



**T H E
N E W**

Spice

T R A D E R S

Today's boutique spice merchants are championing ethical goods with an emphasis on sustainability, writes ALECIA WOOD.

The 15th Century saw two critical European voyages: Christopher Columbus sailed to the Americas, and Vasco da Gama sailed around the tip of Africa. Both were headed for India – but only da Gama made it, arriving in what is now the coastal Indian state of Kerala. At the time, it was a major shipping hub for India's abundant pepper crops.

The exchange of spices from Asia and India into Europe had flourished since Roman times and paved the way for important trade routes, but da Gama's arrival in India marked the start of European powers' mission to gain a direct foothold in the lucrative spice trade, leading to conquests and colonisation. As Yale University history professor Paul Freedman puts it: "The passion for spices underlies the beginning of the European colonial enterprise, a force that remade the demography, politics, culture, economy, and ecology of the entire globe." And that's how, from this problematic past, the global spice industry came to be worth some \$24 billion today.

Any product so valuable is likely to attract short-cuts. The prized saffron has a long history of adulteration, and spices are still susceptible to food fraud. In 2016, CHOICE investigated oregano for sale in Australian supermarkets, revealing that most of the products tested had as little as 10% of the herb. Meanwhile, Fairtrade International flags the influence of large spice trading companies means power imbalances for spice growers and unfair wages.

These days, the average Aussie grocer is likely to stock bean-to-bar chocolate, while baristas tender bags of batch-roasted Sumatran coffee. Is it time for the cinnamon that graces our morning porridge to enjoy the same regard for provenance, quality and ethics? Enter a new crop of direct-to-consumer businesses determined to foster a shift in the herb and spice industries.



PHOTOGRAPHY SANA JAVERI KADRI (TURMERIC), ANDRIA LO (SPICES, RIGHT), GETTY IMAGES (SPICES, LEFT).



Single origin Pragati turmeric harvested in Andhra Pradesh, India. Below: Indigenous Indian spices.

DIASPORA CO.

Diaspora Co.'s heirloom and wild Indian spices come with notes on the exact family-run farm where they were grown and the month they were milled. "It requires heroic amounts of communication," says owner Sana Javeri Kadri of maintaining this attention to detail and collaborating with a network of small-scale growers, who might only produce a few hundred kilograms of each crop at a time.

After watching the trend for turmeric lattes boom – typically made with low-quality spice from mysterious sources – Mumbai-born, California-based Javeri Kadri started the business in 2017. "When it came to finding the tastes of home, the options were dismal," says Javeri Kadri. "I thought, if I can get on a flight to Mumbai and be there in 20 hours, then surely my turmeric can, too."

Another motivator for launching the brand was to challenge the conventional spice trade model. "The minute I started researching turmeric, it became a lens for understanding the world of spice," she says, explaining that colonisers favoured profit and storability over quality or fair prices, and that this approach is still largely in play today.

Diaspora Co. pays farmers well above the market rate, and selects flavour first. Harvests are milled four times a year to maintain freshness, and every batch is lab-tested for cleanliness and oil content (low oil indicates the spices have turned stale). "You're tasting a flavour that's actually hundreds of years old," she says of their powerfully fragrant Indigenous spices, like Aranya pepper, Pragati turmeric and Guntur Sannam chilli. "Our chillies blend so perfectly with every cuisine – I use them in pasta sauce as much as I do in Indian food." diasporaco.com; [@diasporaco](https://www.instagram.com/diasporaco) >



Clockwise from left: Turmeric and marigold flowers; Diaspora Co. works with small-scale growers across India, including Vijayalaksmi who grows chillies on her farm in Karnataka; Freshly picked chillies.

DAPHNIS AND CHLOE

Pennyroyal mint, Cretan dittany flowers, smoked chilli flakes from Almopia. The Daphnis and Chloe range of ultra-local Greek herbs and spices reads like characters from an ancient fable. “Whether we’re talking about the islands or the mountains, it’s so pure and full of potential. It’s about terroir,” says owner Evangelia Koutsovoulou, speaking from her Athens workshop. “These high-quality examples of thyme or bay leaves rarely end up in the pantries of city cooks – you have to know somebody who lives in the places where they grow.”

Working with small-scale farmers who harvest and dry their plants on-site, Koutsovoulou says very limited amounts of her products are grown due to agricultural policies introduced in the ’80s that encouraged mass-market crops. “Nowadays, you only

have a handful of families who are still cultivating these heirloom varieties according to traditional processes. There’s a long heritage around these Mediterranean products, so it’s our job to spread the word, to give a second life to these ingredients.”

Boasting high levels of essential oils that make for intense flavour and fragrance, Daphnis and Chloe even offers three different varieties of oregano and two types of mint. “We’re totally pro diversity. You cannot pretend that it’s okay to have five types of tomatoes or three types of oregano produced universally, because these are plants with great variation.” Their biggest challenge? Inspiring curiosity in cooks with tried-and-tested spice racks. “But once they try what we do, they never go back.” daphnisandchloe.com; [@missgoodherbs](https://www.instagram.com/missgoodherbs)

WARNDU

“People don’t even realise Australia has a native pepper,” says Rebecca Sullivan, who runs Warndu with husband Damien Coulthard, an Indigenous Australian man from Adnyamathanha country. Warndu started out as a range of herbal teas made from wild and cultivated Australian native ingredients, expanding a year ago to include spices after they released a cookbook – *Warndu Mai* – that’s peppered with recipes featuring those goods. “We always tell people to go spice first. It’s the easiest way to start learning to cook with native ingredients,” says Sullivan.

Based in South Australia, their roasted, whole wattleseed and freeze-dried quandong come from the Flinders Ranges, while the powdered Davidson Plum and ground strawberry gum are sourced from New South Wales. Sullivan says that as an Indigenous business, they prioritise working with other Indigenous businesses, wild harvesters or women’s groups first before ordering from growers. However, demand for native Australian food products is now consistently outweighing supply, and seasonal variations mean sourcing is constantly in flux.

“We need more growers in the industry, but we need more respectful growers who are going to ensure that the IP of the plants remains with Indigenous Australians,” says Sullivan. “The industry has a bit of a dark past, as does spice trade generally. We’ve spent years building relationships with people before we buy from them and before they sell to us.” warndu.com; @warndu ●



PHOTOGRAPHY SANA JAVERI KADRI (CHILLI, FARM & TURMERIC) & LUISA BRIMBLE (WARNDU & AUSTRALIAN NATIVES).

Clockwise from top: Warndu co-owners Damien Coulthard and Rebecca Sullivan; Edible native Australian plants; Just-harvested, naturally farmed Sannam chillies from the historic chilli-growing region of Guntur, Andhra Pradesh.