by colonialism, and its ugly twin, slavery.

⁶⁸ be remembered in a particular way

⁶⁹ acts of giving something and be given something else

⁷⁰ an advantageous agreement

⁷¹ extremely

⁷² able to be bought, not expensive

⁷³ made possible



A Curious History of Spice

[00:16:14] From cinnamon to sugar, slaves were involved with the production of much of these spices that Europeans enjoyed on their plates.

[00:16:23] It is, perhaps, even more [horrifying](#)⁷⁴ when you consider that many spices have zero nutritional value; they just make your food taste nicer.

[00:16:33] Now, let's return to the modern day, and consider some of the [implications](#)⁷⁵ of the spice trade.

[00:16:41] Nowadays, spices are [ubiquitous](#)⁷⁶, they are everywhere, and—with a few [exceptions](#)⁷⁷—they are incredibly cheap.

[00:16:49] India is still the world's centre for spice production, producing around 75% of all of the world's spices.

[00:16:58] And the global spice market is valued at around \$13 billion dollars.

[00:17:03] It might sound like a lot, but when you think about the fact that spice is something that a majority of the people on the planet consumes in some shape or form at least once a day, it gives you an indication of quite how cheap spices really are.

⁷⁴ very frightening

⁷⁵ possible effects

⁷⁶ seeming to be everywhere

⁷⁷ things that are excluded from something that is said



A Curious History of Spice

[00:17:21] So, the curious history of spice is of something that was an expensive [addition](#)⁷⁸ to food for [pharaohs](#), an [exotic](#)⁷⁹ [luxury](#)⁸⁰ of kings, of parts of a plant worth so much that countries literally went to war over them.

[00:17:37] Yet now they are very cheap, if you go to a European city you are more likely to find [piles](#)⁸¹ of spices in small low-cost grocery shops rather than [luxury boutiques](#)⁸².

[00:17:50] But spices are an instrumental part of our history.

[00:17:53] Their high prices [encouraged](#)⁸³ merchants to make long journeys to bring them from East to West, and in doing so they enabled connections, the sharing of ideas between people of different cultures, and the start of the system of global trade that we are all [beneficiaries](#)⁸⁴ of today.

[00:18:13] And of course let's not forget that they make everything taste just so much better.

[00:18:22] OK then, that is it for the curious history of spice.

⁷⁸ a thing added to something

⁷⁹ unusual and exciting because they come from a far away place

⁸⁰ a state of great and expensive comfort

⁸¹ large amounts of

⁸² businesses that sell expensive and fashionable products

⁸³ gave confidence and hope

⁸⁴ people that benefit from something



A Curious History of Spice

[00:18:26] It is a really interesting subject, and I think it's fascinating to consider how something that used to be such a [luxury](#) is available to a large proportion of people in the world, at a very affordable price.

[00:18:40] As always, I would love to know what you thought of this episode.

[00:18:44] How spicy do you like your food? How has the [cuisine](#)⁸⁵ of the country you are from been [influenced](#)⁸⁶ by spice?

[00:18:52] For the members among you, you can head right into our community forum, which is at community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:19:01] And as a final reminder, if you enjoyed this episode, and you are wondering where to get all of our bonus episodes, plus the transcripts, subtitles, and key vocabulary, then the place to go to for that is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:19:17] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:19:22] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

⁸⁵ style of cooking

⁸⁶ affected



Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Take for granted	consider something as an unquestionable certainty
Nutmeg	the fruit of a tropical tree used as a spice
Preserve	something that is reserved only for a particular group
Sprinkle	drop a few small pieces of something
Bark	the hard outer material covering a tree
Root	the part of a plant or tree that grows down into the earth
Tonnes	a lot of
Vindaloo curry	a spicy sauce popular in India
Consumes	eats
Correlation	a connection between two facts
Sweat	cause the salty liquid from the body to pass through the skin
Sweating	causing the salty liquid from the body to pass through the skin
Handy	useful and convenient



A Curious History of Spice

Antibacterial	effective against bacteria (harmful microorganisms)
Tended	were likely
Shaped	had a great influence on
Prized	highly valued
Mummified	preserved or saved from rotting away using special oils
Pharaoh	a ruler in ancient Egypt
Peppercorns	berries used as spices
Valuable	of high value
Pharaohs	ruler in ancient Egypt
Salary	a fixed amount of money paid to an employee
Distinctions	differences
Currencies	kinds of money
Centralised	controlled by a single authority
Doubled up	used in another way
Borderless	without being limited by borders or by a state's area of control



A Curious History of Spice

Affordability	the ability to be bought related to its cost
Manual labourer	a common worker whose job involves working with the hands
Halved	reduced by half
Manual labourers	common people whose job involves working with the hands
Out of reach	beyond the ability to buy it
Preserved	kept as it was
Magnificent	great, beautiful and impressive
Sank	went to the bottom of the sea
Status symbol	something that shows someone has money or importance
Showing off	showing something in order to attract attention
Feudal	belonging to a social system controlled by rich people of high social rank
Extravagant	very expensive and impressive
Status	social standing
Aristocrats	people belonging to the higher social class
Earls	British noblemen



A Curious History of Spice

Equivalent	the same amount as
Wages	the money earned by an employee
Tightly	firmly, strongly
Cut	a share of the profits
Source	the place something comes from
Cut out	exclude, do without
Secure	succeed in getting something
Sophisticated	very well designed and advanced
Harvesting	the activity of gathering and collecting spices
Fertile	capable of producing lots of plants
Blow	a hard hit or something that causes difficulty
Set off	started on a trip
Subsequent	following
Squabble	argue, compete over something
Hotspot	a place where fighting is likely to happen



A Curious History of Spice

Fierce	wild and intense
Persecution	unfair and cruel treatment
Inhabitants	the people who lived in that place
Harvest	collect
Brutally	in a cruel and violent way
Threatening	seeming likely to
Disrupt	interrupt
Monopoly	the exclusive control of a trade
Eager	wanting very much
Go down	be remembered in a particular way
Swaps	acts of giving something and be given something else
Bargain	an advantageous agreement
Immensely	extremely
Affordable	able to be bought, not expensive
Enabled	made possible



A Curious History of Spice

Horrifying	very frightening
Implications	possible effects
Ubiquitous	seeming to be everywhere
Exceptions	things that are excluded from something that is said
Addition	a thing added to something
Exotic	unusual and exciting because they come from a far away place
Luxury	a state of great and expensive comfort
Piles	large amounts of
Boutiques	businesses that sell expensive and fashionable products
Encouraged	gave confidence and hope
Beneficiaries	people that benefit from something
Cuisine	style of cooking
Influenced	affected

We'd love to get your feedback on this episode.

What did you like? What could we do better?



English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #168
A Curious History of Spice

What did you struggle to understand?

Let us know in the forum community.leonardoenglish.com

