

Spices: Exotic Flavors and Medicines [Review]

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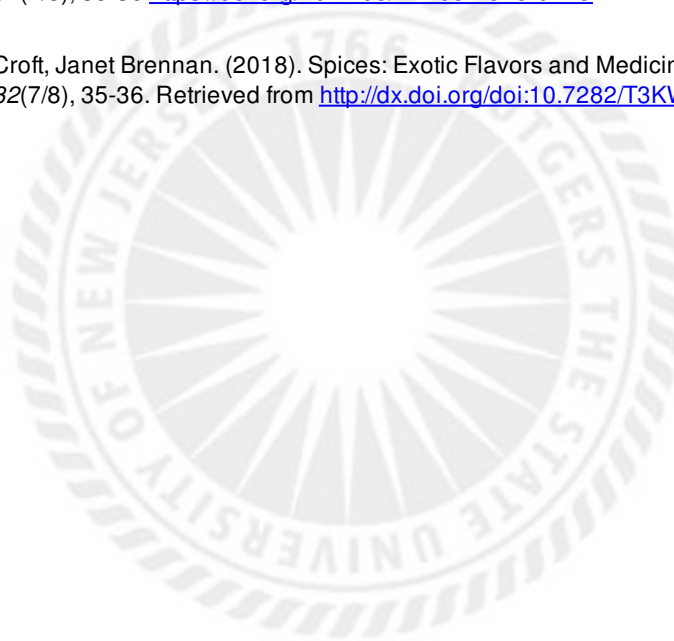
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Spices: exotic flavors and medicines.

<https://unitproj.library.ucla.edu/biomed/spice/index.cfm>. History & Special Collections, UCLA Louise M. Darling Biomedical Library. Online exhibit sponsored by The Barbara and Leon Rootenberg Endowment Fund. Narrative by Irwin Ziment. 2002.

This long-running online exhibit exploring the natural history and uses of spices is rather dated in appearance, having first been mounted in 2002 and showing no evidence of later updating. It presents a useful gathering of information on spices as flavorings *and* as medicines in the same place. The short introductory essays in the "Learning about Spices" section are informative at a relatively basic level, if not compellingly written, and the timeline is similarly simplified and broad. It is a decent enough resource for a junior high or high school paper, perhaps, but not for in-depth research.

The bulk of the exhibit consists of entries on various herbs and spices; twenty-nine of them, from Allspice (Pimento) to Vanilla, ranging in familiarity from the everyday Black Pepper to the medieval favorite Galangal, now rarely used in the West. Individual entries include pictures (not very good or clear ones, in most cases), scientific names, a list of places where the spice is cultivated, and a text section that might contain a description of the appearance of the plant, its useful parts, medicinal properties, historical significance, method of harvesting, etc.

Some features of the exhibit can be reached only from links within the individual entries. One is a table listing the taste notes, "hotness," and major uses of the individual spices, including many for which there is not a full entry; this is actually a handy feature and it is a shame it is buried like this. There is also a table listing the major chemical compound families found in spices, like alkaloids, resins, and terpenes.

A website dating back this far and never updated is a sort of artifact preserved in amber, perhaps more interesting as an example of early library online exhibit design than as a resource. In fact it even lacks information about when the exhibit was initially mounted; I had to find that information in WorldCat. A person in search of a list of spices and all information on a particular spice would find more extensive resources on Wikipedia, starting with the link collection "List of culinary herbs and spices" and working out through the extensive entries for individual plants, which generally include both culinary and medicinal uses as well as history (see, for example, the entry for *Laurus nobilis*, the bay laurel). Cooking websites like thekitchn.com can also provide a wealth of well-illustrated information. Reliable information on medicinal properties might be a little harder to find, and sticking to sites like WebMD.com might be the safest tactic. There may be a need for an overview site like *Spices: exotic flavors and medicines*, but without a design and content update, it cannot compete with these other resources.