

PLANTING PARADISE

THE SPICE GARDEN IN THE JUNGLE

A CEYLON PRESS ALTERNATIVE GUIDE
TO THE SPICE GARDEN IN THE JUNGLE
AT SRI LANKA'S FLAME TREE ESTATE & HOTEL

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FOR
BEATA
QUEEN OF GREEN
GIVER OF COMFORT & JOY

Snufkin was a calm person who knew an immense lot of things but never talked about them unnecessarily. Only now and again he told a little about his travels, and that made one rather proud, as if Snufkin had made one a member of a secret society.

MOOMINSUMMER MADNESS
1954

MONSOON,
MAGIC &
MONEY

Field guide; saga; pharmacy; pantry - this memoir of the Spice Garden at The Flame Tree Estate and Hotel in the jungle northwest of Kandy confirms that most elemental of Sri Lankan horticultural truths – that plants – all 7,500 of them found here – divide into just three categories. They are medicinal. They are edible. Or they are useless.

Had we known this before things kicked off, life would have been much simpler; and plans far more straightforward. For, as with most plans, ours went off mission within months, pursued across the neat pages of excel by the best intended of mission creeps. But God, as they say, is good; and no good God has much truck with plans of any sort. It took years to properly understand what a release this Plan Wilderness was; and just how unconditionally that most office Gulag of conditions had been trounced. Enslavement is a condition that takes time to undo. Even now, years later, I still place thankful and imaginary offerings of flowers and fruit before the alter of my imagined gods. As Mark Twain noted, “to succeed in life, you need two things: ignorance and confidence.”

Servitude had begun to slide off, albeit unnoticed, just after the ceremonial signing of deeds to buy Mudhenna Wallawwa, the ancient crumbling plantation house and estate in the jungle northwest of Kandy. Over 30 people representing the sellers, attended by scores more attendants, met in an echoing room around a table that must have been related in some complex wooden way to that of State Banquet table in Windsor Castle. Signatories, witnesses, supporters, attestors, senior and junior legal counsels, tea bearers and not a few passers-by transmuted the transfer of a deed into a Dhurbar.

The plantation came with twenty five acres of land that had long since reverted to jungle – though rampant hints of what once grew in smug order (rubber, cocoa, coffee, coconut) could still be glimpsed. The estate had been abandoned during the 1988 JVP civil war, the family fleeing to the greater safety of Colombo. And, as with all things tropical, the land settled back comfortably into the loving hands of nature, with a sigh, as if all that building and harvesting, planting, and living was in some inexpressible way, a trifling and passing distraction, now best forgotten.

But possessing land is habit-forming. And soon enough our acquisition was followed by the purchase of more acres. And another house. Further acres, once part of the wider estate before it was decimated by Land Reforms, were incorporated on long term rents until the estate had more than doubled in size, the various land parcels threaded together by the slimmest of jungle tracks.

One large plot was planted as vegetable beds but lay so trenchantly close to a misbehaved river that the onions, carrots, and sweet potatoes had little choice but to fester and moulder. Another was set aside to grow sandalwood trees. This, as it turned out, was a poor choice. Glamorous though the trees undoubtedly are, keeping them in the style to which they wish to become accustomed is harder even than keeping a mistress in Paris. The slightest variant in water resulted in sulky die-back. The tree's high maintenance root system, which demanded the presence of other plant roots to attach to, meant a continual need to throw what amounted to hedonistic horticultural parties; and when all that had been sorted, Sandalwood Spike Disease arrived.

An entire valley was planted out with thousands of bananas, all of which succumbed to Fusarium wilt. Lemon grass was seeded on well drained hill sides, most of which caught fire during the drought. Mushrooms, a great favourite of our auditor, were added - more out of good manners than any real attempt to be commercial.

The old rubber terraces were recklessly entrusted to a horticultural bandit who lacerated the trucks to produce quick flows of sap, injuring the trees for years to come. Terraces of new rubber trees were established. "Harvest the latex," advised one enterprising land agent, "and move up the value chain." Make didoes," he went on to suggest: "the few on sale on the island are all expensive imports."

Greenhouses of tomato and pepper were built and grown for the Maldivian hotel market until Spotted Wilt Virus raced through the plants, leaving behind such fruit as only the angriest chef might use. Several acres worth of nurseries to raise cinnamon, cloves and erica nuts were built, the tiny plants intended for resale onto the local agriculture board, though porcupine, gathering in force for nightly raids, had alternative ideas.

As the estate's plantation workers grew into a small army, supervisors with, it turned out, imperfect circadian rhythms, were recruited to manage and mentor the mildly mutinous troops. On the hottest days, sleep under the shade of mango trees seemed the only option. One manager, tempted to distraction by thoughts of ill-gotten lucre, was later to be seen gazing woefully out from behind the bars of the castellated Bogambara Prison in downtown Kandy, built by the British and home to a grisly record of 524 executions, including that of the glamorous Sura Saradiel, the island's fabled Robin Hood.

The only plants that readily seemed to work were spices. Ah – the wisdom of hindsight! The first of these rare flouring marvels were several acres of pepper planted to scramble up nitrogen fixing glicicidia sticks. The vines proved valiantly resistant to animal attack; just glad to throw off long green clusters of pepper grapes. Plantations of clove trees also seemed to flourish; and in one distant corner of the estate, cinnamon, that most magical of all Sri Lanka's indigenous spices, prospered with a lack of neediness that might move a hardened planter to tears of wonder and gratitude.

Emboldened, we tried vanilla. Now as any spreadsheet junkie might tell you, vanilla is the sure route to becoming an overnight millionaire. As more and more people eat more and more chocolate, cocoa beans have barely manged to keep up with demand, with export prices oscillating from between \$350 to \$670 per kilo.

Our first crop was interplanted with our sad, and still in-recovery, rubber trees – by Francis, an aged and devoted Catholic plantation worker whose ancestry, once deciphered from a tin box of antique family documents going back to the 1890s, came in part from Scotland. Ever the old fashioned Scot, Francis was as fond of whiskey as he was of God. Every vanilla cutting was blessed before it was planted, his hand waving the form of the cross across the ambitious little plants. Completing the bedding-in of this new plantation took some considerable time and it became clear that shade-loving though they are, the amount of shade they had to endure under the rubber trees was just all too much.

Francis set to work, digging up each consecrated plant and transferring them to a new plantation, more open to sunlight, which corkscrewed down to a small pond. But the sanctified plants were no less miserable in their new spot, fighting off

fungal rot, and periods where the water on offer was either too much or too meagre. And eventually they were moved a third time, though by now not by Francis who had left to meet his Maker.

In their new position and under the mindful eye of Ananda, now our head gardener, the vines finally prospered. As the first vanilla pods emerged, so too did the late but gratifying realisation that the best jungle gardening to be had was to stick to spices. We divested ourselves of the wilder outlying parts of the estate and focused our planting efforts on the twenty five acres most immediately around us. For by then their easy and relatively effortless growth had constructed a compelling argument. But more than that, they had woven a most persuasive spell as well. They seemed to sit up there along with gods, language, myths, music and miniature schnauzers, parts of our shared human existence, able to retain an elemental magic and as impervious as a seam of gold to all attempts to mine them or reduce them to something merely transactional.

As we learnt their stories, histories, homes, admirers, and journeys, they formed an accretion of remembrances that explained why they stayed the course as they moved from jungle and moor to supermarket shelf and checkout. Even now they are much, much more than mere bottles of dried flavour. One whiff of pepper or cardamom, cinnamon or cloves is sufficient to conjure up places and memories as potent as the sound any seashell makes of the sea when you place it to your ear.

In the smell of each spice is much of the whole history of the world: its rulers, presents, writers, planters, merchants, alchemists, chefs, doctors. And its great explorers. Marco Polo; Xuanzang, the seventh century Chinese Buddhist monk;

Hippalus; Joao Ribeiro; Ibn Battuta; Vasco da Gama and Zheng He, the fifteenth century Chinese admiral. Like gold, silk or the tin that produced the Bronze Age, spices was the impetus for a major part of the ancient world's economic explosion, opening sea and land routes, connecting east to west; and exposing cultures, ideas, languages, religions, and technologies to societies that have never before heard of one another.

They started their journey of course, on foot - prehistoric land routes – from Africa into the Middle East; from Australasia and Indonesia into China; and then from both directions towards India.

By the time the civilizations of the ancient world were stirring, these land routes had multiplied into sea routes – the maritime Silk Route, bringing Africa in touch with SE Asia through India – and Sri Lanka, which sat like a belly button in the middle. The very centrality of Sri Lanka was to prove its commercial making. Cosmas Indicopleustes, a Greek writing in the sixth century CE noted that "the island being, as it is, in a central position, is much frequented by ships from all parts of India and from Persia and Ethiopia; and it likewise sends out many of its own. And for the remote countries...it receives silk, aloes, cloves, sandalwood, and other products and these again are passed onto marts on this side such as Male where peppers grow..."

Monsoon winds filled the sails of cargo boats along the Swahili Coast and on the western seaboard of India, right across to the ports of Java. Predictable as clockwork, these annual winds allowed merchants to fund long journeys within fast, predictable, and relatively safe seasons. From May to September the southwestern monsoon blows from the west to the east so helping ships sail from Africa and the Arab world to Asia. Between November and March the northeastern

monsoon takes ships in the opposite direction. Budgets could be made, profit measured, risks taken.

By medieval times, these routes expanded dramatically at either end to bring the whole of Europe, and Central Asia into the mix – though the engine still sat squarely within the Indian Ocean – in ports like Zanzibar, Mogadishu, Hormuz, Calicut, Malacca – and across the coastline of Sri Lanka itself.

Mathottam in Mannar, in the northwest of Sri Lanka became a key point for traders of spices, pearls, ceramics and ivory. North of Jaffna, Dambakola Patuna became another such hub, famous for later welcoming the arrival of the sacred Bo tree itself into the country.

Close by, the port of Urathota Kayts specialised in shipping horses and elephants; and it is clear from inscriptions discovered there from around the middle of the twelfth century CE how finely regulated was this trade, with one reading "if the vessels bringing elephants and horses to us get wrecked, a fourth shall be taken by the treasury and the other three parts shall be left to the owner..."

By the sixth century the ancient port of Gokanna – now Trincomalee – was welcoming merchants from China, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, Greece, Rome, India, and Persia, all drawn in part by its perfectly provided resources for ship repair, easy docking in a huge safe harbour and the availability of plenty of fresh water and food. Some merchants continued their journey from the port into the Mahaweli River to penetrate deeper into the island itself. Further south the port of Godawaya near Hambantota prospered. In fact historians have recently demonstrated how almost a third of all Roman coins found on the island come from the southwest coast, indicting that its ports were from the earliest times of great significance. Godawaya

itself is recorded as returning to the Anuradhapura kingdom notable amounts of tax revenue from the second century CE.

Very little is known about how Sri Lanka, through its own ship building and merchant fleets, was able to move beyond its position as a trade hub to take a more active position in transportation, but marine historians have begun to believe that at least until the late tenth century CE, the island was active and capable of making ocean-going cargo boats, constructed from wood and held together by coconut fibre ropes that were sufficiently robust as to work the seas between India, the Maldives and up to present day Pakistan.

Soon enough, what had begun with a breeze in a few sails became an armada of vessels from Europe as the first European colonists set out to break the monopoly of the Indian Ocean trade and take it over for themselves. "He who controls the spice," observed Frank Herbert, messianically, in the novel Dune, "controls the universe."

First came the fifteenth century Portuguese who established ports, routes and colonies in East Africa, southwestern India and in the islands of around the Javan Sea, fuelled by the cinnamon, cloves, nutmeg and pepper of SE Asia. Breaking the monopoly of the Arab traders, they took over the lucrative trade – until that is, the Dutch stepped in.

With the establishment of the Dutch East India Company in 1602, the Portuguese stranglehold over the spice trade was broken. The Dutch brought with them a draconianly more commercial mindset, setting up Sri Lanka as a de facto cinnamon estate, shortening the trade routes dramatically and developing across the island an infrastructure of canals such as the famous

Hamilton Canal, which linked Negombo to Colombo; roads; large, professionally managed commercial plantations especially around Negombo; and stringent laws to maximize what was to become one of the most profitable monopolies the world had ever seen. Huge fines; and sometimes deportation to Africa, was inflicted on anyone who cut down a cinnamon tree, wild or otherwise, without permission.

When the British began the final expulsion of the Dutch across Sri Lanka from 1796, the cinnamon monopoly fell into their hands – but only momentarily. British control of Sri Lanka co-incided with the natural dissolution of the global cinnamon monopoly.

Plantations that had sprung up in places as far apart as Java to the West Indies were now producing the spice; and merely trying to control it at the Sri Lankan end made little commercial sense anymore. In 1833 the market was opened up - by which time the British had added a wealth of new crops to Sri Lanka including tea, coffee, and rubber.

But by then Sri Lanka, by virtue of its spices, had drawn into its heart all manner of things, good and bad, from Buddhism to Love Cakes. Everything that the country is today, come in part at least, from the magnetic draw it spices first exerted on the rest of the world.

And although the spice trade has moved on, with India now accounting for seventy five percent of the world's total metric tons of spices, and Sri Lanka barely one percent, the island still prides itself on the quality, of not the quantity, of its spices. And in this spice connoisseurs agree - for Sri Lankan cinnamon or pepper, for example, have a caviar quality of taste and perfume that plays with bewitching delight to the senses, as do no others.

Yet the very earliest trade in spices was as much - if not more - promoted by the medicinal quality of spices as by their culinary impact, a feature that is wholly reversed today. Such spices as cinnamon, turmeric, cinnamon or pepper were known and neatly incorporated into the traditional remedies used by medics of the first ancient societies - the Greeks, Romans, and Egyptian; the Xia, Shang, Zhou, Qin and Han of ancient China; and the Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Hittites, and Phoenicians in what is today the Middle East.

And within all of South Asia - and parts of SE Asia - ayurveda, the 5,000 year old Vedic Indian holistic medicine system, had long since integrated spices into the treatments and therapies that were commonplace across the Indian sub-continent. The development of western science since the early modern age refocused attention away from many of the health benefits of these spices; and empirical scientific research across the world is only now beginning to catch up with their benefits.

As societies became more sophisticated and consumer preferences began to impact more heavily upon economies, it was the culinary benefits of spices that turbo charged their use and exchange. Cooking, after all, is a form of psychotherapy, marvellously mood-changing. Many spices contribute to the texture and colour of food. Many also aid food preservation and increase its nutritional value. And all spices to some degree or other enhance the flavour of food, and add to its aroma, turning what is simple into something compellingly complex and delicious. But in this matter democracy quite breaks down - for not all spices are equal.

Some, a very few, play the part that red, yellow, and

blue do in painting – primary colours from which all others are derived. These primary spices do more than merely compliment a dish; they set the tone for it, establishing the foundational flavours of what awaits your palate. Food writers and chefs argue long and hard about the rightful membership of the list – but most seem to agree on the top nine: turmeric; cinnamon; pepper; cardamom; cloves; chilli; coriander; cumin and ginger. And of these the first three are among Sri Lanka's most famous indigenous plants.

Buyers within today's spice world have shown themselves more than happy to pay out for real quality. Sri Lanka's gardens, plantations and estates contribute one billion dollars to the twenty five billion dollar total that is the value of the global spice market – a sturdy total for a small country that has just 0.04% of the planet's total land mass.

Sri Lanka's bountiful landscapes, lavish rainfall, rich soils, wider ranging temperatures, and generous range of microclimates from coasts to cloud forest, scrubland to jungle, ensure that there is always somewhere where every spice will grow to its best possible advantage.

Cynics say all you need do is chuck in a few seeds or cuttings into Sri Lanka's soil and they will grow with a profusion that needs little human encouragement. And whilst it is certainly true that in the hills, that make up twenty percent of the island's land mass, the climate, monsoons, soils, and weather patterns make for an almost alarming fecundity, growing spices still requires a bit more care than the random scattering plants across hills.

Spice gardens exist in most parts of the country; but most especially in the highlands around Kandy where the balance of climatic and environmental conditions is,

as Voltaire might have stated, had he called in on Kandy "all for the best in the best of possible worlds."

For here a striking form of gardening unique to the island kicks in – the Kandyan gardening technique, a system of gardening that developed in this region 500 years ago.

The technique, still practiced here, is open to anyone with a garden – and a mindset to plant it in such a way as to mimic a tropical rainforest. Dig for Victory never looked so good. Erosion is minimised, fallen leaves keep soil temperatures at kinder levels; fertility is inspired.

It is as if a sumo wrestler had squeezed himself into a pair of shinny jeans. In spaces of an acre or two – and often less than that - taller trees are interplanted with shorter ones. Shrubs, creepers, and ground cover are allowed to prosper. The resulting fusion garden typically includes jackfruit, mahogany, mango, teak, avocado; smaller fruits like banana, papaya, rambutan, and guava; medicinal trees like beli and neem; vegetables; ornamental plants, orchids, ferns, and crotons – and of course as many spice plants as can be squeezed in. The multi layered garden that busts out has an astonishing biodiversity – and an embarrassment of virtues: a self-sustaining eco system that drives up the health of the soil and the resilience of the plants to disease.

But of all the spices that adorn it, it is remarkable to note that barely ten can truly be regarded as native to the island - moringa, long pepper, gutu kula, curry leaves, brindleberry, lemongrass, the blue butterfly pea flower, turmeric - and the two spices that stand head and shoulders above the rest: cinnamon and pepper.

The rest all came here by accident or design. Arab traders brought with them cardamom from the Western

Ghats of Southern India; as well as fenugreek and possibly cloves and pandam leaves. The British imported nutmeg and mace to break the monopoly held for these spices by the Portuguese and Dutch in Indonesia.

Vanilla, a plant that originated in South America, came via the Portuguese. Chili peppers – also originally from the Americas also found their way to Sri Lanka with them in the sixteenth century. Three classic Mediterranean and Middle Eastern and African spices – tamarind, coriander, cumin, and fennel – arrived here on trade routes powered by the Arabs. As did ginger, which originated in the pacific region of SE Asia.

Had none of this occurred, Sri Lanka's cuisine would be a rather austere affair – virtuous as a vestral virgin – but little removed from eating water biscuits. Every eager gourmand from Nero to Oscar Wilde would have felt alienated.

Imagine curry – that catch-all dish – without chilli, coriander, cumin, or fennel. Or the luscious banana-leaf-wrapped Lamprais that the Dutch brought with them from Indonesia – but without their heady aroma of cardamom, cloves, black pepper, and cinnamon. Picture Sr Lankan Butter Cake or the Love Cake introduced by the Portuguese – but without vanilla. Sambal without ginger. Watalappam without cinnamon – dishes brought here by Malay migrants. Butch Sri Lankan Bruedher Bread without nutmeg. Or Rassam tamarind soup – but without tamarind. It is like imagining prison.

Through every century the island has not only welcomed new spice species, but also new dishes and recipes, integrating them with its local cuisine as to make them almost as endemic as the Purple-faced Langur Monkey or Sri Lanka Blue Magpie - animals found nowhere else

in the world but here.

And this, then, is what we sought to get somewhere close to in a wild plot of shaded land that lay behind the kitchen gardens of The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, northwest of Kandy in the very centre of Sri Lanka.

Old clove and wild jack trees shade this chunk of land, together with some of the 100 year old coconuts that dot the whole estate. A large pomelo grows, its fruit harvested by our chefs to make extra chunky marmalade. In March and October the ground is strewn with the crunchy sweet-sour Veralu fruits of the Ceylon Olive; and between May and August with the giant fruits of the pungent Durian.

A massive Ceylon Oak, under whose roots lay the graves of three of the last working elephants on the estate, casts its greater shade across the space. Out beyond its branches you glimpse the high hills that surround the estate and that mark the point at which the flat plains of the west and north of the island rise into the Central Highlands with its entanglement of mountains and valleys.

And all its wild animals. For in creating just such a space at The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it became instantly obvious that it was not just humans who like spices. So too did animals.

Monkeys craved cardamom, wild boar were thrilled by turmeric roots. Insatiable civets, porcupine, bats, pangolins, deer, squirrels, and any number of birds - they all gathered to spice up their usual diet with - well, spices.

It was here, in the still months of the COVID pandemic that our butlers, chefs, gardeners, housekeeping, under the eye of

Angelo, our general manger, laid out the first terraces of our bespoke spice garden. Its lies just beyond The Spice Kitchen, a building put up at the same time and built in the most traditional of ways, using bamboo, mud, leftovers, and love. Its like can be seen all across

Sri Lanka, though the use for this one is as a staff hideaway, tearoom – and sometimes crèche. Its name – The Hockin's Spice Garden – is in memory of two sassy polyamorous Methodist family cousins who lived, unconventionally, ménage à trois, with a German POW on their remote Cornish farm for 50 years. Their three graves, side by side, overlook the sea near

Morwenstow. They were said to have occasionally travelled to nearby Barnstable and Bude, but never any further afield. Somehow, remembering them here in the jungles of Sri Lanka seems oddly, more than fitting.



THE THREE GRACES

It took just three homespun goddess - Aглаia, Euphrosyne, and Thalia - to give their ancient Mediterranean world all the perfection it needed; its charm, beauty, and creativity. And so it is with the three great indigenous species of Sri Lanka: cinnamon, pepper, and turmeric. Native to the island, it is impossible to image how life would be here without them.

The greatest of these is cinnamon. Its perfumed bushes mark out the outer edge of the spice garden at The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel. No other thing, except perhaps Buddhism itself, water or Sri Lanka's island status has had so marked an impact on the country as this miraculous spice, beloved of Herodotus, Aristotle, Nero; and such famous chefs as Vivek Singh and Emma Bengtsson.

It is the magnetic North of the world's spices, having enticed traders, colonists and planters to Sri Lanka, the invisible force field of its glittering commercial allure sucking them in, willing monopolist marketers, villainous vendors, wolfish merchants. The consequences of their commercial obsession were to remake the island - utterly.

But that is, of course, not the fault of the plant itself, and not even that fact that it has been expropriated in name by hotels and insurance companies, wellness spas, buns, babies, and kitchen ware can deter from its epic health and culinary properties. Unlike Cinnamon aromaticum or Cinnamon cassia, which comes largely from Vietnam and Indonesia, and is commonly known as Chinese cinnamon, Ceylon Cinnamon – or to give it its Latin name, *Cinnamomum verum*, comes almost only from Sri Lanka. It is, in fact just one of ten species that can credibly claim to be fully indigenous to the island – the other fourteen key ones being imports of one kind or another.

The most significant difference between the two variants of cinnamon lies in their health qualities. Of the eighty or so chemical compounds that make up both varieties of cinnamon there is little to compare in how well they are known to improve insulin, increase blood sugar uptake, reduce cholesterol and, with their shared anti-inflammatory and antioxidant qualities, act against bacteria and fungi - even to the extent of stopping the growth of tumours. Both also work to stop the built up of tau, a substance in the brain that can lead to Alzheimer's disease.

The way in which they metabolize into sodium benzoate mitigates the loss of proteins like Parkin and DJ-1 and so inhibits the progression of Parkinson's Disease. The polyphenols both varieties have help to detoxify enzymes to protect against the growth of cancer cells. Their shared cinnamaldehyde component activates thermogenesis, a process that results in the enhanced burning of calories.

But where they differ is in their inclusion of coumarin, an aromatic organic compound with known hepatotoxic and carcinogenic properties; and one that is known to cause liver damage. Compared to Chinese cinnamon, Sri Lankan cinnamon has extremely low levels of this dangerous chemical - 250 times less, to be exact. It is therefore the only sure variety to use for health benefits.

Gourmands would also argue for its preference in cooking. Sri Lankan cinnamon has a flavour that is arresting different - sweeter, more subtle, and less bitter than Cinnamon cassia. It has a softer texture and a lighter colour - and, commanding a much higher price than Chinese cinnamon, accounts for just nine percent of the world's one billion plus dollar market. As one food writer put it: "cinnamon is the flavour equivalent of being hugged by your grandmother."

From fruit pies and custards, sweet breads and rolls, teas, soup, lattes, pilaffs, baked meats, pancakes, cakes, dumplings and pot roasts, its delicate nature allows it to compliant dishes rather than dominate them, war-lord style. Image some of the world's great dishes like Kanelbullar; beef rendang; lamb tagine; apple crumble; Franzbrotchen Buns or Teurgoule rice pudding – but without cinnamon to transform them.

Across Sri Lanka the spice has found its way into dozens of classic island dishes including Watalappan, a spiced coconut and jaggery custard; Bibikkan; Dutch Lamprais; Kavum, sweet rice flour treacle fritters; as well as scores of common curries. Here at The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel our chefs have used it to create a morish breakfast bun – the Kanelbullar Crocodile Croissant – a pastry made like the classic Sri Lankan sugar crocodile bun, shaped like a croissant and flavoured like a Swedish cinnamon Kanelbullar.

The growing spice likes it hot but not blistering – a steady temperature of around 25°C to 32°C. Although the soils best suited for its are reckoned to be the sandy white soils of Negombo, its demand for plenty of moisture means that it is also a firm fixture in the central hilly area of the country.

It is grown most easily from seeds, 3-4 per pot, and planted out about 4 feet apart in these clusters, whose competing roots ensure a beautifully shrubby plant, best able to give off many branches to peel, and so limit the dangers of any one plant racing to become a fifteen metre tall tree.

Pruning starts at about eighteen months with cross branches taken out and the plants kept to a height of around three metres. Twice yearly harvesting occurs after about three years at which point the branches are cut, the leaves removed,

and the outer layer of bark scraped off with a Surana Kurutta knife. The raw stems are rubbed with brass rods to squeeze out the oils; and then, with the aid of a special curved knife – a Koketta – the softer inner bark is then peeled to a target width, with different widths determining the final grade of the spice.

Thirteen different grades are recognised, determined largely by the diameter of the quill. The highest, known as Alba, has quills that are less than 6mm in diameter.

More typically are C4 - around 13 to 15mm in diameter; and C3 - between 15mm to 17mm in diameter. All three are known as "Heen Kurundu" or Smooth Cinnamon. "'Gorosu Kurundu" includes quills that up to 38 mm in diameter - typically used for grinding into cinnamon powder. The cinnamon sheaths are then dried in shade, curling inwards upon themselves; and the quills then placed on strings or racks to dry still further.

Among the world's key spices, Sri Lankan cinnamon holds its own, costing up to \$60 a kilo – more than cloves though less than saffron (\$500 to \$5,000 per pound); vanilla (\$200 to \$500 per pound); or cardamom (\$30 per ounce).

Less labour intensive and climatically fussy than saffron; without any of the pollination drams of vanilla; the harvesting quagmires of cloves or the complex choreography of cardamon collecting; and less prone to animal attacks than any of these, cinnamon, by dint of experiment and experience, has recommended itself as the lead spice that we grow at The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, with bushes populating not just the Spice Garden itself but also several acres of hilly land that lie to the east and south east of the hotel, on Singing Civet Hill, and underplanted beneath aged coconuts that know no straight line.

Pepper is the second great indigenous spice for which Sri Lankan is rightly famous. It is one of only two food items (the other being salt) to have earned a place as one of the immutable fixtures at every table in almost every part of the world. Yet this extreme popularity belies its opulent history. Food historians have dated pepper's first origins to the Malabar Coast of India – present day Kerala; and to around 2,000 BCE, by which time Adam's Bridge, that frail corridor of land that connects India with northern Sri Lanka was already several thousand years old. Rising and falling sea levels meant that over time it became more or less walkable – but certainly the presence of black pepper so close to Sri Lanka probably implied its existence on the island too, brought here by birds, early migrants or just by creeping, acre by acre, when the land was dry.

Its extreme antiquity was spectacularly displayed when pepper corns were found in the nostrils of Ramses the Great who died in 1213 BCE and whose mummy was unearthed in 1881 in The Valley of the Kings. Arab traders brought it to the attention of the ancient Greeks, largely as a medicine used to alleviate haemorrhoids, diarrhoea, and digestive disorders. It was also the go-to cure for reverse the effects of hemlock, the poison that killed Socrates. Its beneficial chemical properties derived from the alkaloid, piperine, its main active compound, though it has other valuable chemical properties such as tannin, potassium, calcium, magnesium, Vitamin C, Vitamin B1, B2, B3, and Vitamin K. Modern science has since validated some of these presumed health benefits. The alkaloid piperine it contains has obvious antioxidant properties. Scientific studies have also linked it to anti-inflammatory benefits. Indeed, when combined with turmeric and ginger, the spice was found to have the same impact as prescription medication for patients with knee osteoarthritis.

On-going medical studies are also examining piperine's potential in cognitive functioning; lowering bad cholesterol levels; regulating blood sugar, providing pain relief; boosting the immune system by supporting white blood cells; treating vitiligo - and, most interesting of all, as a use in cancer drugs where its antioxidant and free-radical scavenging properties are of possible benefit in chemoprevention and controlling tumour growth.

For so small an item it makes potent whatever dish it touches, adding an earthy, and mildly hot flavour that hints of figs and citrus, pine, smoke, and wood. And from its first beginning, nurtured by the humid climate and heavy rainfall that the plant loves, it has long been one of those pivotal ingredients that make Keralan stews, roasts, and rasams distinctive.

The Romans began tentatively to use it in their cooking, and the spice makes an early culinary appearance in the ancient Roman cookbook, Apicius' *De re coquinaria*. But it took its rediscovery in Kozhikode by the fifteenth century Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama set it on track to a much wider audience, one eager to use it as much for cooking as for health. Within decades it had become so prized as to become a currency in its own right, used to pay rents, taxes, and dowries. It entered the language as "black gold." And it is as gold that it has continued, with a global market value of over two billion dollars, ten percent of which is Sri Lanka's more than marvellous share.

Today barely a dish made anywhere is without its pepper; sometimes it's the star as in *Steak au Poivre*; often it's the chorus; occasionally it's the saint, as in David Lebovitz's award winning Black Pepper Ice Cream, a jungle version of which the chefs make here at The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel.

Unlike so many other spices, it is a walkover to plant, harvest and maintain. A vine that grows to four meters and lasts for at least three decades, it proliferates interplanted in home gardens on the island and as a commercial crop in such areas as Matale, Kandy, Kegalle, Badulla, Ratnapura, and Kurunegala. Cuttings are planted to grow up Gliricidia tree stakes which pump the soil about them with nitrogen.

Its green berries, like tiny grapes, are harvested twice yearly from June to August and again from November to February; and dried and blanched to become black. White pepper is made from the same fruit but immersed in water for several days and then rubbed clean of their outer coat. Its peppery hot taste deters most animal attacks though not that of songbirds who are so configured by nature as to feel no burning sensation when they guzzle its grapes.

But for real pepper buffs, black pepper has a cousin that, though little known is infinitely grander – long pepper. Both are indigenous to Sri Lanka, and both are paid up members of the *Piper* genus within the *Piperaceae* family.

Where they differ is in their taste. Whereas black pepper is candidly pungent, long pepper is way more complex – hotter, sweeter with delectable hints of incense, cloves, and nutmeg. It grows like a catkin, so red as to resemble a run-away mulberry.

It has somehow joyfully resisted most attempts to properly commercialize its growth, despite its reputation, at least in Indian Ayurvedic medicine as being a stalwart tool to help manage obesity, liver disorders, asthma, lung strength, rheumatoid arthritis, and high cholesterol. It is also promoted as something to makes the brain sharper, slow down aging

and enhance a flagging libido, though empirical evaluation of this aspect of the fruit remains sadly outstanding. As a vine it much resembles black pepper but demands greater shade and more water to really flourish - and the sort of perfect drainage for which good plumbers win gold medallions.

In cooking it can be used much like black pepper yet makes curries bolder, marinades zestier, and strews famously more aromatic. For anyone in search of the ultimate recipe to use, look no further than Long Pepper Chicken, a recipe that first surfaced somewhat unexpected in the Arthashastra is 2nd century BCE Indian Sanskrit treatise on statecraft, politics, economic policy, and military strategy. It is a simple dish to prepare. Add crushed long pepper, ginger, and salt to yogurt, then chicken pieces; and let it marinade overnight. Then add mustard seeds to hot oil, more peppers and then the marinated chicken till it browns. Squeeze lemon over the result and try not to wolf it down disgracefully.

"When in doubt, rock the red." Turmeric is the third of the island's most important indigenous spice, if valued from a purely culinary perspective though it is much cherished as a medicine and a dye too. It is one of those rare spices that has dominated the tropical zones of the world since records began, appearing in archaeological findings in Australia that date back to 10,000 BCE; in cuneiform texts from the Assyrian kingdoms in the seventh century BCE and in the Vedic medicine of South Asia 1000 to 500 BCE.

Although awash with potassium, sodium, calcium, iron, phosphorus, vitamin C, vitamin B3, vitamin B6 as well as several oils, its most important component is curcumin. This is the active ingredient that gives the spice its stunning colour as well, as most of its critical health benefits. Modern scientific research is homing in

on its quantifiable properties. Studies have begun to show how it can help in treating inflammations, degenerative eye conditions, arthritis, cholesterol, kidney health – as well, possibly as mental conditions: depression, anxiety, and dementia.

Few Asian and Arab dishes would be the same without turmeric. Dosas, bhajis, samosas, Moroccan pastillas, Tunisian tagines, aloo gobi, butter chicken, chana masala, kormas, rendangs – all owe their appeal in large part to their inclusion of turmeric; as do newer entrants, from martinis to sourdough bread. Rice, dhal, chicken stew, coconut milk, curries, custards, jackfruit pickles and even puddings: across Sri Lanka there is barely a recipe that fails to touch on turmeric in one way or another.

Our chefs at The Flame Tree Estate & Holtel turn into a marvellous ice cream. Even so, its cultivation ground to almost zero during the troubled decades of the civil war, and turmeric, as it slowly recovers in local production, is still seen as horticultural gold commanding over 3,000 rupees per kilo.

In many ways it is a pleasing spice to grow, making few demands on its attendants. Fresh rhizomes, with budding green shoots, are planted a few centimetres deep. Sun, good drainage, mulching, and water do the rest. Where it falls just short of perfection is in the allure it offers to wild boar. They adore its roots, its leaves, the taste, and texture of the whole plant. And herds of them wander our land – usually at night. Often in small groups of three or four, they occasionally like to mass like D Day armies with up to 20 or 25 beasts dropping in for a midnight snack. Bold, large and understandably entitled, they have to be deterred from the turmeric beds by our nightwatchman; and by

fencing that is almost always never quite enough. What amounts the boar leave behind are ready to harvest after seven or eight months, after which time the rhizomes can be replanted for a new crop.



INSCRUTABLE
PATRIOTS

Sri Lanka's other indigenous spices are far less known; indeed, so far as Tesco, Walmart or Carrefour go, they remain inscrutable, ingredients of electrifying mystery. But collectively, they may well have been what Virginia Woolf had in mind when as she sat for dinner with her husband, Leonard, the assistant government agent for the District of Hambantota - "one cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well." For Sri Lanka's lesser known indigenous spices cast a distinctively captivating taste across its dishes.

The first of these reticent herbals is moringa, a short lived, fast growing, ten metre high tree, indigenous to India and Sri Lanka. It matures with good tempered ease, demanding merely tropical temperatures, water, and good drainage. Barely known outside Asia and Africa, it is a spice to covet. Every part of the plant is edible. Its leaves can be used in salads or boiled like spinach. Its flowers make a great tea and its seed pods, when young, present themselves as a rare alternative to asparagus. Its taste is grassy, a little bitter with an agreeable horseradish-like heat and flavour which explains why it is also known as the horseradish tree.

According to several authoritative scientific studies of the plant, it is ridiculously healthy as well. Its dried leaves offer seven times the Vitamin C of oranges, nine times more protein than yoghurt, ten times more Vitamin A than carrots, and fifteen times the potassium of bananas.

It is widely used in Indian Ayurvedic medicine to mitigate heart disease and as anti-inflammatory, anti-cholesterol, antidepressant, and antioxidant. It may also help you see better and grow more luxuriant hair.

The ancient Greeks used it in

perfume. The Egyptian pharaohs depended on it for their complex death rituals. Warriors consumed it before battle. And with far less drama, it is widely used in Sri Lankan cooking and in many of the rice and curries made here on The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel. It is favourite addition to all things fish; and its stars with the greatest lustre in the island's celebrated Spicy Drumstick Curry dish.

But if it's a touch of fusion food you are really after, go down the moringa-as-asparagus route. Collect young tender pods around a foot in length before they become too woody. Trim them in smaller asparagus like-lengths, add onion, butter, and salt, and boil them for ten minutes. Then steam the pods in a marinade of oil, vinegar, sea salt, pepper, garlic, and parsley and enjoy them with all the sophisticated delight that made Louis XIV's obsessive consumption of asparagus so memorable as to figure in every contemporary Versailles diary.

Another of the island's lesser known spices is brindleberry – known here as Goraka, or to give it its full and formal Latin honorific, *Garcinia gummi-gutta*. It is the Lewis Carroll of the spice world for the White Rabbit must have had its mercilessly caustic taste in mind as he wandered through Wonderland: "The Queen of Hearts, she made some tarts, All on a summer day: The Knave of Hearts, he stole those tarts, And took them quite away!" It is a slow growing rainforest tree that reaches about twenty meters in height with dark shiny leaves and rough black bark. It is an unfussy plant, growing happily so long as it has its roots in deep, well drained, slightly acidic, light clay soil. In Ayurvedic medicine it is used to treat ulcers, and digestive problems. Western medicine is now busy studying its hydroxycitric acid content to better design medicines that increase fat burning whilst

simultaneously reducing fat accumulation and appetite.

Some scientists also believe it can be of use in managing cholesterol, stabilizing sugar levels, and protecting the body from cell damage.

Goraka fruit, which resembles doll's house-sized pumpkins, are first dried before its flesh is used in place of lime or tamarind to give dishes, especially fish dishes, a distinctly tart taste. The fruit badly needs this pre preparation as it is otherwise far too acidic to be eaten raw. Its most famous island offering is in Ambulthiyal, the classic Sri Lankan sour fish curry where, as part of a mix of spices, it turns the fish meat as stylish black as the walls of a Soho literary cocktail bar.

Gotu Kola is another of the island's demure indigenous species, something of a Mother Theresa amongst spices, awash with virtue and value. Known as pennywort or centella asiatica, it is a herby perennial vegetable, with small round leaves that bud off soft stems like a kind, apple-green version of watercress. It thrives in rich, moist soil, with plenty of shade and manure – the swampy edges of ponds are an especial favourite. The leaf has a subtle earthy taste, sweet and bitter at the same time and combines especially well with coconut.

It is popular in traditional medicine where it is considered to promote life expectancy and good vision. Modern science is catching up on the beneficial effects of its principal compounds – especially triterpenoid saponin, a naturally occurring sugar. Studies suggest this has many applications: as antiviral to inhibit the replication of viruses like herpes; as an antioxidant; an anti-neoplastic to combat cancers; and to promote collagen production. Other studies are in progress to identify how it helps improve memory, and support blood circulation.

In Europe Gotu Kola has yet to make the leap from specialist natural food shop to supermarket but here in Sri Lanka almost any vegetable shop has it for sale. It stars in many island dishes, but the two most famous ones are as a sambal – a salad where it is combined with coconut, onions, lime, tomatoes, and pepper; and as a porridge. Kola Kanda, or Gotu Kola Herbal Rice

Porridge, to give it its full and formal name, is a comfort food that is ridiculously easy to make. Red rice and a bit of garlic are boiled up. Gotu Kola and curry leaves are blended to dust, strained, and added, with coconut milk, to the cooked rice. The gorgeous green porridge is poured into breakfast bowls, and, served with a piece of sweet jaggery – and so begins a better day.

Curry leaves, the small pinnate leaves of the sweet neem tree is a commonplace ingredient in Sri Lanka

and is no longer the Mr Quiet of the spice world, becoming ever better known outside of South and SE

Asia and China. It has even made its first tentative appearance in such places as Sainsburys and Tesco. It is a very easy going plant, growing well from cuttings and root divisions and afraid of few, if any, animals. It reaches heights of around four meters quickly as long as it's got decent sun. It puts up with all soil types as well as periods of prolonged dryness. It gives all the dishes it touches an earthy citrus-like flavour and a scent as if lemon grass and star anise had been twinned in some ecstatic horticultural coupling. It is especially delicious when fried with cashew nuts.

Picked and used fresh off the tree, like basil in Italian cooking or marjoram in Greek dishes, there is almost no South Asian dish to which it cannot be added to deepen both flavour and scent. It has long been a staple ingredient Ayurvedic medicine to treat skin and hair problems and combat indigestion, bloating, and constipation. Western science is studying its various

chemical properties, especially its carbazole alkaloids, to improve cancer and anti-inflammatory therapies.

Despite the racial slur implicit in its common name, kaffir lime," *Citrus Hystrix*, as it is known in more Latin quarters, is an indigenous plant right across South and Southeast Asia. It most probably gained its ill-stared name through the Bantu slaves brought into Sri Lanka by the Portuguese who went by the generic name "kaffirs." One of its very first appearances in western literature is its inclusion in Emanuel Bonavia's 1888 books "The Cultivated Oranges, Lemons Etc. of India and Ceylon". H.F. MacMillan also includes it in his seminal reference work of 1910, "A Handbook of Tropical Gardening and Planting". Something of a Caliban amongst spices, it is a small thorny scrubby tree with an all-round appearance only a mother could love. It has few animal enemies of any sort. Its leaves appear to double in on themselves in growth and its tiny bitter thick rind fruits are shaped like miniature brains. Its taste, however, is remarkable, much more citrusy, and floral than that of any other lime - and for this reason alone it is the secret weapon of all top chefs. It is used in place of traditional limes to give things the sort of intensity that only good rock music can otherwise bestow. Thai chefs in particular have taken it to their hearts using it for stand-out Massaman curries and Tom Yum soups. Its strong flavour and acidic nature also makes it a favourite ingredient in other products from leach spray to shampoo.

For reasons best known to travel agents, Sri Lanka's indigenous lemon grass, *Cymbopogon Citratus*, gained the moniker "West Indian Lemongrass" somewhere along the way. It is one of only two species of *Cymbopogon* that is treasured in all the ways lemongrass should be, the other being *Cymbopogon flexuosus*, a variant more given to producing oils and medicines that being used in foods. Greener, thicker,

more fragrant, and harder to grow, Sri Lanka's native so-called West Indian lemongrass is the one to be found in discriminating kitchens. Although modern science has yet to fully discover the full impact of its various bioactives, it has in large part endorsed the characterises that have made it a popular ingredient in folk medicine - to relieve pain and arthritis, reduce blood pressure, inhibit infection and vomiting and combat gastrointestinal disorders and fevers. For so simple looking a plant it is the most complex of food additives, with its unreproducible blend of sweet, tangy, floral, citrusy, and almost ginger-like flavours. It has hallmark any number of Malay and Thai dishes, particularly fish cakes, curries, and sauces, whilst in the west there is no better way to start your morning than with a lemongrass tisane at Alain Ducasse's restaurant in The Dorchester. It is used in many Sri Lankan dishes but when added to the classic Cashew Curry, puts eating on a level only a little below the gods.

Sri Lanka's last, most erotic, and most secretive indigenous spice is the blue butterfly pea flower - *clitoria ternatea*. An immodest fast growing vine that reaches lengths of around fifteen feet, it is, by dint of its etymological origins, considered something of an aphrodisiac, the genus part of its name (*Clitoria*) deriving from "clitoris", a shape faithfully reproduced in the plant's blossom. Science has backed up its reputation as a love drug.

A study published recently in the International Journal for Herbal Medicine noted that "the milk treated group showed significant increase in body weight, sperm count, motility and sexual behaviour parameters compared to the control group." Ayurvedic texts that date back many thousands of years before this particular study was conducted could have told them not to bother as the flower has long been used in

traditional Asian medicines to improve all round sexual vitality. Not that the ancient medics stopped there, for the plant and its flowers were also used to improve memory, reduce stress and depression, minimise the outward signs of aging and mitigate inflammations. Modern science is now busy confirming most of this - and adding to its tally of benefits. The unique cyclic peptides that make up one of its cornerstone active ingredients has been found to help lower blood glucose and insulin levels as well as combat some bacteria. But all of this pales into off-stage mumblings when compared to its colour – for the pure sapphire blue hue it gives to many recipes especially teas – this, even though its taste is easy to miss, being mildly floral at best.

Little else denotes such modern sophistication today as sitting sipping a warm glass of cornflower blue Clitoria Tea. It also works remarkably well as a natural dye - so should you be eager to host a Blue Dinner Party, use it to turn your pasta, butter, rice, or custard into something unforgettable, prior to hitting a playlist that includes Mr Blue Skies and Blue Suede Shoes.



A COLONIAL
QUARTET

Sri Lanka's generous habit of annexing new ingredients is one of the more positive ways in which it has reacted to the very mixed impact made on it by the island's spice-mad colonial occupiers; and its traders. To the nine core spices indigenous to the island since the earliest of times, - cinnamon, pepper, long pepper, brindleberries, moringa, curry leaves, gutu kula, the blue butterfly pea flower, and turmeric – up to thirteen others have been introduced through the centuries and have become so commonplace as to be now classified as fully fledged residents. The list includes chilli, cloves, cardamom, ginger, coriander, cumin, fenugreek, pandam leaves, fennel, tamarind, nutmeg, mace; and vanilla.

The most famous of these, chilli, a spicy vegetable widely used throughout Asia, only reached Asia in the past five hundred years, originating from Peru and Bolivia before being brought to the attention of a marvelling Spanish court by Christopher Columbus after his first voyage to the new world. In the diaries he kept on his voyage Columbus noted the existence of this new plant in an entry dated 15 January 1493 saying it was "a better spice than our pepper". Within decades chilli had become a commonplace plant in Spanish gardens and by the mid fifteen hundreds it was to be found as a cooking ingredient from Scandinavia to the Balkans.

And almost as quickly the plant also found its way to Sri Lanka, and other parts of Asia, due in large part to the Portuguese and their commercial thirst to control the Indian Ocean trade - and with it, its lucrative spice revenues. The spice's adoption into Sri Lankan cooking came with an etymological twist for the Singhala term for pepper ("miris") was transferred to chilli. Pepper was renamed "gam-miris" – literally "village pepper." Its penetration across the island seems to have been slow if the journals of Robert Knox the famous British

captive of the King of Kandy is anything to go by. Knox's book, "The Historical Relation of Ceylon" published in 1681, recorded just about anything that moved and most things that didn't. And it fails to mention chilli. More than anything else this probably indicated the limited reach of the Portuguese settlement, which never properly incorporated the highlands of the Kandyan kingdom.

Rich in such vitamins as A, C and E, chilli's natural chemical compounds, especially capsaicinoid, have prompted a wave of on-going scientific research into harnessing it to promote weight loss, relieve pain from arthritis, reduce inflammation, control LDL (bad) cholesterol to lower the risk of strokes and heart attacks and regulate blood sugar. Some studies have also indicated its potential use in killing cancer cells.

But it is of course for its taste and flavour that it is most widely celebrated. And in this regard, there are as many influences as there are outcomes. Different varieties of pepper, their ripeness, colour, drying process and growing conditions – all influence how exactly its tastes, and smells. Smokey? Fruity? Grassy?

Tart? Warm? Hot? Blistering? The vegetable's extraordinary range and adaptability has ensured it can cover all these bases and more, making it one of the kitchen's most flexible ingredients. From chilli pickle to chilli con carne, many of the dishes to which chilli adds its flavour have become household items everywhere. Barely a dish in Sri Lanka fails to include it – from sambals and curries to the sweetly exquisitely spicy banana pepper curry - and of course Lunu Miris, one of the island's top pickles, made from finely chopped onions, red chili flakes, salt, lime juice, and Maldivian fish, and able to go with just about anything. Foodies like to debate which cuisines tends to be hotter – Sri Lankan or Indian. But the answer is far from straightforward as it all depends on which regions you

have in mind: the Chettinad or Kandy; Galle or Rajasthan; Tamil Nadu or Jaffna?

Three other spices, vanilla, nutmeg and its derivative, mace, also all arrived on the island courtesy of European colonists.

Although not hatched from a single silver egg like the mythical Molionidai twins Eurytos and Kteatos, nutmeg and mace are, all the same, the conjoined twins of the spice world, being two quite separate kinds of species that derive from the same plant – *Myristica fragrans*.

The nutmeg part of it is the hard round seed found within the fruit; it has a powerful musky flavour, woody, a little sweet, and unmistakably aromatic. The mace is the reddish orange membrane that surrounds the seed, with a scent that hardened Olfactors would describe as floral, citrus, light and delicate.

The tree that bears them is slow growing, deciduous, relatively tight in spread but able to reach heights of twenty to thirty meters. As you would expect from so special a spice, the trees inhabit the fussy end of propagation, demanding rich well drained soil at around 500 meters, nicely distributed rainfall of about 2,500 mm per year, a decent amount of shade, especially in their first years, and temperatures that range from between 20 to 30 degrees.

The trees have a staggeringly constrained commercial history, with all specimens across the world deriving from plants that once only grew on the Banda Islands, a collection of islets that make up the 17,508 islands that is Indonesia today. Identified by the Portuguese as a major revenue earner, the spice became one of the most tightly controlled monopolies of the Indian Ocean trade. The Arab traders who, till then had been carrying and selling it across the region were muscled out and, until 1621, the Portuguese managed to keep

trade in this spice to themselves. Naturally, this also meant a tight grip on production, and the various Portuguese governors across the East Indies took special care to ensure that no live pants escaped from Banda.

When eventually the Dutch stormed the Banda Islands and wrested control of nutmeg from the Portuguese, little other than control really changed. The Dutch VOC Company maintained as tight a grip and monopoly of the spice's production, transport, and marketing as their colonial predecessors. This state of affairs continued until 1810 when the British captured most of the Dutch East Indies territories, including the Banda Islands. Although the islands were later returned to the Dutch 4 years later, the British by then had taken particular care to uproot as many nutmeg trees as possible for distribution and regrowth across its own Empire – including Sri Lanka, which it gained formally in 1802 at the Treaty of Amiens.

It is possible that the monopoly has been more quietly ended a few years earlier if reports of the French seizing a cargo of Dutch nutmeg trees and carrying them off to the Caribbean are to be believed. Either way, the nutmeg monopoly had been ended and by the early eighteenth century the first nutmeg plantations in South Asia were recorded in Kerela, just across the sea from Sri Lanka itself, the work of an enterprising Scottish planter. Exactly when they came to Sri Lanka and where they were first planted is a matter of mildly rumbustious academic debate.

The global market for both species is relatively small in value – oscillating at around 250 million dollars annually, half coming from Indonesia, with Sri Lanka making up about five percent of the total, mostly from small plantations around Kandy, Kegalle, and Matale.

But not Galagedera sadly for the nutmeg trees that once grew here had to be removed in order to safeguard the life of the miniature schnauzers that also live on The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel. The species' active compound, myristicin, can easily kill a curious dog bent, as are our schnauzers, on chewing anything interesting they might find during their daily walks. But not all its chemical properties are toxic. The species also contain elemicin, a compound now being researched for its antidepressant properties, its effectiveness in modulating gut flora and in promoting general good health.

Harvesting nutmeg is far from simple – the art lying almost wholly in the drying process. Too dry and they are so depleted of oil as to lose all flavour. Too moist, and mould develops. The mace that coats the pod is best removed straight from the shell in a single go, so it forms one piece, to be cleaned and dried. Nowadays it has found its way into several preprepared popular spice mixtures like garam masala; but it is more classically known as the one spice equally at home in sweet and savoury dishes - game pies, apple crumble, Swedish meatballs, eggnog, macaroni cheese, chutneys, curries, Christmas pudding, frittatas, quiches. Indeed, in the seventeenth century, beau monde Europeans would carry their own personal nutmeg graters around with them to season food to their own particular liking. In Sri Lankan nutmeg most famously features as a key ingredient in watalappam, the island's version of creme caramel, a spicy coconut custard sweetened with jaggery. Mace, given its more delicate flavour is perhaps best enjoyed in Congee, a comfort food like few others – a rice porridge made with coconut milk, and heavily flavoured with herbs, vegetables, and mace.

Vanilla is the other great spice introduced to the island

by its colonists. It is the Mummy of all spices – its taste, connotations, associations, and aroma reminding you of the perfect home, overseen by someone not unlike Mrs Darling in Peter Pan or Tove Jansson's beloved Moominmamma. It originated in Mexico and for centuries was exported to Europe and elsewhere by the Spanish. It is perhaps the fussiest of all species to grow as only the *Melipona* bee and two species of Mexican hummingbirds could ensure the pollination of the tiny flowers to create the vanilla pods. The bees and the birds, patriotic to a fault, refused to live outside of Mexico and it was not until 1841 when a twelve year old slave, Edmond Albius, discovered how to hand pollinate the plant. The vanilla market that this discovery was to go on to create is today valued at well over six billion dollars – though much good it did poor Albius. It took years for his French masters to even unenslaved him, and he was to die in poverty and neglect by 1880. His obituary in a local newspaper noted that "the very man who at great profit to his colony, discovered how to pollinate vanilla flowers has died in the hospital at Sainte-Suzanne. It was a destitute and miserable end. His long-standing request for an allowance never brought a response."

Eighty percent of the worlds vanilla now comes from Madagascar, with Sri Lanka making up so tiny a percentage as to be all but invisible. Even so, attempts were made very on to raise the crop here. The Burgher planter Antoine Joseph Van der Porten planted acres of the vine on his plantation in Halgolla, just thirty five miles from Galagedera. It should have been a triumph as the island, especially around Kandy, had the perfect climate and environment for the plant. Little capital investment was needed to raise it, and it showed a sturdy disregard to disease and pests. Its failure to take off was perhaps in part due to the lingering complexity of self-pollution, though its execution, as Ananda our

head gardener knows, is relatively straight forward, once learnt. Using a thin stick or even a blade of grass the flower's flap is opened and the stamen and stigma gently pressed together. Bingo. Never had sex been so untroubled.

The pods, once grown, require careful processing before they are fit for market. The beans need to be heart-treated to stop growth and activate the pod's flavour-producing enzymes. They then need to be wrapped up to ferment to bring out their flavour. Several weeks of sun drying next follows, the pods turned daily, before they are left to rest for three months to mature. What few vines exist in the country have lingered on in the imagination of vanilla dreamers for connoisseurs claim that Sri Lankan vanilla has a more subtle, caramel, and delicate flavour than Madagascan vanilla. Egged on by the indefatigable Sri Lanka Export Development Board, attempts are being made to increase production and the Kandy based Vanilla Grower Association now claims to have 1000 members.

After several attempts to grow it on our estate, it has finally come to flourish within the boundaries of our Spice Garden, the cuttings scrambling up glericidia poles in the warm humid partial shade of the space they now occupy. Their flowers, which last but a day, usually come out between December to February; and once pollinated, the pods then take around 8 more months to develop before they can be harvested.

The pod has an astonishing 250 chemical properties to it, one of which, vanillin, is known to increase serotonin production - the happy hormone. More excitable scientists are also busy investigating how it increase male testosterone to work as an aphrodisiac. Others, perhaps more grounded, are focusing on its

ability to promote healthy aging and better memory, combat indigestion, and insomnia and assist in the reduction of sickle cells blood disorders.

But it is of course as a cooking ingredient that it is today best known, its warm rich woody fragrance making cakes and ice creams, milkshakes, yoghurts, custards, and pies the kind of dishes that live on in your imagination long after you have consumed them. Here in Sri Lanka it is most lovingly associated with Sri Lankan Butter Cake, a cake that is a happy evolution of the classic English pound cake, which made its first appearance in 18th century London in Hannah Glasse's 1747 cookbook, *The Art of Cookery*. Flour, baking powder, lots of butter, eggs, salt, milk, and vanilla make up the cake itself and – for Sri Lanka anyway – it is frosted with passion fruit butter and filled with chopped mangos.



MERCHANT
MYSTERIES

On the distant streets of the Old Bailey in London stands F. W. Pomeroy's famous 1906 statue of Justice hanging above the entrance to Central Criminal Court. The vast and gilded Amazonian holds in one hand the sword of justice and in the other the finely balanced scales of justice. And is in in thinking how Sri Lanka's spice history might best fit into these scales that this distant statue comes to mind.

On one side of the scales you might imagine lie the enticing black and red gold of the island's indigenous pepper and cinnamon. These were the spices that drew in European colonists, enabling them to make untold profits and to better establish their sprawling foreign empires. And on the other, side of the scales are those spices – such as chilli, nutmeg, and vanilla - that the Europeans introduced to the island.

It is of course an invidious comparison. Imperial apologists would want to throw in all sorts of other things from railways to constitutions, tea to telephones. Nationalists would meet each opening with equal or better examples to prove the opposite. It is a bill that remains in pyretic calculation. But for foodies and spice enthusiasts what remains, even before the cost is reckoned, is the exuberant existence of the spices themselves, however they arrived.

Remarkably, though, it was Arab traders, not European colonists who made the greatest impact on the island's spice heritage – if measured in terms of variety, range, and application. For it was through them that the final nine or so other spices so critical to the country's character, first arrived: cloves; cardamom; coriander; cumin; fenugreek; pandam leaves; fennel; tamarind; and ginger. For these traders, working the ports of the Indian Ocean from Africa to Indonesia, they filled what was empty and emptied what was filled.

“Run, run as fast as you can! You can't catch me. I'm the Gingerbread Man!” And nor can you – for there is nothing to touch the taste of ginger. Known in more formal circles as *Zingiber Officinale*, it is a cultigen - one of those rare species that has been so altered by mankind as to no longer exist in its original wild state.

Originating from the rainforest islands of SE Asia, it has been modified to fit human culinary and medicinal needs. It probably arrived in Sri Lanka with Arab traders, but its travel schedule is so ancient as to be all but lost. The Rig Veda, which dates to around 1400 BCE and is the world's oldest Vedic text, mentions ginger; and later ayurvedic books elaborate its medicinal qualities - to reduce indigestion and nausea, stimulate the respiratory and nervous system; and, by improving blood circulation, act as an aphrodisiac. Recent scientific studies that have tabulated sexual function, fertility, and testosterone levels suggest that there may be something in this.

Western science has also set in train a wave of further forensic research into the clinical applications of ginger – in cancer control, menstrual pain, glucose levels and in treating arthritis.

It is an easy plant to grow, demanding dappled shade, well-drained soil, and high humidity. Rhizomes with green growth buds are planted in shallow depressions; and before long green leaves, sometimes up to ten feet high, spread out, accompanied by pink or white flowers so perfect in their construction as to look as if they have sprung from moulds. Within eight months the roots can be harvested and the process restarted.

Our own ginger, grown with a carefully defence mindset to ward off attacks by rampaging wild boar, lives in stone beds in

the Spice Garden. At ten billion dollars and growing the global market for ginger outsteps production and so prices are higher than they really need to be. The culinary form of ginger has two main variants: white ginger – either large or small, the smaller variant being preferred for cooking; and red ginger, which is preferred in medicine. All these variants have scores of sub variants. The pale yellow flesh of Chinese ginger for example is preferred for pickles; Rangoon Ginger for oils and perfumes; and Indian ginger, like the tiny account of ginger grown in Sri Lanka, is most favoured in cooking and drinks for its much stronger taste. Its sweet, and citrusy flavour, as well as its peppery heat, alter in its preparation. When raw it is at its most pungent; dried, it is at its hottest; and cooked, it is at its sweetest.

From ginger cakes, and ginger beer to stir fry ginger beef, it is used in many dishes across the world – but perhaps none so celebrated as with Gingerbread men. England's first Queen Elizabeth even had an official royal gingerbread maker whose only role it was to make such pasties, once famously creating edible clones of all the foreign dignitaries who assembled at her 16th century court. In Sri Lanka it is especially favoured in chicken and sambal dishes.

Older even than Harry Potter's Dumbledore, Tamarind, native to Africa, has been growing in India and probably Sri Lanka since at least 1300 BCE, roughly the same time as the civilizations of the late Bronze age around the Mediterranean collapsed. It has godly properties, being included in the Book of Enoch, one of those texts that was banned from inclusion in the Bible; and in the Hindu Epic, the Ramayana, a text that Hindus believe dates back 1.2 million years; though scholars argue for a later date - around 5,000 BCE. Certainly, it was old enough to be included in some of

the earliest Indian Ayurvedic texts – the Charaka Samhita, the Sushruta Samhita, and the Nighantus. Its very name appears to hint at its travel history, "tamarind" being derived from the Arabic phrase "tamar hindi" which meant "Indian date." Commonly added to ayurvedic medicines to treat constipation, digestive disorders, arthritis, blood disorders, wounds, and cell health, it is now undergoing deeper scientific studies for its pharmacological properties, helping with asthma, liver problems, diabetes, and dysentery.

Tamarind's primary compound, tartaric acid, is what gives it its sour flavour – this characteristic being the reason it is so liked in Thai and Indian dishes for the gentle and complex layer of acidity it adds to curries, soups, stews, chutneys, sauces, as well as in desserts, and drinks. It pops up in Massaman, Rassam, and Pad Tha; in tamarind jam in Costa Rica; tamarind beer in the Bahamas and, since 1876, England's legendary Lea & Perrins' Worcestershire sauce. In Sri Lanka it is most widely used in fish, chicken, and pork curries. It grows as a long-living evergreen tree, reaching heights of eighty feet in good sun and well able to live through droughts. Lightly covered with pinnate leaves, its modest red and yellow flowers develop into hard six inch knobbly pods, the flesh within them being the best part of the tree to use.

Its cousin, in bitterness at least, is fenugreek, a plant which, though originating in Turkey six thousand years ago, became so widespread as to appear with residential ease in the texts, medicines and recipes of the first Mesopotamian and Indian civilizations, as well as those of ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome. Use it, advised the Egyptian Ebers Papyrus in 1550 BCE, to embalm the dead, purify the air, and cleanse the tummy. A main component of ayurveda and traditional Chinese medicine, it was regarded with great suspicion

by western medicine – until recently. It is now enjoying an investigative renaissance as labourites around the world probe its antidiabetic, anti-obesity, anticancer, anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, antifungal, and antibacterial properties. The plant, an annual, grows to a bushy two feet in height, happiest in full sun and is well able to tolerate drought. Its celery tasting leaves are often used in curries and salads, but it is its seeds that attract the greater use, giving to dishes a nutty, maple like taste with hints of curry as in Aloo Methi, the Indian potato curry or Persian Sabzi stews. In Sri Lanka, its seeds are especially enjoyed when combined with a few onions, chilli, garlic cloves, tamarind, and plenty of thick coconut milk to make a simple vegetarian curry.

Fennel, to which fenugreek is not in any way related, owns instead its remote DNA to carrots. It is a staple ingredient in the Sri Lankan kitchen, prized for its sweet, liquorice-like flavour, the Paddington Bear of the spice world, easy to grow from seeds in full sun, its base bulb ready to harvest after just three months. It is prone to gluttonous slugs and insects and so grows in

The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel with the sort of protection a junior Vice President might receive. Native to the Mediterranean, the plant was widely known across the ancient civilizations of the region and travelled swiftly and almost unnoticed to Asia and beyond – including Sri Lanka, one of the many discreet gifts of the Indian Ocean trade. Its sweet grassy taste is often incorporated into many Sri Lankan dishes from curries to Watalappan. It features as a component of many traditional medicines focused on relieving colds and digestive problems. Modern science seems to validate this, with studies showing how one of its main compounds, anethole, helps relieve stomach ailments. And, perhaps more interestingly, further research indicates it can also be used to help prevent liver disease.

"So the gingerbread was made in the shape of hearts, and the finest was stuck with almonds and cardamom, by the Duchess's own hand," wrote Joseph Victor von Scheffel in his fantasy Tale of the Tenth Century. And the duchess would know. Cardamon, the green pearl or Queen of Spices from India's Western Ghats, is so prized as to be the world's third most valued spice, up there with saffron and vanilla, with a scent and flavour so intensely exotic as to be deeply associated with magic potions, love remedies and spiritual practices that go back to the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. It has a taste and fragrance like no other spice. The oils that derive from its seeds go through many levels of olfactory change as they are heated. Words like peppery, piney, eucalyptus, menthol, citrus, sweet, peppery, pungent, aromatic – they all fall far short of quite how extraordinary it is.

Unique as it is though, its bioactive properties have long made it a key ingredient in many ancient medical systems from Ayurveda to the Chinese Compendium of Materia Medica. Modern science is busy validating its benefits in combating diabetes, disorders, cardiovascular dysfunctions, respiratory and gastrointestinal disorders. It is even beginning to show promise in preventing some cancers. In Scandinavia it has transformed a range of basic foods from mulled wines to pastries, raising them to addictive levels of gourmand refinement.

Poached fruits, pies, cupcakes, biriyani, biscuits, teas, dhals, scones and stews: there is little that will not yield to and be improved by the spice. Arriving in Sri Lanka, courtesy of Arab traders working the sea routes to the Malabar coast, is the likely reason how it arrived here where it is used in cakes and curries, puddings, and rice. It comes in two basic variants – Green cardamom – which has a very intense flavour and Black

cardamom which is cooler and smokier. The green variety, known scientifically as *Elettaria* is the true cardamom. Black cardoon comes from a quite different species – the *Amomum* plant which grows on the slopes of the Himalayas.

Green cardamom grows best in deep shade in wet hilly tropical or sub-tropical areas with plenty of rainfall.

Reaching bushy heights of up to fifteen feet it takes three years before its starts to bear seeds that can be harvested. Over this time it requires a lot of protection as monkeys, if our own cardamom beds on the Flame Tree Estate & Hotel are anything to go by, seem to find it irresistibly attractive. The difficulties and time it takes to grow the spice helps explain how focused its production is, with Guatemala and India accounting for the vast majority of the near on one billion dollars it generates annually. Sri Lanka's own production, centred largely around Kandy, Matale, Kegalle, Nuwara Eliya, and Ratnapura accounts for a tiny proportion of the total.

Three other spices, the Three C's, are spices whose arrival in Sri Lanka can also probably be placed at the feet of early Arab traders. The trio are key fixtures of any fully functioning island kitchen: coriander, cloves and cummin.

You don't have to be all cloved up to enjoy cloves, but the slightest whiff of the alluring spice is likely to leave you in the happiest and highest of spirits. Until relatively recently, the island's source of cloves had been up for debate, with some historians pointing to the Portuguese and others to Arab traders. However, the discovery a few years ago of a pot containing cloves, excavated in the ancient port of Mathottam in the northwest of the island and dating back to 900-1100 CE, suggests that the clove trade was already

well established long before the first European colonists arrived. Indeed, the only clove discovered anywhere else in the world that predates this one is one discovered in Syria, perfectly preserved since 2000 BCE. Interestingly, the Sri Lankan clove was not excavated in isolation. It was discovered alongside many other preserved cereals and grains and 11,418 pottery fragments from 123 different wares, a quarter of which were clearly imports - indicating that in this port, as no doubt in others, a dynamic and cosmopolitan settlement was in progress - like Dubai, only older and greener. Detailed research on the clove in question has since revealed that it came from the Maluku Islands, in today's Indonesia - a 7,000 kilometer journey.

But even before this date the spice had long since made its way right around the world. Third century BCE records from the Chinese Han dynasty refer to the spice, calling it "hi-sho-hiang" or "bird's tongue," and recommending that the Emperor's officers chew some before starting a conversation with their fastidious overload. The ayurvedic Charaka Samhita text, dating back to the first century CE, also recommends it as a medicine. As does the Roman Pliny the Elder around 23-79 CE. Pliny was to die with spectacular drama at Mount Vesuvius, for despite his rousing cry that "Fortune favours the brave," the recuse attempt he led following the eruption ran into the toxic vapours of the volcanic cloud. Hopefully, as he struggled for breath, the taste of the delicious clove-laced Delian Sweets he would have enjoyed the night before, was still refreshing his mouth.

It is probable that cloves grew as permanent features of ancient plantations in India and Sri Lanka and had already taken root well before the European colonists arrived - for the Portuguese and later the Dutch spent

much time trying to uproot them, in an effort to enforce the monopoly they enjoyed with this spice from their control of its primary source in Indonesia.

With their demand for a high humidity to ensure the proper development of the flower bud, good drainage, rich soil, and abundant rainfall, cloves have since come to grow mostly within ten degrees north and south of the equator. Worth around seven billion dollars annually – and growing fast, almost half the production comes from Madagascar, with a little under ten percent from Sri Lanka – especially from small plantations around Kandy, Kegalle, and Matale. Here the climatic conditions are so beneficial that the cloves are renowned amongst buyers for their richer more intense oils and flavour.

The trees themselves, *Syzygium aromaticum*, are slender and reach heights of around forty feet. They take over six years of growing before producing buds. But they then stick at the job for some eighty years, making clove orchards things of great value. Although they grow with relative ease and resist most animal attacks, they are complicated things to manage, requiring careful time-sensitive hand harvesting if the flower buds are to be picked at the optimum time. Once the leafy structure that encases a flower bud changes from green to pink, and just before the petals themselves open, is the time to pluck them. They then must be separated from their stalks and left to dry gently in the sun. Scores of old clove trees grow around The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, and a new Clove Orchard has also been planted, with around six hundred adolescent plants, assiduously attended to by our gardeners.

Traditional Chinese and Ayurvedic medicine have long used the spice for pain relief, toothaches, digestion, colds and gum infections, their power coming mostly

from their large concentration of eugenol oil. Modern science is busy reaffirming much of this. Recent studies have shown how it can reduce the SARS virus and combat oxidativation to mitigate chronic diseases including cancer; how it prevents bacterial infections, reduces rheumatoid arthritis pain and is as effective as benzocaine in relieving tooth pain.

But it is as a food item that it is most cherished. From glazed hams to candid oranges, tea to biscuits, trifles to curries – there is an unending wealth of recipes from all corners of the world that use the spice. They have even made it as the prize ingredients in Sykurlaus kryddkaka, the national cake of Iceland and Pickled Muktuk, a favoured whale blubber Thanksgiving dish cooked in Alaska.

Unlike cloves, whose detractors are almost impossible to find, coriander is the Marmite of the spice world. You either love it or hate it - a predisposition that is said to be genetic. Its distinctive strong spicy citrus green taste and aroma is never in purdah in any dish. Trumpet-like it blasts out in anything it touches and is not therefore something to add to recipes that like to sell themselves on the discreet and well-mannered progress they make across one's taste buds.

Native to the Mediterranean and Middle East, and ancient beyond wrinkles, coriander first appears back in 5000 BCE in Sanskrit literature before popping up in the ancient Greek papyri and the Bible - Exodus 16:31, to be exact: "...and the house of Israel called the name thereof Manna: and it was like coriander seed, white; and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey."

The spice travelled with the Romans, Chinese, and Arabs on every possible trade route to go as rapidly global as ABBA. An annual, it grows absurdly easily from seeds – rather like the mustard and cress of

kindergarten; and, led by India, has mushroomed into a five billion dollar a year market.

Traditional medicines across the world have any number of medicines that include it to treat most problems from fever, diarrhoea, indigestion, and piles to vomiting, arthritis and gout. Modern scientific research is a little pickier, but many studies have begun to show its value in dealing with disorders of the nervous system, and diabetes, and in combating malignant microorganisms.

The more you cut it, the more it grows. In cooking every part of coriander can be used – its strongly flavoured seeds, its grassy leaves, and stalks, even its delicate white flowers, which pair very well with cheese. It appears in any number of curries from South to SE Asia as well as – famously in Yemeni Zhug, Salsas, Tiger Salad, the carrot Potage de Crécy soup, Egyptian bissara dips, and, of course, Sri Lankan Kothamalli Tea – the go-to comfort drink that everyone sips on the island if feeling mildly out of sorts.

Cumin in is the sort of spice that stays with you. Not unpleasantly like – say, a MAGA slogan, but more akin to a wise thought or insight. Nutty, warm, slightly bitter and, when toasted, very aromatic, it lingers on your palate reminding you gladly of epicurean pleasures only just past. A prominent member of the parsley family, it appears to have rapidly spread from its home base around the Mediterranean to take over the entire world. Clocking up a value of almost two billion dollars annually, its production is led by India, with Sri Lanka producing barely enough for its own consumption.

Traditional medicines use it for pain relief, and digestive problems. Modern science has fixed on its principal compounds - thymoquinone and cuminaldehyde – to disentangle its likely abilities as an

anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, anti-diabetic, and anti-cancer agent. As a cooking ingredient, it stars especially in Indian, Mexican, African, Mediterranean, and Middle Eastern dishes and it is no stranger to ambitious chefs either, featuring in trophy dishes like Chocolate and Cumin Fudge, Golden Lassi, Hazelnut Butter, and traditional sausage rolls. In Sri Lanka it is so loved that it forms a key ingredient in Thuna Paha, the top go-to island curry powder used in countless local recipes.

Pandam leaves are Asia's secret spice, the Abracadabra of its spice world, able to magically transform dishes with a grassy green vanilla like flavour that leaves arrivest Westerners wondering why on earth the big supermarket chains have yet to bring it on. Growing like a punk haircut to about three feet in height, pandam is known colloquially as screw pine for the spiralling arrangement of its leaves – not unlike a happy yucca. It is an agreeable plant to house, requiring little attention but for water and a splash of shade. Most Sri Lankan homes have a pot of it standing outside the kitchen. It hit the botanical headlines as late as 1813 when it was described by Scottish botanist William Roxburgh.

His famous catalogue of Calcutta Royal Botanic Garden's plant species noted that the plant had been donated in 1798 from the island of Ambon, in Indonesia. It is especially loved for desserts such as Thailand's khanom thuai or Filipino Buko Pandan – not just for its sweet flavour but also for the shocking green colour it imparts. Nor it is a stranger to curries, soups, and salads. Home remedies incorporate it to treat headaches, joint pain, skin issues, and dandruff. Modern scientific research has been slow to catch up and is only now just beginning to identify its ability to combat various chronic diseases, arthritis, glucose level regulation, and skin disorders. It

is however a spice to put your money on. Investors are piling in and the market, currently at just around 300 million dollars is said to double in just a few years.

And pandam leaves, private, obscure, indolent, enigmatic as they are, is all the same the best of all species to end on. Wafting its secretive scent ahead of it, across the jaded appetites of our ever more urban world, it imparts, like all island spices, an abracadabra magic on all its touches, lifting, with such joy, the mundane taste and scent of life better than drugs or sunshine, holiday romances or being upgraded to First Class on an Etihad A380.

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"It's absolute paradise," wrote one guest recently; "I would fly back to Sri Lanka simply to stay in this place for a couple more days."

Centred on a 25-acre organic spice and timber plantation, The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel is a secret to most and a companion to some. Its 1,000 high rocky hills stalled the Dutch army in 1765; and until the civil war the estate stretched over 100 acres with 3 working elephants.

Renovated and furnished with art & antiques, its hills and valleys keep safe a rare seclusion.

Its restored plantations grow cardamom, turmeric, ginger, cloves, pepper, cocoa; rubber, coffee, vanilla; cinnamon, coconuts; and scores of trees – best enjoyed from the vantage point of the hotel's infinity pool. Its healthy menus fuse east with west, street food with fine dining. It can be viewed at www.flametreeestate.com.

A GIFT FOR READERS

Of course, as a reader, you naturally qualify for special treatment should a holiday bring you to Sri Lanka and The Flame Tree Estate & Hotel.

Drop the general manager a note to tell him how you came across us and to make arrangements to best suit your time and budget:
generalmanager@flametreeestate.com

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

David Swarbrick is a publisher, planter, hotelier, writer, and hermit.

He was raised, with few concessions to modernity, in Sri Lanka, India, Singapore, and the Middle East.

He gained various degrees on the Celtic fringe: at the Universities of Wales, and Stirling, prolonging an introduction to accepted working hours for as long as was decently possible.

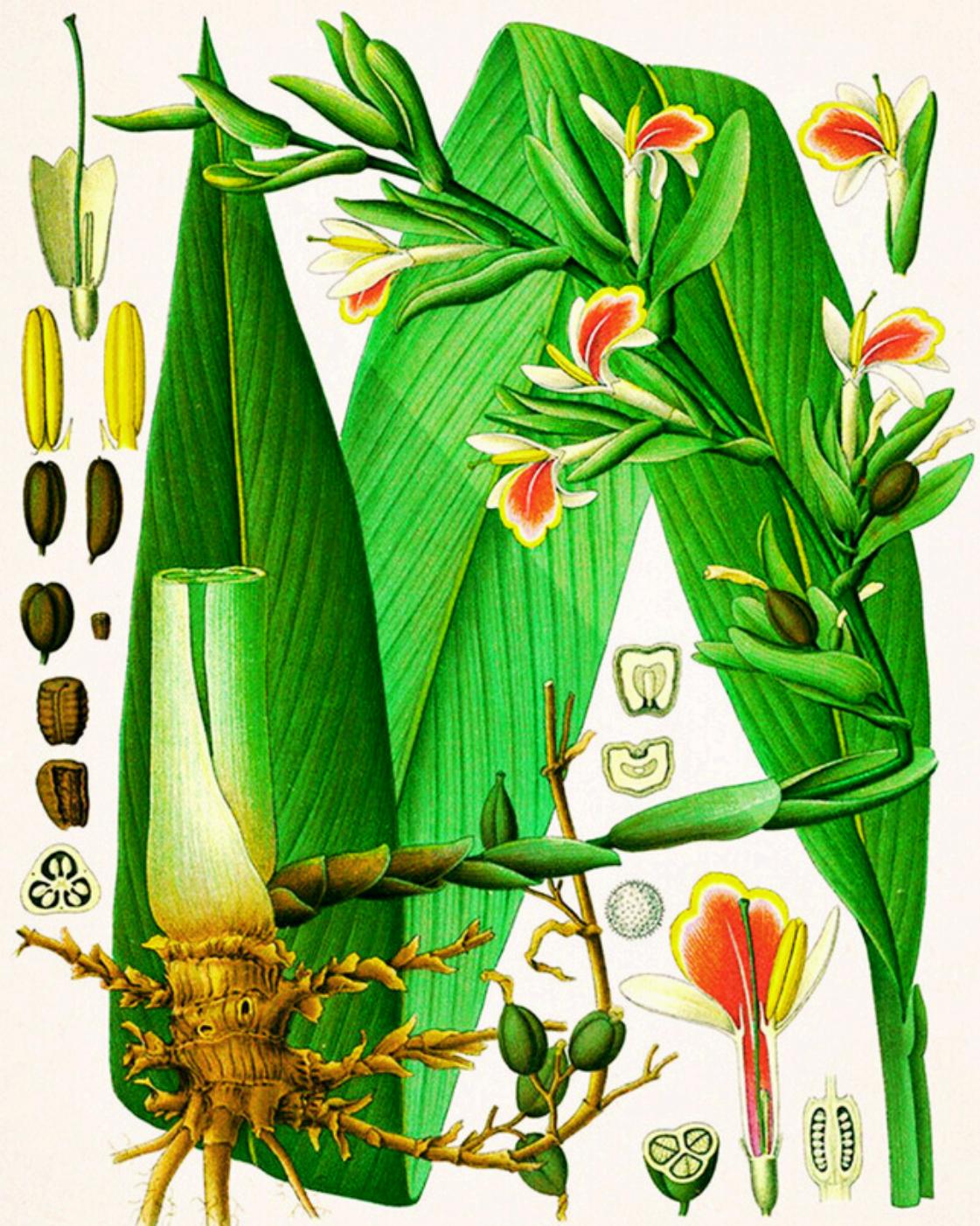
He launched Oxford University Press's first commercial online business, Oxford Reference Online before running various homeless units at HarperCollins UK, India, and Hachette.

When the doubtful charms of boardroom divas and bottom lines diminished, he returned to Sri Lanka, the land of his birth hundreds of years earlier, to rescue a spice plantation and set of art deco buildings that had gone feral in the jungle.

Today, as the Flame Tree Estate & Hotel, it has become one of the country's top ten boutique hotels, run by the kindest and most professional of teams; and overseen by several small schnauzers. The hotel is also the location for The Ceylon Press.

Besides running the Hotel and Press, he enjoys his hobbies of books, trees, dogs and, as a Cornishman, following the progress of the Cornish Independence Movement from afar.

Bianca C'Ffore, an expert on Sri Lankan fauna and flora, is also an accomplished opera singer, known to her admirers as The Milanese Nightingale. When not investigating the jungle around her, she spends her time taking care of the many needs of her capacious family.



Cardamom
Elettaria cardamomum