

**Herbs and Medicinal Cooking**  
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Do herbs and spices actually have a role in cooking and foods or are they simply just used for favouring?

Absolutely they do! In fact, today we take the herbs and spices in our foods for granted. For at least 10,000 years, herbs have been added to food.

Southeast Asia is home to many of our most popular spices today but is also responsible for many significant events in world history because of them. Tropical spices were perceived as prestigious which sparked greed, exploitation, and political upheaval. It is no wonder that the old saying, “to rule the spice trade, is to rule the world” as that was exactly the way it was centuries ago. Everyone wanted them. The transportation, communication, and marketing from the spice trade actually played a major role in access to world and its wealth. The Egyptians, ancient Chinese, Arabs, Romans, the Crusaders, British, and French fought, undercut, and smuggled the precious goods. Even Christopher Columbus played a part by paving the way for the industry expansion to the Americas.<sup>1</sup>

Why all the craze? Herbs and spices have been valued for their medicinal, aromatic, preserving and flavouring properties. They have been used to heal the sick, strengthen the weak, and promote longevity. Preserving food with the anti-microbial and antioxidant properties was a huge bonus especially in warm climates. Moreover, herbs and spices are used to turn a bland dinner into a splendid meal.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, Confection Boxes were today’s medicine chests for the elite. They contained twelve different kinds of sugary pastilles made from spices and herbs mixed with honey. Typically, they were almonds, anise, caraway, cherry kernels, cinnamon, cloves, coriander, cubeb, fennel, ginger, nutmeg, and pepper.<sup>2</sup> Today, most of these items can be found in kitchens around the world.

### **Therapeutic properties of Culinary Herbs and Spices**

Upon close observation, the therapeutic properties are often quickly revealed. The senses are stimulated by the prevailing aromas and delectable tastes from the volatile oils. Often these very oils give the leading medicinal effects. The aromas gently stimulate the olfactory nerves, which are traced directly to the limbic system. This is the part of the brain associated with memory and emotions thereby affecting the body on a psychological level. Furthermore, the various tastes, pungent, bitter, spicy, sweet, salty, and sour, all have an amazing direct effect throughout the body on a physiological level, even before the food hits our stomach. Finally, once ingested, pharmacological effects begin to take place.

When we think about flavouring we often think only about the taste itself and how we perceive it to be – pleasant or not. However, there is so much more to taste than just that. In fact, it carries with it a knowledge that goes way back in many ancient cultures. It has come to be widely accepted that each specific taste engenders particular actions on the body. It is referred to as the energetics of the herb or spice. For example, think about the feeling you get in your mouth when you taste a lemon; immediately the tissues in your mouth tighten up (astringent) and you pucker up.

The following is a generalized chart of the various tastes, effects and action, or the energetics, that a taste generates.







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<sup>1</sup> Hughes, M. 2000. *Flavor Foods – Spices and Herbs*. Lerner Publications, Minneapolis.

<sup>2</sup> Lehner, E., Lehner, J. 1962. *Folklore & Odysseys of Food & Medicinal Plants*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, NY.