SoE 6.1- What’s So Hot about Spices? (page 1 of 4)

Background: A spice is a strong-smelling substance used to flavor food and make medicine, incense and perfume. Spices do not grow in Europe. Strong-smelling substances from Europe, such as parsley, garlic, or oregano, are called herbs. To medieval people, herbs were common and ordinary; spices were exotic treats from Asia. For a rich person, buying spices was one way to show off wealth. Ordinary people could never afford to buy spices.

From where did spices come?

The Native Sites of Popular Spices

* Also native elsewhere
Spices as flavoring for food

The first recipe comes from a 14th-century English cookbook, “The Forme of Cury.” First the recipe is given in the original Middle English and then it is translated into modern English. Parsley, mint, garlic, thyme, sage, and salt either grow or can be found in England.

Verde Sawce (Middle English)

Take persel, mynt, garlek, a litul serpell and sawge, a litul canel, gynger, piper, wyne, brede, vyneger & salt; grynde it smal with safroun, & messe it forth.

Green Sauce (Modern English)

Take parsley, mint, garlic, a little thyme and sage, a little cinnamon, ginger, pepper, wine, bread, vinegar & salt; grind it [with a pestle and mortar] finely with saffron, & serve it.

Garbageys (Middle English)

Take fayre garbagys of chykonys, as þe hed, þe fete, þe ðyverys, an þe gysowrys; washe hem clene, an caste hem in a fayre potte, and caste þerto freysshe brothe of beef or ellys of moiton, an let it boyle; an alye it wyth brede, an ley on pepir an safroun, maces, clowys, an a lytil verjous an salt, an serve forth in the maner as a sewe.

Garbage / Giblets (Modern English)

Take the fair garbage/giblets of chickens, like the head, the feet, the livers, and the gizzards; wash them clean, and throw them in a fair pot, and throw in fresh broth of beef or else of mutton, and let it boil, and combine this with bread, and add pepper and saffron, mace, cloves and little sour fruit juice and salt, and serve it like a stew.
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**Spices as Medicines**

In the 11th and 12th centuries in southern Italy, Constantine the African and others translated medical books from Arabic into Latin. The Arabic medical books introduced Greek medical theories, Arabic techniques, and Asian and African medicinal plants to Latin Christian doctors. Some of those Latin Christians set up a medical school in Salerno (southern Italy) which became the University of Salerno in the early 1200s. The basic medical theory of that time was there were four elements in illnesses and medicines – hot, cold, dry, and wet. Medieval doctors treated a “hot” illness (such as fever) with a “cold” medicine (such as mandrake). Latin Christians learned about spices as medicines from the popular book, “Concerning the Present [Topic of Simple Medicines],” written by Mattheus Platearius in the 12th century, using theories from Salerno. Here are two excerpts from that book, the first on mandrake, a plant that grew in western Asia, and the second on sugar. Few people in Western Europe knew about sugar before the Normans conquered Sicily, where the Arabs had sugar mills. From sugar, doctors could make syrups, a new kind of medicine to the Europeans. The word “syrup” comes from Arabic.

**Mandrake**

*For pain of the head caused by heat, crushed leaves [of mandrake] should be placed upon the temples. Let them also be anointed with mandrake oil, which is made thus: having ground the “apples” of the mandrake in common oil, let them be macerated [softened by soaking in liquid] for a long time. Afterward, make a little decoction [liquid medicine] and let it be strained. This mandrake oil is said to be good for provoking sleep and for pain of the head from hot humors, if the forehead and temple are anointed with it.*

**Sugar**

*Its use is necessary in many things, namely in confections [making] of medicines for those suffering from acute fevers, and in syrups. . . . And note that a lot of sugar is good for thirsty travelers if it is offered when they do not have liquid in a hot region. And it is good for consumptives [patients with tuberculosis] and asthmatics when put in their food and drink, for it rectifies their emaciation [cures their thinness] and lubricates their dryness.*
Two modern historians described ways in which medieval doctors used spices as medicines:

**To prevent the bubonic plague:** Mix spices, put them inside a cloth, and wrap them up in small ball called a pomander. Then breathe in through the pomander. [Since medieval doctors believed that bad smells spread disease, breathing in “good” smells might prevent disease.]

**To prevent scurvy (a lack of vitamin C):** Eat ginger.

**To deaden toothache:** Apply oil of cloves. They also rubbed this on the forehead to cure a headache.

**Other spices used in medicines:** pepper, camphor, cinnamon, sugar, frankincense, ambergris, and mace.

**Spices were also burned as incense in churches and wealthy homes and used to make perfumes.**


**Instructions:** After you have read and discussed the sources with your group, answer these questions:

1. Are the Middle English recipes primary or secondary sources? How do you know?
2. Are the medicine descriptions primary or secondary sources? How do you know?
3. Make an interpretation based on the evidence: What was so hot about spices? Why did medieval people value spices so highly?
4. List two pieces of evidence that support your interpretation.