November's Spice of the Month

Cloves

How a mysterious spice made its way into the world

Modern cuisine is flavored with a rich medley of spices from the farthest corners of the globe. We take for granted the fact that we can buy jars of spices, even scarce and exotic ones, for a few dollars each and use them in our everyday cooking. Because spices occupy a small space in the supermarket and in our kitchen cabinets, we often overlook their importance in shaping the modern world. It is hard to comprehend the centuries of exploration, conquest, slavery and war that brought these products to our shelves, and it is impossible to estimate the number of lives and fortunes that were risked and lost along the way. Spices were among the first commercial products to be traded over long distances. Used to flavor food and preserve meat, spices such as black pepper, cinnamon, ginger and cardamom were carried from the tropics to emerging civilizations in Asia, the Middle East and Europe.

The story of cloves is especially colorful, involving a complex, secret system of trade that lasted for thousands of years. Cloves are the dried flower buds of Syzygium aromaticum, a tropical tree in the myrtle family. The flower buds contain high concentrations of eugenol, an aromatic chemical compound that is also found in cinnamon, nutmeg and basil. The tree is native to a row of volcanic islands, the Spice Islands or Moluccas, in what is now Indonesia's North Maluku Province Province (see map on p. 34). Prior to the 17th century, clove trees could not be found anywhere else.

There is archaeological evidence that cloves made their way from the Spice Islands to world markets in ancient times. Like many other spices, they appear to have reached India by 1700 BC and southern Europe by the first century AD. We can find additional clues about the history of cloves by studying their integration into the cultures and traditions of Asia. Cloves are a particularly important component of Indian cuisine, appearing in a wide variety of spicy dishes and in spiced teas. This suggests an ancient and strong connection between the Spice Islands and many parts of India. Cloves also have widespread traditional use in China and Japan, where they are used to make incense and perfume.

Merchants kept the location of the Spice Islands a closely guarded secret for thousands of years. Ancient writings from Asia, the Middle East, and Europe mention possible locations of the islands, but few of them are even remotely accurate. Incredibly, this secrecy was maintained as cloves became increasingly common in markets worldwide. With an aura of mystery surrounding their origin, fanciful myths about cloves began to emerge. One theory, persisting for centuries, suggested that cloves could only be grown and harvested by genies using magical techniques.

By the first century AD, traders had learned to sail westward across the Indian Ocean on the steady monsoon winds, carrying cloves and other spices from Southeast Asia to

North Africa. From there, overland routes brought spices to the Mediterranean Sea, where they could be distributed far and wide to markets throughout the Roman Empire.

When Rome lost control of North Africa in the seventh century, a new trading route was established through the Middle East to what is now Turkey. Trade along that route flourished for 800 years, until it was interrupted by the rise of the Ottoman Turks. Without an overland connection to the Indian Ocean, Europe lost its supply of precious Asian spices. As the nations of Middle-Ages Europe became desperate to reestablish the spice trade, they launched expeditions to chart new maritime routes, beginning the Age of Discovery.

Resolving the mysterious origin of cloves became a top priority for those expeditions. It took more than a century of exploration, multiple around-the-world voyages and an extraordinary investment of wealth to pinpoint the location of the Spice Islands. Portuguese explorers arrived first, in the mid-15th century, followed soon by the Spanish, English and Dutch. The first detailed maps of the world's continents were produced during those early voyages, as were the first records of the plants and animals of distant lands.

As the world's powerful nations began to expand and colonize territories overseas, the Spice Islands were the prize they coveted most. Through a series of bloody conflicts, the Dutch seized and controlled the Spice Islands for 350 years. In their quest to monopolize the supply of cloves forever, the Dutch established plantations to the south on the well-fortified island of Ambon. Once those plantations were able to adequately supply global markets, Dutch soldiers began burning all clove trees in their native range of North Maluku. That action wasl strongly resisted by the local people, who had traditionally planted clove trees to commemorate the birth of each child.

Somehow, even under the tight grip of the Dutch, clove seeds were eventually smuggled out to other tropical regions in the 18th century. The trees were propagated in French and English colonies, and cloves quickly became widely available and less expensive.

As the Dutch monopoly was finally broken, cloves were reestablished as an important part of the North Maluku economy and culture. Today, the intensely fragrant flower buds can be found drying in the sun along roadsides throughout the islands. North Maluku is now peaceful, and little evidence of its bloody history remains.

The majority of the world's cloves now come from elsewhere, primarily Zanzibar, Madagascar and Sri Lanka. The bulk of the world supply is used to make clove cigarettes, which are especially popular in Asia. Cloves remain a favorite culinary spice throughout the world, used in a variety of baked goods, meat dishes and soups. They stand as one of the best examples of a local crop that skyrocketed onto the world stage and forever transformed the global economy.

This article was written by Carl Lewis, Ph.D. and originally published in the Fall 2010 edition of the Tropical Garden*. Minor changes from the print version of this article were introduced to improve readability in a digital format.*

Gingerbread French Toast

This is an easy-to-make gingerbread-flavored French toast recipe that gives you that warm, fuzzy holiday feeling. Serve it with butter and syrup or brown sugar.

Prep Time: 10 mins
Cook Time: 10 mins
Total Time: 20 mins
Servings: 4

Ingredients

½ cup milk

2 eggs

1 tablespoon white sugar

2 teaspoons rum extract

1 teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon

¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg

¼ teaspoon ground cloves

⅛ teaspoon ground ginger

4 slices white bread

1 tablespoon unsalted butter, or as needed

Directions

Whisk milk, eggs, sugar, rum extract, salt, cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, and ginger together in a bowl. Dip each bread slice in egg mixture, turning to coat both sides.

Melt butter in a nonstick skillet over medium heat. Add bread slices in a single layer; cook until golden brown, 3 to 5 minutes per side.

Cook's Note

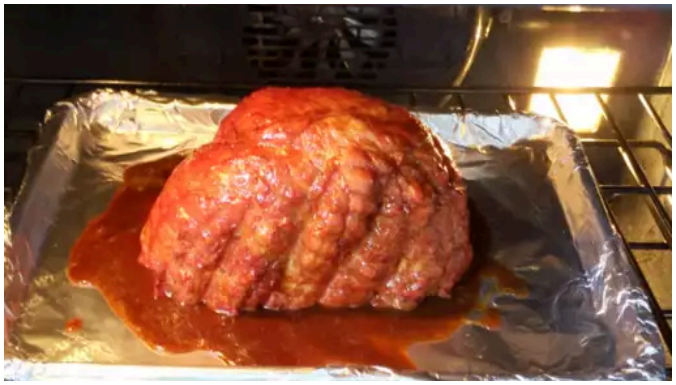
Top servings with more cinnamon, nutmeg, and clove, if desired.

Vegetable oil or cooking spray can be substituted for butter. Vanilla extract can be substituted for rum extract. Wheat bread can be substituted for white bread, if desired.

This can also be cooked in an electric skillet.

Source: allrecipes.com

Honey Clove Ham Glaze



Made for Thanksgiving ham. Received lots of compliments! Adjust clove and ginger to taste. Pour glaze over cooked ham or after ham is sliced.

Ingredients

½ cup brown sugar

½ cup honey

1 tablespoon spicy brown mustard, or more to taste

¾ teaspoon ground cloves, or more to taste

¼ teaspoon ground ginger

Directions

Mix brown sugar, honey, brown mustard, cloves, and ginger together in a microwave-safe bowl; heat in the microwave until sugar is dissolved, 45 to 60 seconds.

Ginger Spice Cake Doubles as Dessert for Breakfast

It's as perfect for dessert as it is paired with coffee at your holiday brunch.

Active Time: 30 mins

Total Time: 3 hrs 40 mins

Yield: 10 servings

Ingredients

Baking spray
1 cup boiling water
3/4 cup chopped peeled fresh ginger, preferably young ginger
1 cup granulated sugar
1 cup canola oil
1 cup unsulfured dark molasses
2 teaspoons baking soda
1/2 teaspoon kosher salt
2 large eggs, at room temperature

2 cups (about 8 1/2 ounces) all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon ground allspice
1/2 teaspoon ground cloves
Pinch of ground nutmeg
Pinch of black pepper
Whipped cream, powdered sugar, pomegranate arils, and thinly sliced candied ginger, for garnish

Directions

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Line the bottom of a 9-inch springform pan with parchment paper; lightly grease sides of pan with baking spray. Tightly wrap outer sides and bottom of pan in a double layer of aluminum foil; place on a rimmed baking sheet.

Process 1 cup boiling water and ginger in a blender until smooth, about 1 minute. Add sugar, oil, molasses, baking soda, and salt; process until well combined, about 15 seconds Add eggs; process until just incorporated, about 15 seconds.

Whisk together flour, cinnamon, allspice, cloves, nutmeg, and pepper in a medium bowl; add to ginger mixture in a blender. Process until just combined, about 30 seconds. Pour batter into the prepared pan. Bake on a rimmed baking sheet in a preheated oven until a wooden pick inserted in the center of the cake comes out clean, about 1 hour. (It's OK if the cake domes and cracks slightly.) Let cool in a pan on a wire rack for 10 minutes. Remove foil and pan sides; let cool completely, about 2 hours.

Dollop whipped cream around edges of cake, and dust center with powdered sugar. Top whipped cream with pomegranate arils and candied ginger.

Make ahead

The baked spice cake can be refrigerated (without the toppings) in an airtight container for up to two days.

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