

THE SPICE OF LIFE



A variety of spices in India

“Variety is the spice of life.” Have you heard that saying? What does it mean? It means life gets dull without new things. Change can be good. Look at Europe in the 1400s. This saying was literal. Life was all about spices. Spices were important, because the middle and upper classes wanted them. Back then, there were few choices for foods. Foods from the Americas had not yet been discovered by the Europeans. They didn’t have potatoes, corn, or peanuts. They didn’t

have chocolate or strawberries. That’s just to name a few! Europeans had a diet that lacked variety. They relied on meat, but there were no freezers. They butchered in the fall. How could they store the meat? They used salt to dry and cure it. Eventually, salted meat lost its appeal. Spices like pepper, clove, and ginger helped the bland food taste better. But where were these spices? They came from faraway lands.

Explorers and their patrons wanted to find a better route to the spices. They set their sights on the “Spice Islands.” These were islands in Indonesia. They also wanted to reach Africa and India. Exotic flavors were there. They could be brought back to liven up meals! Of course, there were people living in the places where spices grew. These people knew they ruled the spice trade. They charged high prices. They knew the Europeans couldn’t get the spices any other way. Most traders made the prices so high that only the rich could afford their goods. That wasn’t all. A series of religious wars shut down the traders’ land routes. A sea route was needed.

This need for spice drove explorers. New ships were built. They could withstand rough waters and long trips. They were called *caravels*. The *astrolabe* was invented. It was a way to chart a ship’s course using the sky and stars. Sailors also used the magnetic compass. These were all new tools for navigation.

All of Europe wanted to bring home spices. Portugal led the way. Portugal was a small, poor country. But, its people were smart. They were passionate. They focused on sea trade. They sent out explorers. One was **Bartolomeu Dias**. Another was **Vasco da Gama**. They were the first explorers to set up sea trade routes. They went around the southern tip of Africa. They went to India! Without these men, European food would have stayed bland, and so would life. These sailors found new ways to chart the seas and reach new lands. They met new people. Cultures and languages were discovered. They left on a quest for new flavors. They returned with new knowledge. Their work sparked a wave of interest in the world. Old tales about sea monsters were laid to rest. Thanks to these men and the wish for different flavors, Europe entered the age of exploration.