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posh Spice

Maine is the last place on Earth you'd expect to find fresh spices... unless you know where to look. BY CLAIRE Z. CRAMER



What international spices can we find in Maine? How can our global embrace be locally approached? Creatively, it appears.

START IN THE BACKYARD

"We toast a lot of chiles here," says Matt Burns, in the kitchen at Zapoteca on Fore Street. "Arbols, anchos, pasillas, mulattos, and not as often as you'd think, chipotles. We toast them, cool 'em down, seed them, and grind them into our own powders. This is always better than any powder you can buy. All you need is a coffee grinder or a good blender. We make a lot of adobos and moles, so we're toasting or rehydrating chiles every day." Maine farmers grow many

In the gin: You may be surprised to learn it's not just juniper. Coriander, cardamom, anise seeds, cassia bark, orris root, rosemary, lavender, cinnamon, star anise, fennel, nutmeg, mace, and angelica can also be found in the gins of the world. They're on display at Sweetgrass Farm Winery & Distillery's tasting room at 324 Fore Street. The recipe for their own Back River Gin is, however, "a secret."

varieties of peppers now, including hot chiles, and Burns uses these too. "In season, we take the two-minute walk up to Monument Square to see what they've got on Wednesdays. Occasionally, local farmers dry out some chiles—it's more hobbying and toying around, but we're always willing to try them when they're available."

"We address this challenge in several ways," says David Levi, chef/owner of Vinland, the Portland restaurant strictly dedicated to fresh and local everything. "We use native-grown [herbs and] spices, including ginger, turmeric, coriander,

cayenne, anise hyssop, and lemongrass. We seek out exceptionally flavorful ingredients rather than assuming—falsely—that a carrot is just a carrot, a turnip is a turnip. We use wild herbs and spices like juniper, white pine, black trumpet [mushroom], and chaga [an edible fungus that grows on birch trees]... We find ways to highlight the intrinsic 'spiciness' of certain foods...like the intense pepperiness of bolted arugula."

CLIMATE CONTROLS

"Spice flavor tones take on the characteris-

HUNGRY EYE

tics of where they're grown," says Christine Pistole of Dresden, a Gryffon Ridge Spice merchant.

OK, so can we dry the hard, round seeds produced in the fall by our backyard cilantro and end up with coriander seeds?

"You can. I've done it. But they just won't taste quite the same. Most herbs and spices come from Asia—they've got the heat and dry soil. We just don't have that kind of growing season in Maine. I've grown cumin plants a few times and harvested the seeds and they're fine, but not as intense. And there's nowhere near the quantity I need [for her business].

"I go through about 500 pounds of cumin seeds in a year, but in small batches. I toast and grind the seeds myself [for every spice she sells in ground or powdered form]. As soon as you toast and grind, you're releasing the essential oils in the seed, so you want it to be as fresh as possible. My batches are small enough to keep the flavors so much brighter than super-market jars."

The other wild card is a commercial drying facility. "We don't have one in Maine. The state just doesn't grow enough spice or herbs to make one practical. And seeds and chiles need to be dried as soon as possible for freshness. Some are slow-dried, some require some smoking. If fresh spice comes from Asia, the first stop is California, and they do have drying facilities. It's not practical to send them all the way to Maine." You can dry the seeds and chiles you grow yourself the old-fashioned way—in the air in well-ventilated conditions—but this doesn't meet commercial production regulations.

Johnny's Selected Seeds' 2014 catalog is proof that Maine's herb sophistication continues—more than a dozen varieties of basil, an entire page of parsleys, lemongrass for Southeast Asian dishes. But there's nothing intended for planting here that will become an actual spice, other than good old dill weed maturing into dill seeds for our pickles.

Pistole imports spice seeds and dried chiles—strictly organic varieties—to create chile powders, spice rubs, and mixes. She has an extensive line, from whole peppercorns of many hues to ground Aleppo pepper and asfoetida to Saigon cinnamon.



Clockwise from above: Vinland's chef David Levi seasons locally; fiery dried Thai chiles from Portland's Mittenheap Market; white peppercorns from Gryffon Ridge; John Watts harvests Maine Sea Salt.



Gryffon supplies Whole Foods markets in the Northeast, along with many independent stores in Maine such as Rosemont Market, Browne Trading, and LeRoux Kitchen in Portland and Bow Street Market in Freeport, along with other local accounts with sausage makers and butchers.

MIXING IT UP

"Everything I use in my blends is purchased," says pepper connoisseur Jessica Moore of her Regina Spice line of spice, herb blends, and rubs which she manufactures at 179 Woodford Street in Portland. Her alchemy combines the exotic and local into such mixes as Sweet Smoky Fire, an ancho-chipotle-maple rub for meat. She grinds the seeds she uses and sticks to small batches. "I try for U.S.-grown if possible, and organic if possible, but I'll take U.S. over organic if necessary for something like garlic granules. They really need to be fresh and pungent."

Moore, a founder 15 years ago of Port-

land Spice Co. in the bygone Portland Public Market, believes in the power of spice.

"My absolute favorite peppercorn is tellicherry—really pungent, not bitter, and the best texture for allowing you to control the grind size. White pepper's hotter; its bright, hot tones are the bridge to lift flavors that might otherwise be heavy on the palette. People think it's only for cream sauces because it doesn't show black flecks. But it's essential to something like hot-and-sour soup."

Regina Spices hit the market in Horton's Fine Food on the first floor in the Public Market House in Monument Square.

"Spices and herbs are a low entrance into fancier—and healthier—cooking," says Moore. "It's an easy way to start raising the bar to make your food more interesting. I always say, if you can roast a chicken breast, you can give it some spice."

"We get our spices from a place in Boston," says Manu Singh at Tandoor restaurant on Exchange Street. He offers a glimpse into what may explain the Tandoor's 20 years on a street where trendy cafés come and go. "It's the same coriander and cumin and curry spices anyone can get. But you mix your own masala. *The way you mix it makes it yours.*" Aha.

THE POLITICS OF SALT

If Maine can be said to have a truly native seasoning, it is salt. "Maine Sea Salt is the first micro salt works in the continental U.S.," says Steve Cook, who, with his wife Sharon, has been drying pure, unadulterated sea salt from Atlantic seawater near their home in Washington County since 1998. (There are no quantity restrictions on seawater.) "We produce 40,000 pounds annually, [and] we've been growing every year. It takes about four gallons of sea water to make a pound of Maine Sea Salt. Sea salt is a food, and I have an FDA license." The Cooks' salts and Mt. Desert Rock Sea Salt from Swan's Island are in retail stores throughout Maine.

Premium "finishing" salt, flavored salt, and smoked salt are big business. Maine Sea Salt has some flavored and smoked versions, Stonewall Kitchen carries salts, and

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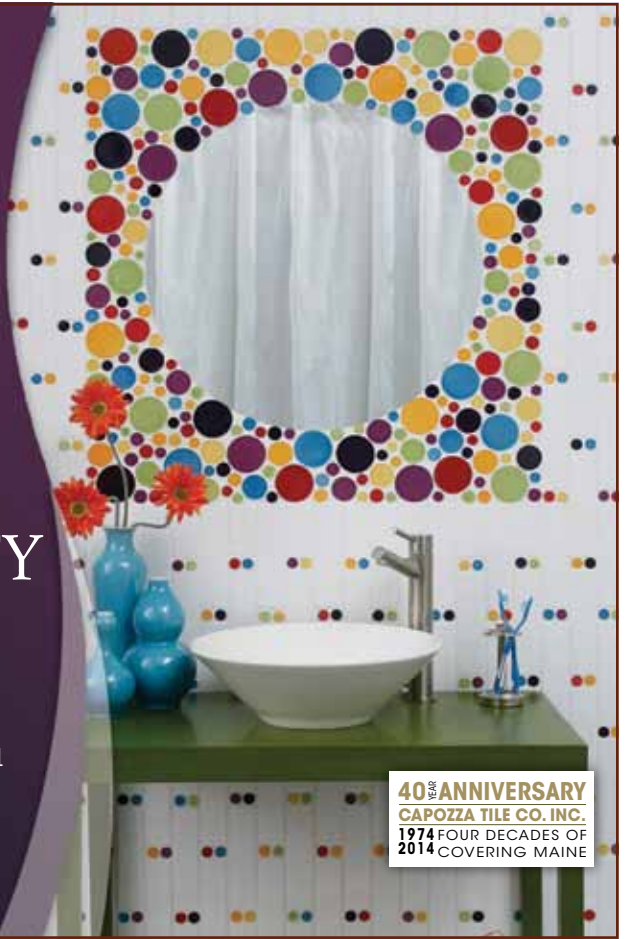


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HUNGRY EYE

Posh Spice (continued from page 44)

Vervacious on Commercial Street gets global with Mexican chili pepper salt, saffron *fleur de sel*, Sichuan, Sicilian, spicy curry, and star anise salts. The Salt Cellar in the Old Port is devoted to all things salt, including a selection from Maine.

Some of us find the concept of apple-wood-smoked, lemon-lime, espresso-vanilla, or rosemary salt puzzling, but we're apparently in the minority. "The average person goes for flavored," says Randall Chubbuck at the Salt Cellar. "Maybe one in 10 goes for plain sea salt." He sings the praises of "amazing black and white truffle salt from Italy" and reveals that smoked salt is "popular with pizza chefs who put it in the dough to add depth and subtle smokiness. It turns out it's also really good on moose. My dad got one this year, and I tried it."

LIFE BY CHOCOLATE

You never know where the spice road will lead. How about a spicy candy bar? At Bixby & Co. in Belfast, Kate McAleer makes what she calls "nutritious, all-natural, vegan, gluten-free" chocolate bars, each containing a fruit, a nut, "and my fourth dimension, a spice." Her white chocolate bar with pistachios, almonds, goji berries, and cardamom won a Good Food award at the Winter Fancy Food Show in San Francisco in January.

THE GIN GAME

Spices are also the soul of distilled spirits, a thriving cottage industry in Maine.

"We go through hundreds of pounds of juniper berries," says Constance Bodine, who owns Sweetgrass Farm Winery and Distillery in Union with her husband Keith. She is pouring out a taste of their Back River Gin in Sweetgrass's shop and tasting room on Fore Street in the Old Port. It's wonderfully bright and peppery with juniper flavor. Just not Maine juniper. "There's no commercial juniper berry harvesting in Maine, even though they're perfectly edible—I've picked them and cooked with them," says Constance. The Bodines' gin is distilled with Hungarian juniper—and with Maine blueberries. Blueberries, in this pure, clear spirit? "The distilling process removes all color."

Sweetgrass's line includes wine, vermouth, apple brandy, whiskey, and two kinds of bitters using Maine blueberries and cranberries. A dash of these bitters in plain seltzer or tonic is a revelatory taste explosion. ■



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