

What is a bazaar, anyway?

The word bazaar comes to us from the Persian word *bazar* or the older Pahlavi word *bahachar* which means “the place of prices.” As contact with Europe increased, the word was assimilated into Italian as *bazzara* and later transferred to English in its current form, *bazaar*.

The concept of the bazaar originated in ancient Islamic civilizations where it first appeared along important trade routes giving rise to complicated systems of negotiating prices for the array of foreign and exotic goods. As time went on, the bazaar area of the city became its social, religious, and financial center where even today, the bazaar retains a historical and local identity much more strongly than today’s modern shopping mall.

Some of the more interesting items that can be found in bazaars across the Middle East include...

DRAGON'S BLOOD

Dragon’s Blood (cinnabar) comes from the resin of a tree that grows on Socotra, an Island in the Indian Ocean near Yemen. This tree is a member of the lily family that produces cherry-sized berries which are covered with a red resin when ripe. This was used to produce a very powerful medicine as it was thought to be a mixture of dragon and elephant blood. It is also used as a dye as well as a remedy for eye and skin diseases, stomach problems, and headaches.

FRANKINCENSE

Frankincense is a white resin that is collected by making a deep incision into the tree. It burns with a white, pungent smoke that was thought to carry prayers to heaven. The Egyptians buried it in their royal tombs and it was used by Greeks and Romans as an offering to their gods. The smoke was used to counter bad smells, to fumigate clothes, and to repel insects. It was also thought to have a wide variety medicinal uses, including a cure or forgetfulness.



MYRRH

Myrrh, another resin collected from a tree, is found in Yemen and is the basis of “holy oil” and incense used by the Christian churches in sacraments and liturgical celebrations.. Myrrh is used to make perfumes and incense and in ancient times was often worth more than gold (it was five times more valuable than frankincense). Myrrh was used to mask the smell at Roman funerals and the Emperor Nero burned a significant amount at the funeral of his wife. It was also used in embalming and in the mummification process.



Myrrh is mentioned several times in the Bible and in the Torah (Exodus 30:23-33) it is described as the primary ingredient in the anointing oil God commanded Moses to make.

SPICES

Spices have inspired trade, exploration, and war since the beginning of civilization. Pepper was once worth its weight in gold; nutmeg once fueled a war as it was touted as a miracle cure for the plague.

Spices have been discovered in Egyptian tombs dating from as early as 3,000 BC. In addition to being used for embalming purposes, spices brought the favor of the gods to help with travel into the afterlife. Spices have been recorded in hieroglyphics on walls of palaces and on papyrus from very early in times.



The Ebers Papyrus (1550 BCE) records detailed information about the use of herbs and spices in medicine...many of the same herbs and spices that we use in contemporary cooking. It is interesting to consider that the original purpose of some of these spices was for medicinal purposes.

Consider spices as money! Pharisees in Biblical times paid tithes in cumin seeds; 3,000 pounds of peppercorns were part of the ransom paid by Rome to the Visigoths; and during the 14th century, in Germany, one pound of nutmeg could be traded for seven fat oxen; even rent could be paid in peppercorns.

CINNAMON: One of the first known spices and so highly prized that it was considered



to be a gift for royalty. Native to India, it was imported to Egypt as early as 2000 BCE. The Romans believed cinnamon's fragrance sacred and burned it at funerals. The use of cinnamon is mentioned in the Bible in Exodus 30:23 where Moses is commanded to use both sweet cinnamon and cassia and again in the Song of Solomon 4:14, "...cinnamon scents her garments like the smell of Lebanon."

Arab traders brought the spice via overland trade routes to Alexandria in Egypt, where it was purchased by Venetian traders in the bazaar and sold in Europe where the great demand for it and other spices gave rise to the age of exploration, which led indirectly to the discovery of America.

As medicine, cinnamon can be used to cure colds and digestive problems.

Today, cinnamon is primarily used as a cooking spice. It is used in savory dishes of chicken and lamb throughout the Middle East while in the United States it is primarily used to flavor cereals, fruits, and breads.

Nutmeg

This highly valued exotic spice is the kernel of the apricot-like fruit that is enclosed in a hard seedcase covered with a soft membrane that is the spice, Mace. It was a valued spice in medieval cuisine and during Elizabethan times, it was believed that nutmeg could ward off the plague. In England several hundred years ago, a few nutmeg nuts could be sold for enough money to ensure financial security for life.



The Roman philosopher Pliny wrote about nutmeg and mace in the first century. Indian Vedic literature recommended Nutmeg for bad breath, headaches, and fever. Arabian writing mentions its uses as an aphrodisiac and stomach medicine. Middle Eastern traders brought Nutmeg and mace to Southern Europe in the sixth century, and they were well known by the twelfth century from Italy to Denmark. In large quantities, nutmeg is poisonous and is a mild hallucinogen.

Pepper

Black pepper, along with white, green, and pink peppercorns is among the most popular spices ever—accounting for 20% of all spice trade today. Pepper has been used in mummification, as medicine, seasoning, and as an important economic factor from very early in history.



Pepper traveled along trade routes from India, up the Red Sea, overland to the Nile River, was barged to Alexandria, and then shipped to Europe...filling bazaars along the way and eventually adding to the impetus to find a short cut to India and the unintentional discovery of America.



Pepper was so valuable that it was used as currency. First the spice trade was controlled by the Persians and later by the Arabs and by the end of the Dark Ages, the central portions of the spice trade were under Islamic control.

Pepper was used for both a seasoning and a medicine. The *Syriac Book of Medicines*, dating from the 5th Century, prescribes pepper for everything from earache to gangrene...even as a treatment of eye problems...there is no current medical evidence that any of these treatments work!

*I am black on the outside, clad in a wrinkled cover,
Yet within I bear a burning marrow.
I season delicacies, the banquets of kings, and the luxuries of the table,
Both the sauces and the tenderized meats of the kitchen.
But you will find in me no quality of any worth,
Unless your bowels have been rattled by my gleaming marrow.*

7th Century, Bishop of Sherborne riddle describing the importance of pepper in England.

Web Sources: The British Museum. "Spices, Gold and Precious Stones: The South Arabian Spice Trade."
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The Spice House. History of Spices
New World Encyclopedia