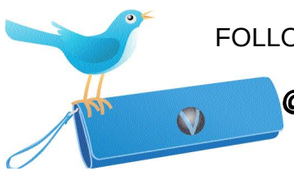

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In a wonderful new book, Ben-Erik van Wyk offers a guide to nearly all herbs and spices in existence, detailing their propagation, cultivation and culinary uses. He spoke to Heather Dugmore

BOTH FOODIES AND GARDENERS WILL RELISH NEW BOOK

MANY of us like to picture ourselves as wannabe Masterchefs, and with our stock pot of cultures in South Africa there's an exciting choice of herbs and spices available to us.

To add to this we can now indulge ourselves in the world of tastes and flavours by paging through a new book by Ben-Erik van Wyk. A professor of botany at the University of Johannesburg, he has created a guide to more than 120 different culinary herbs, spices and flavourings from all over the world.

It takes us back to the earliest use of spices by ancient civilisations and guides us on a journey of discovery from Ethiopia to China via 600 vivid photos of herbs and spices Van Wyk has gathered from the far corners.

"It's been a life-long interest of mine to find out about useful plants," he says. "Through travelling, reading, tasting and experimenting, I've managed to gather most of the herbs and spices of the cultures and culinary traditions of the world and describe their origins, tastes, flavours and smells."

One of his favourite culinary traditions is that of Ethiopia.

"To me it is the cultural centre of Africa and it is the only African country that has never been colonised," says Van Wyk. "It had an incredible ancient written language called Ge'ez that later evolved into the official current language, Ethiopian Amharic. Ethiopia also has one of the few distinct culinary traditions in Africa, and you can find Ethiopian and Abyssinian restaurants all over the world."

The signature Ethiopian dish is a pancake-like flatbread made from teff called injera. It can be up to half a metre in diameter, and little heaps of spices and spiced dishes are placed in the middle of it. All those partaking of the meal then sit around the injera and break off pieces, which they dip into the tasty delicacies in the middle.

"The most widely used Ethiopian spice mixture is berbere – it's a bright orange-red ground mixture usually used in savoury meat, vegetable or bean stews accompanying the injera," Van Wyk explains.

The ingredients of berbere include: cayenne or chilli pepper, Ethiopian thyme, fenugreek seeds, coriander seeds, cinnamon bark, black pepper corns, long peppers, cloves, ajowan (similar to celery seed), blackseeds or nigella, Ethiopian cardamom or korarima, salt, red onion, garlic and ginger.

Several of the ingredients are indigenous; others are indicative of the diverse cultural influences of spices. Chilli peppers were introduced to the Ethiopians (or Abyssinians as they were called) by the Portuguese with whom they had a trade relationship in the 1500s. Portuguese explorers brought chilli peppers back from Latin America. Cinnamon bark is from Sri Lanka; black pepper corns and long peppers are from India; cloves are from Indonesia; and garlic is an ancient spice herb that has been cultivated for over 3 000 years. Its closest wild relative grows in Central Asia – places like Iran, Iraq and Pakistan – and was first used by the ancient civilisations there.

Trade in spices dates back to the overland spice and silk trade, when camel trains from China and India brought these Eastern riches to Europe through Istanbul and Alexandria. This created vast wealth in centres like Venice, Naples and Genoa that once held the monopoly on the spice trade.

Van Wyk says: "Some argue the Renaissance would not have happened without the spice trade as wealthy merchants were then able to patronise artists, musicians and philosophers."

We continue our journey to China where the Chinese or star anise is by far the most important traditional spice. A beautiful star-shaped dried fruit with an aniseed flavour, it is the main ingredient in wu xiang fen – the classical Chinese five-spice mixture, which, in addition to star anis contains fennel seeds, cassia, cloves and Sichuan pepper, all indigenous to China or early imports into China.

Traditional Chinese food is a favourite of Van Wyk's who still clearly remembers an evening of fine Chinese dining in Singapore in 1998 with South African culinary guru, the late Lannice Snyman.

"We were both doing final checks on books being printed there – Lannice's was a wonderful book on South African cooking called *Rainbow Cuisine* – and she joined us at a top Chinese restaurant overlooking the harbour. There we had one of the signature dishes of Chinese cooking, prepared since the Imperial era in Chinese history: Peking duck."

In Chinese cooking all the senses are aroused in a yin-yang of tastes, textures, flavours and colours, he explains. "At this restaurant we were served slithers of the dark brown, savoury-spicy, crispy skin of the duck followed by slithers of the succulent, soft, pure white meat."

Chinese traditional cooking recognises seven tastes: the four standard tastes of sweet, sour, bitter and salt, then savoury or umami which was recognised in 1985 (the taste from fermented sauces like soy and fish sauces); ma (the fizz or buzz effect from Sichuan pepper) and the pungency of chilli peppers, which they regard as a taste, even though it is actually a pain trigger.

Another favourite culinary tradition of Van Wyk's is Cape Dutch cooking, which brings us all the way back across the world to home shores. "Cape Dutch cooking is based on 17th-century Dutch cooking, which in turn was strongly influenced by Malaysian and Indonesian spices and flavours as a result of the Dutch having colonised these parts of the world," he explains.

One of his favourite Cape Dutch spices is dried mandarin peel, also known as naartjie peel or *nartjieskil*, which is used to flavour the traditional Cape sweet potato dish known as *gestoofde patats*.

To make this, slice up good old-fashioned sweet potatoes into 5mm thick slices, add generous amounts of butter and sugar and a generous sprinkling of dried mandarin peel. Bake in the oven until the sweet potato is soft and the butter and sugar becomes caramelised. Delicious!

In South Africa and most parts of southern Africa there is little evidence of ancient use of spices in food. To flavour food the Khoisan used the wild onion from the northern Cape – the only indigenous onion we have in this country.

We also know the herb they most widely used was the round-leaved buchu, indigenous to the Cederberg region of the Cape. However, as far as we know it was used by the Khoisan as a perfume and skin ointment and not for culinary use, as it was by the Cape Dutch settlers.

The Cape Dutch used it to flavour jams, jellies and sweets (today it is used to flavour black wine gums), and they used it to flavour brandy and liqueurs. Being of Cape Dutch origin, Van Wyk made full use of this tradition, and used buchu brandy as a love herb when he was a student at Stellenbosch University.

The story goes he invited a young woman named Mariana to sample buchu brandy at a stylish local hotel. The young woman was clearly impressed by it for she became his wife, and is still his wife after many a year.

He suggested this was probably a good note on which to end our discussion, which is a shame because he tells such wonderful stories about the herbs, spices, food plants and medicinal plants of the world – and he has written books on all three.

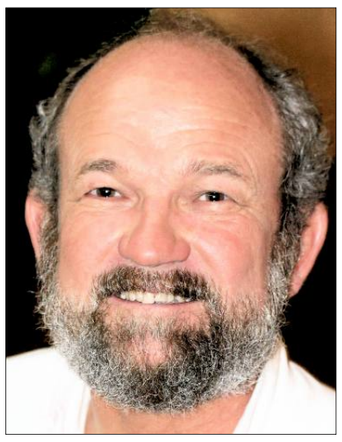
But, as they say, no one should come between a man, his secrets and his buchu brandy.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HERBS AND SPICES

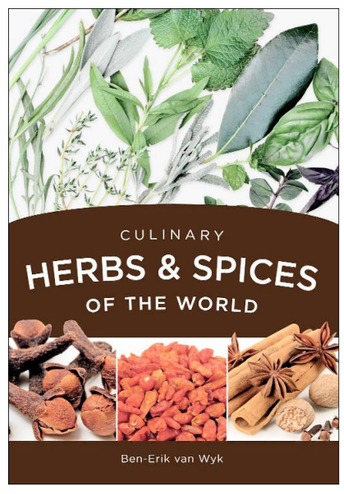
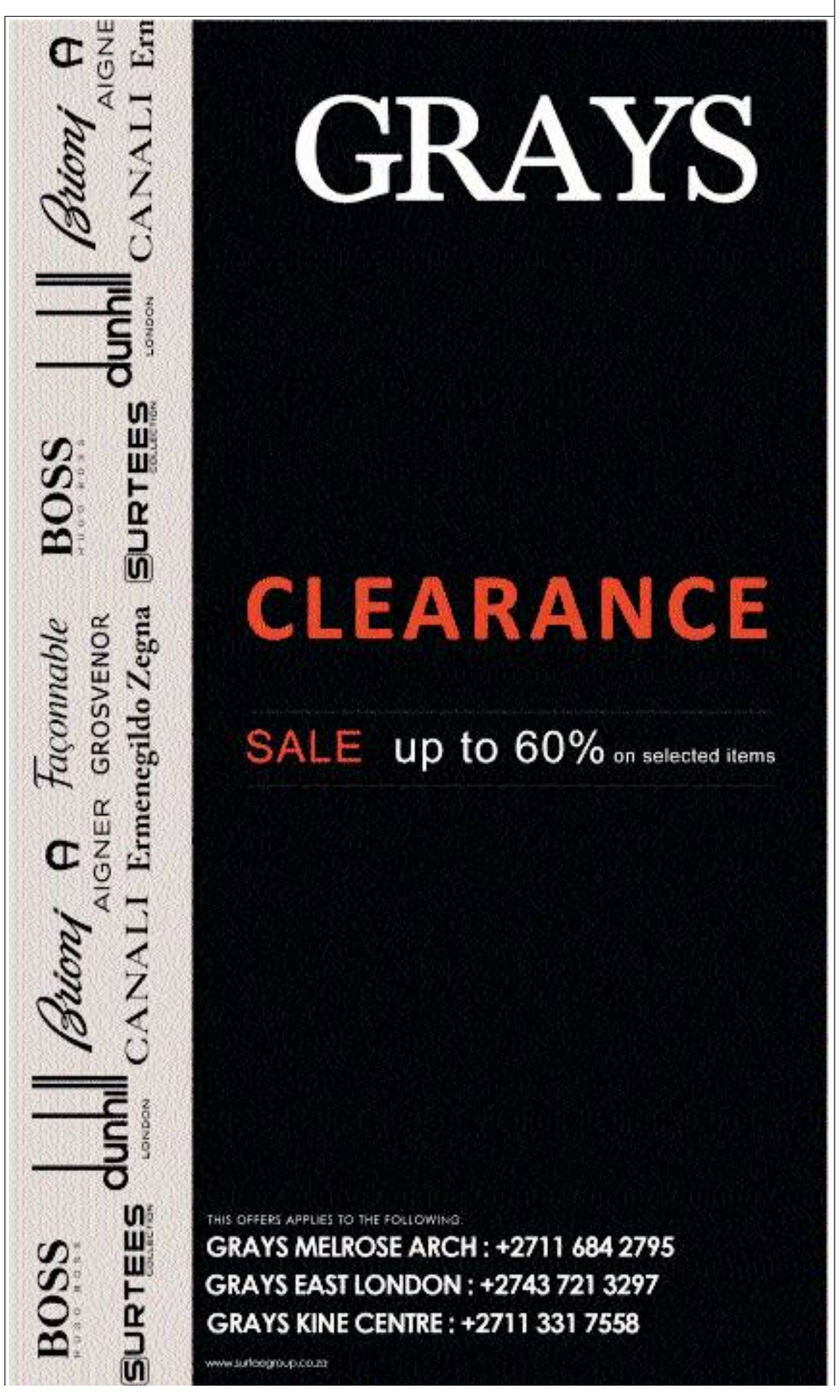
Spices are any dried part of a plant, usually the fruits and seeds, but sometimes also the leaves, stems or bark are spices, says Ben-Erik van Wyk.

Herbs are the leaves or leafy parts of the plant, and are used fresh or dried. Fresh herbs are usually more flavourful and aromatic.

There is an overlap between what we call herbs and what we call spices, and these are called spice herbs. Dried parsley is one of them. There are also some tricky cases like garlic, which can be described as a herb, but when it is dried it is more of a spice.



Author Ben-Erik Van Wyk



Culinary Herbs and Spices of the World is available just in time for Christmas at a price of R350. It is co-published by Kew Publishing in the UK, University of Chicago Press in the US and Briza Publications in SA. Get it at leading bookstores and through Briza's website, www.briza.co.za