Carmencita

Francisco Escolano Navarro. Jesús Navarro Navarro. Jesús Navarro Alberola

Maybe we're just a little nostalgic because our line of business is to sell packaged nostalgia, the aromas of your mother's cooking, of your childhood, of family gatherings, aromas that trigger melancholy and reminiscence.
Our grandfather Jesús was the one who started paving the way for Carmencita almost ninety years ago; he did it with courage, hard work and humility. Accompanying him was our grandmother Carmen who always said, "Above all, you are members of the same family so you must love each other. When times are hard, which they inevitably will be sometimes, you need to love each other even more".
And that's what we do.
The pages that follow tell of what we have done so far. The future is still to come, but it would be an honour for us to share it with you.
Thank you for your interest and for the time you spend savouring this book.

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Carmencita, memory and the reality of smells...

Juan Cruz

"So what did my father do when he had to remove the girl's ribbon?" asks Jesús. "He dressed her in Andalusian costume and set his sights on capturing the Andalusian market".

Now that I am face to face with Jesús Navarro, the heart and soul of Carmencita, I ask him about his father. What was he like? He, too, was called Jesús. His mother was called Carmen, and the couple were the parents of the legendary Carmencita, the little girl who posed for the photograph that, in her father's hands, became the jaunty trade-mark of a company whose success has been built upon dependability, good quality and smell.

The Jesús sitting across from me in one of that company's offices, in the town of Novelda, is their eldest son, patriarch now to a generation just becoming aware of the history behind this place steeped in the smells and memories intrinsic to the making of a legendary brand: Carmencita.

The office he has chosen for our conversation is an airy room on a corner of the building, and is full of graphic mementoes of a company with a dynamic past. We made our way here through corridors and work rooms every inch of which was charged with the essence of Carmencita: the intangible, aromatic *raison d'etre* of the place is ever-present in the atmosphere, and he, Jesús, heir to the spirit bequeathed by Carmencita's founding father, feels very comfortable here. He's at home in this house of smells.

Jesús, a good-natured, straightforward yet thoroughly businesslike man is a good son and an excellent father. And he is much more than just a veteran: he's an enthusiastic veteran. Strolling around Carmencita with him feels like stepping into a paradise dreamed up by others but one that he has long since amalgamated into dreams of his own.

Coming here with him, into this space where good smells and good memories entwine, is indeed like entering a sort of paradise. But it took a good deal longer than six days to create, and it did not create itself. As poet Ángel González says of the history of mankind, it took a very long time and a lot of patience for Carmencita to become more than just a name and acquire the significance with which it is charged today.

Jesús Navarro, senior, takes his time and answers patiently when I ask him out of the blue about his own father, creator of this paradise called Carmencita, the name of the woman who inspired the creation of this aromatic universe.

So, what was your father like, don Jesús?
The Castilian accent acquired by Jesús Navarro Valero in the course of a long and active life is still modulated by the tell-tale 'l' and 's' sounds of his native Valencian dialect; there are tears in his eyes when he replies:
—My father was one of a rare breed.
Jesús turned 80 not long ago, and his gaze is expressive both of satisfaction and of tales waiting to be told. His father possessed formidable powers of persuasion, he tells me. He always achieved what he set out to do, by sheer perseverance and enthusiasm. His aim was to do what others had already done, but to do it better. He learned to read in his teens, working at it by night. He lived out in the country and used to go in to Novelda for lessons from "Colet the school-master". He had six siblings, all of whom were immersed in poverty and tied to the land, and he knew that acquiring learning was the way out of there. He determined to achieve it, and did so. His son recounts the story as if he were celebrating the facts with his father here and now.
He was an entrepreneur, the dreamer-up of a paradise. And he found, says Jesús, a hand that was not only to point the way forward, but also bring serenity into his life: "a certain discretion, a particular approach to life".
Jesús' mother was from Novelda, from right here – he points his finger at the town we are in. Novelda is important, not just as the home patch, or a place on the map, but also as a spiritual state which has also by now become that of Carmencita. And just as Novelda is to Carmencita, the company, so his mother, (who was also the mother of Carmencita) was the emotional core of the business. Novelda and Carmen: the little town has acquired enduring significance through its association with a name much loved locally, and a particular favourite of the family.
Carmen Valero came from a family of blacksmiths, well-to-do people who made Novelda's windows. And Jesús Navarro, Carmen's husband, father of Carmencita, was a peasant who had started work loading up pack-mules when he was eight years old, and got enough to eat or not depending on the harvest.

To be able to sow seeds in paradise, one must first prepare the soil. And that is just what Jesús' father used to do. In the mornings, he tells me, his father would set off along the road in search of manure. On Sundays, he would watch the comings and goings of people better-off than he. He knew from an early age that, by learning to read, he would also learn the way out of poverty. And if he were able to read he could be like those people who went to Mass.

Those people were exporters of saffron to India; saffron was never grown in Novelda –it came from La Mancha– but Novelda was always good at creating something out of nothing, and the town's well-off young men brought in Manchego saffron and exported it to India. Such was the example that Jesús' father aimed to emulate... Jesús is visibly moved as he describes the extreme poverty in which this story begins.

By the time he reached his teens he had learned to read and already knew what he wanted to do in life, but was called up to do military service in Melilla. Had he possessed three thousand reales at the time, he could have got out of going to North Africa, but as things were it was Africa for him and off he went in 1918. Two years later, he met the woman who brought serenity into his life.

She was the town's 'posh girl', Jesús tells me. In those days, owning a forge was the equivalent of owning a garage today. Her parents' forge made all the carts, windows, gratings... they supplied the whole of Novelda. The local Casino (men's social club), for example, still has iron-work made by Jesús' mother's father. She had been left motherless at fourteen; four years later "...she married my father. And from then on, we all started to be born".

An entrepreneur with "an enormous capacity for work and a burning desire to escape from poverty." Thus motivated, he soon headed for the Canary islands, taking saffron from Novelda. Also, and most importantly, he soon got married – a step which seemed to complete the shaping of his character. And, indeed, of his future. "My father was impressed by Carmen's character – good-looking, healthy, and notably sweet-natured; I think she exerted a restraining influence that kept my father's impetus in check... He was generous but managed his

affairs well, knowing that there was no future in profligacy: although he made gifts that left his mark on Novelda –a school named after him, another school named after my mother, Carmen Valero– he was able to do so because of the caution that my mother instilled in him".

They came from an era in which there was nothing and before they could get on with it and do something they needed a taste of reality. Carmencita (the business) was conceived with that in mind. He wanted to emulate "the sort of people who paraded about the plaza on a Sunday". He wanted one day to enjoy the sort of comfortable life that he observed others enjoying. So he set about examining 'those who stood out from the rest' and what it was they did. And as he owned no estates, and was in no position to go off to India to sell saffron, "he focused on small businesses that did things like wrapping little paper packets of saffron by hand". These anonymous, neatly folded little packets were then made up into boxes of a hundred... He didn't hesitate, relates Jesús. "That's what I'm going to do!" He had acquired some experience in the Canary Islands, having gone there to sell the product. But he was adamant on one point, another of the founding principles of Carmencita, the company, namely: "I will not work for anybody else". He wanted his freedom, and to be himself. His determination verged on the obsessional. He assembled his sisters, his wife and three or four neighbours and started them folding paper packets out on the veranda of the house. Meanwhile, his father was selling the packets around the neighbouring towns and villages, as far afield as Murcia...

In effect, Carmencita was already in being, though it would have neither name nor trade-mark until years after the birth of the first daughter, Carmencita, the girl in the photograph that would prove to be the vital element in the success of the company's logo some time later. Don Jesús knew that he had to organise his business dealings into a company; he ordered a photograph to be taken of the child, they put a ribbon in her hair and registered the trade-mark in 1926. From then on, Carmencita existed as a registered brand, with the girl as its metaphor. Another business in the area had a similar trade-mark, a girl with a ribbon, so don

On a wooden horse, Jesús Navarro Valero and his sister "Carmencita", the day of the famous photograph.

Below, Jesús Navarro Jover with his military service colleagues in north Morocco, 1920s. Inset, in the Plaza de España in Seville, 1930s.

Right, Luis Navarro Cantó and Jesús Navarro Valero.

Advertising slide used in cinemas in the 1940s and 1950s.

Advertising poster for Carmencita, 1940s.

Carmen Valero with her husband Jesús and their four children, from left to right: Conchita, Jesús, Magdalena and Carmencita.

Jesús Navarro Valero awarding a prize to the winner of the professional skills competition (for producing saffron sachets), 1960s.

Jesús removed the ribbon from his and threw down the competitive gauntlet with a daring gesture that involved changing his company's trade-mark.

"So what did my father do when he had to remove the girl's ribbon?" asks Jesús. "He dressed her in Andalusian costume and set his sights on capturing the Andalusian market". And that was how (in 1929) the figure with her Cordoban hat, Manila shawl and carnation which has been the company's true emblem came about, and she has remained with us right up to the present generation." In fact, she is still there as the basis of the current logo, now modernised by a designer whose considerable expertise and generosity have been given over to serve the aesthetic so that the name Carmencita, while still the little girl dressed up for a photograph, evokes messages relevant to us today.

—I suppose, Jesús, that your father would be proud of having created such a trade-mark.

—He knew that he was selling something different from the rest! And Carmencita, the photo of the girl, marked him out from the others. Some of them had trade-marks – a clown or an aeroplane or something like that: he had his daughter dressed up in the Andalusian style! Just think how proud he'd have felt about that...

—It was a pretty clever marketing ploy for someone with no education...

—Pure intuition. Remember, it's only been about twenty years since I learned about marketing myself...

But the product itself was pretty special, too. The company has diversified since then: Carmencita now processes and packages spices of all kinds – flavour-enhancing and lifestyle-enhancing aromatic substances in general. Back then, however, Carmencita meant saffron. Saffron was used in every household in Spain, and the famous portrait of Carmencita Navarro Valero gazing out at one from the packet was as familiar as the flavour of the spice itself. And with that logo in his possession, don Jesús knew that he was shaping the early stages of an industry that called for imagination and caution, rigour and effectiveness.

By 1934, some years later, the women on the veranda had increased in number

to thirty or forty. Even during the war (Spanish Civil War 1936-39) that number was to double, and Carmencita continued to pack saffron in sachets printed with the following information: Jesús Navarro Jover. Nombre comercial registrado. Novelda. Alicante. España. Teléfono 37. Apartado 34. "Anyone wanting to place an order had all the information he needed right there!"

—"That was classic marketing strategy", I comment to Jesús Navarro Valero, who replies: "It was 'unconscious marketing,' in fact. That's what they call it these days... There came a time however, when my father did carry out an enormously successful direct marketing campaign: if a salesman called at a house that was already stocked up, he would say "But wait until you see the irons we're giving as a free gift! And these tablecloths, and these radios!" It created customer loyalty among those people. What engendered it, of course, was my father's determination that they should buy from him rather than the competition so that Carmencita could go on expanding...

In the beginning... there was just saffron. These days, Carmencita deals in all sorts of spices, Jesús (junior) invented a very successful paella seasoning, and in every department I pass through I see people researching new products that bear the Carmencita emblem. The famous logo has now been renovated by designer Manuel Estrada, who has succeeded in giving a modern edge (and depth) to the solid image of this company founded by Jesús senior shortly before the war.

I ask Jesús to take us right back to the beginning of the story, and he harks back to the period when the Suez Canal was opened and communication between Europe and India started to speed up. Novelda was a grape-growing town in those days –mostly dessert grapes, though some wine-making ones, too. Indeed, it exported casks of wine from Alicante to Marseilles, where some of the wine exporters were to meet Indians from whom they learned of their use of saffron in religious ritual. That was how it became known in Novelda that saffron was a sacred product in India.

With that, a light went on for the people of Novelda, and it still illuminates its most prosperous industry to this day. Carmencita is the consequence of that

serendipitous event. Back then, saffron had to be brought from La Mancha to Novelda on horseback; then, later, came the automobile. “My father-in-law had an early Ford” recalls Jesús “which he would load up with boxes of saffron for processing in Novelda before being exported to India”.
In fact, they exported so much saffron that the price went up on the domestic market; and the Spanish were big saffron eaters, so much so that the French used to jibe that that everything smelled of garlic and saffron as soon as one crossed the Pyrenees... “To which our riposte was: And you smell of wine!”
For the Indians, saffron was “more than a talisman... Though they did use it in food, its main use was in rituals marking occasions both happy and sad: any wedding or funeral not steeped in saffron is not a truly Indian event.” It is used differently in the Arab countries, where it is believed to have invigorating properties. “They put the best part of a gram in a tea pot, add water and drink it to make them feel stronger.”
So saffron’s uses span the symbolic spectrum; it is also perceived as a performance-enhancing stimulant; furthermore, it adds flavour to whatever it touches. All in all, a sound business prospect. Jesús is on familiar territory when he recites the facts: “Saffron draws out the essence of each ingredient in a cooked dish. Say you eat a rice dish which contains a lot of saffron: if the post-prandial conversation and smoke are rather long and drawn out, you’ll soon find that you’re perfectly capable of eating again. It’s because saffron speeds up the digestion process considerably, apparently by stimulating the flow of gastric juices. We thought that might be the reason for the Arabs’ belief in its invigorating properties: it helps clean out fat from the stomach. And if the stomach isn’t clean, maybe it should be cleaned of other things well, I don’t know. But the fact is that they believe it to be invigorating. Here at Carmencita, even the tea is made with saffron. Would you like to try some?
Jesús Navarro Valero was born in 1928, by which time Carmencita had acquired a logo. Determined that his son should avoid the suffering that he himself had undergone during the early years in Novelda, his father’s plan was to send him

away to study engineering. However, Novelda and the whole business of saffron and everything that involved exerted much more of a pull. And so it was that, when he finished his military service in 1949, he came home with the purpose of getting married and continuing at Carmencita, "which was the world I had grown up in, because my father never stopped talking business".

His father never stopped talking about it and the son never stopped learning. "We used to spend all day every day with the saffron-wrapping women, and the conversation after meals would consist of my father relating the latest ups and downs on the business front. We were impregnated, so to speak, with the smell of saffron, and the whole Carmencita ethos was part of my daily life".

The Carmencita ethos and an approach to life. Before going off to do his military service, Jesús was a goalkeeper playing football "I was a wizard at stopping penalties!". He followed devotedly in his father's footsteps. "He taught me what he had learned from experience and the business grew before my very eyes, we seemed to take another step forward every day, until Carmencita became what it is today... I saw all this coming into being. From nought to international company, technical advances –you can hardly believe it when you see what can be done nowadays. Don't forget that we started off making little sachets, and just look at us today. In the old days, the conditions of employment stipulated that each woman should fold 2,333 sachets, but some of them were so deft that they could make up to 4,000... Today we can justifiably claim that we've sold 12,000 million sachets of Carmencita all over the world. And we, the second generation, have had the world opened up to us by the Carmencita logo. And now the third generation's at it and the fourth is on its way!"

And did his father, creator of Carmencita, have a secret to success? "He never imagined this sort of growth. His style was to go fast, but never over the upper speed limit. And to persevere and persevere, work and work. One day, when he was very old, he looked at me and he said, leaning on his stick: 'Jesús, why on earth did we choose to package things that cost a peseta rather than forty centimes? We'd have been millionaires by now!"... And one day I asked him, just

Left, Jesús Navarro Jover (the company's founder) on one of his trips to the Canaries, 1950s. Below, with one of the Andalusian sales team, 1930s.

Central photo, on a tea plantation in Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon).
Left, Francisco Escolano during a trip to Saudi Arabia.

Carmencita and her travels

At a time when travel was an unattainable luxury for most Spaniards, Carmencita had already crossed the Atlantic. Not in first class or a luxury cabin but tucked away in suitcases together with family photos, a few basic belongings and hopes for the future. Many inhabitants of the Canary Islands migrated westwards in old, unsafe ships under inexperienced captains who trusted that, if they travelled in the direction of the sunset, they should reach their destination. After disappearing from the Canaries and after an average of 40 days at sea, these "phantom ships" eventually docked in Venezuela. Carmencita colouring seems to have been one of the customs the migrants preserved because it reminded them of their lives back home.

In 1952, the Carmencita sales representative in Tenerife told Jesús Navarro Valero on one of his visits to the island that he had sent a parcel of colouring sachets to Venezuela in response to an apparent demand for it there.

Soon the demand in Tenerife grew way beyond the amount the islanders could possibly consume and it turned out that several dealers in the Canaries were making regular shipments of colouring to Venezuela.

It was a Spanish resident in Caracas who placed the first direct order. His company was, and is, called Mayor de Víveres y Licores Navarra, although today it is his daughters who run the business and who still work with us. That first order was for 30 packs of 10 thousand sachets. Orders soon started to come in thick and fast, and the sachets were distributed all over the country. So much so that, when Francisco Escolano Martínez travelled to Venezuela, he was astonished to find how popular the brand had become. In fact, customers did not ask for colouring, but for Carmencita.

Laura Cantó Verdú

Francisco Escolano Martínez (in the foreground) on one of his many trips, 1960s.

First printed saffron sachets.

out of curiosity, how he got the idea for the business in the first place. He looked around to check that no-one else could hear us and eventually came out with: "I haven't a bloody clue!"

—And if you were asked to answer for both of you, Jesús. What would you say is the secret of success?

—"We'd have to go back to my mother for that. All she looked for within the business was, unusually, love and affection. My mother lived shoulder to shoulder with all the women workers; she made them coffee in the mornings, ate lunch with them at midday. Those were needy years in Spain. Carmencita, my sister, used to help her make little sponge cakes... my mother's love for us radiated out from her... And that's catching, don't you think? There was more to it than selling, earning money, saving... There was love between us, and I see the results in the way that my children and my nephews treat each other today; you can see it in the gestures between the cousins as they work together. I find it quite moving. The third generation is now running the business, and doing it well and that's because of love. There's a closeness that isn't common in other businesses. I may be partly responsible. And I share the blame with Luis Navarro Cantó, husband of Carmencita, and Francisco Escolano Martínez, who is married to another of my sisters, Concepción. They are the 'roots' of Carmencita S.A.

The former, even at 89 years of age, is the sort of character that every company needs. He is prudent, honourable and modest – the person I look up to most in Novelda. He would examine and analyse problems in the light of those principles before making any decision.

The latter is a born salesman (rest in peace): we couldn't let him get away. He was responsible for consolidating the expansion of Carmencita in the 1970s: up until then it had been doing well and growing by force of its own inertia. From Escolano's time on, growth was managed with strategic skill. Two people with whom I run into and who have made that I'm overestimated in regard to my role in Carmencita.

Carmencita is a family business where various Jesuses, Pacos, sons and daughters and cousins; according to Jesús the veteran, the secret is "not to treat my

children any differently from the rest, or relatives any differently from those who are not...” And off we went to observe this policy in action.
Don Jesús took us out to lunch with his nephews Francisco Escolano and Jesús Navarro Navarro, his niece Laura Cantó and son Jesús. We went to an *arrocería* (restaurant where rice dishes are a speciality) in Pinoso, run by Paco Gandía, where they cook rice just the way don Jesús likes it, tasting of Carmencita saffron, adhering to the paella pan, full of flavour and altogether memorable. I asked each of them about their feelings regarding the family story.
Nephew Jesús said: “If you analyse our way of doing things, in the end you conclude that quality isn’t the best word, even though that’s what the company is founded on – making quality products, not letting people down, transmitting flavour. But I think the word that best defines the work that goes on at Carmencita is honesty. Honesty as regards the product and the customer. That’s been the way of things since the time of our grandparents and parents, and the workers know it. That honesty has been handed on day after day, year after year. I think that people pick up on it. We’re dealing with a product whose preparation is very simple and after so many years, we still have every confidence in our suppliers. As a result, what we do emanates good quality, and that’s how people perceive it. They know that we’re honest, and they know the quality to expect”.
From Escolano’s point of view: “Seeing the trade-mark makes one feel very proud... When I see the photo of my aunt, I feel proud. But that’s just our feelings. What the public perceives is that the brand gives them quality, and that’s how we mean to go on.”
Laura says: “I’m in export, and every time someone approaches me and says with pleasure “Ah! Carmencita!”, I know they are referring to a long-established relationship and that I am a mere link, albeit proud to be one. I think we are perceived as something familiar, close at hand, something that people have seen in their homes for several generations. That means we have a duty to them all. I find it moving: it gives me a frisson when I see how thrilled people are when

they recognise Carmencita. It's like an encounter with a distant relative they haven't seen for a long time".

"Having said all that", adds Laura, "the fact is that Carmencita is Jesús' mother, with whom I've had a very special relationship, so I don't see her as a trade-mark but rather as belonging very much to me!".

Two years ago, Laura received a letter from Guam, in the Mariana Islands, way out in the Pacific, ordering the paella seasoning invented by Jesús' father. "...and telling me that an ancestor had been Spanish viceroy in the Philippines!"

Jesús junior points out that "the brand transcends the commercial sphere. When they hear the name Carmencita, they remember their mother, the smell of her cooking... it's associated with home cooking and its smells. Carmencita is a thousand different smells... We're lucky enough to deal in a product that works with all the spices so that we have access to all the different aromatic areas. Given the direct link between smell and memory, this means that our products are a powerful nostalgia trigger…"

But there has been more to the story than upholding the company's traditionally high standards. "We've also had to move the brand forward in new directions", explains Jesús junior "to make it more competitive. We had to convince the chain stores and other shops, large and small, that we were competitive from the design point of view, too. We took an innovative, creative approach and changed the size, the label, the lid, the whole look of our product packaging. Essentially, our established core qualities and goodwill have been given a stylish new look, which seems to have been well received everywhere. We are still us, but even better. That's our present position."

Carmencita. The brand goes back a long way... But who was she? Don Jesús, her brother, takes up the story:

—Carmencita was everybody's mother. And her mother's daughter. She used to cook rice dishes in a special way so that the grains were 'loose' in lots of liquid just for her husband, because that was the way he liked it. She should have been called Saint Carmencita, not just Carmencita. She was in a league of her own.

—And what did she think of the photograph of her that is still the company's trade-mark?

—She used to say that I was the one who caused the most bother on the day the photo was taken, because I wanted to be photographed too. They sat me up on the horse with her wearing the Cordovan hat, and had to take another picture of me just to keep me quiet... Back in the early days, she didn't seem particularly pleased to have been dressed up as an *andaluza* with a Cordoban hat on but it just seemed to sum up more and more the image that my father wanted to present... That picture is perhaps the answer to what my father couldn't put his finger on that time I asked him what the secret was and he replied: "I haven't a bloody clue!"

Laura says: "Carmencita the person was just the opposite of the brand, because the trade-mark is everywhere while she hardly ever left the house. Even so, I don't believe there's ever been a house as open as hers, before or since. Uncle Jesús is quite right in saying that she was her mother's daughter".

I ask Jesús, grandson of Jesús Navarro Jover, what sort of relationship the family has with smells after all this time. The paella has arrived: don Jesús tests the rice to check that it is *en su punto* –not overcooked, not undercooked, but just right– and the jokes, laughter and pleasure around the table flow even more freely in response to the smell emanating from it. And Jesús says "There was such a mixture of smells, and we could identify them... I remember that my knees were always stained yellow; you left yellow marks on everything you touched. When you had a shower at night, the water used to run completely yellow. But oh! The smells! They were always mixed, but we could put names to them; we were born with the pituitary gland specially attuned to the aromas of Carmencita..."

Laura: "I definitely detect and identify smells, every single one. I go into a house, or into the factory, even the office, and I find myself saying: garlic; cumin, saffron..."

I asked them about their own versions of this story of tastes and smells. Jesús junior said: "It's difficult to separate Carmencita from our own lives; the smell

factor is so important – it heightens our emotions. We are all professionally involved with the brand, but all in different ways. The important thing is that we've always been a very close family, and we're close to the brand as such, as well... I see the same sort of thing in other family businesses in this area, but the sort of closeness we feel among our generation at Carmencita is exceptional…"

"It's because it stems from Aunt Carmencita herself", says Paco Escolano. "Remember how we all used to have lunch together every day! The fact that we were a company seemed incidental – we used to go along with friends. Essentially we've been more like brothers and sisters than cousins. And it was our aunt that brought us all together. Life revolved around our aunt, and our grandmother Carmen."

Laura perhaps exemplifies particularly well the feeling of belonging that overarches Carmencita, just as its characteristic smell does, or the rhythm of life of the people who work there. When she was pregnant with her first child, they were more than half expecting another Jesús Navarro. The baby turned out to be a girl. Then they had the boy, and he became another Jesús Navarro.

During our stroll round the factory in the morning, Jesús Navarro the elder statesman introduced me to the youngest Jesús. Already a qualified engineer, he is now being trained at Carmencita among the smells and spices that captivated the eldest Jesús Navarro so long ago and which, today, provide the olfactory background for a family that talks of the past as a smell in which they all shared.

Jesús put a hand on the boy's shoulder and, looking straight at me, said: "Just like his granddad. There he is, already busy with smells. His hair's much longer now, though, ha ha ha! He'll get there in the end!" And off we went to complete our aromatic tour of the stuff that memories are made of.

Congenial image created
by that girl with her Cordoban
hat, an image that I remember
from my childhood and that
can be found in almost all
Spanish kitchens.

Vicente del Bosque
Manager of the Spanish National
Football Team, World Champions
and winners of the European
Championship 2012

The image of new Spanish gastronomy

All brands strive to reach the Mount Olympus of the commercial world. Very few of them make it. But some of those that do end up as cultural icons, finding a place in our lives, as if they had always been there. They belong in our homes, forming part of our landscape, our family history, our vocabulary and our visual memory.
Carmencita, a medium-sized Spanish company, which does very little advertising, has become one of these undeniable icons. The girl with the Cordoban hat and the curl on her forehead is the image of spices in Spain. She stands for all the traditional flavours of our grandmother's cooking but is now also the image of new Spanish cuisine. When we make new dishes, try out new spices or experiment with flavours, using dressings, herbs and condiments in different ways, and taking our cuisine into the forefront of worldwide gastronomy, we are all Carmencita.

Manuel Estrada designer




















In the family kitchen, there were always those famous little sachets of saffron. Mysterious, delicate sachets bearing the portrait of a girl, Carmencita, with the same name as my cousin, a commercial brand name that I didn't understand back then.

And I loved to watch
the ritual they involved.
My mother used to
open the sachets
with great care, gently
taking out the threads
and placing them
on a hot pan to toast
them lightly, for a very
short time, until they
released an intense
aroma.

José Carlos Capel food writer

the name

Just as I like the flavours of Carmencita's products, I like the name.

María Dueñas writer


CARMENCITA®

For many years, Carmencita has been introducing this rich gastronomic heritage into Spanish homes and restaurants, enriching our cuisine and helping preserve an important aspect of our identity.

Ferran Adrià chef

wisdom and authenticity

Just as I am pleased to hear that the ‘old-fashioned’ names are coming back for girls born in the second decade of the new millennium, I am also delighted to see that Carmencita has remained faithful to itself and has ended up by teaching us all a lesson, one of wisdom and authenticity.

María Dueñas writer

My childhood left me with an abundance of culinary memories. I always felt drawn towards the kitchen. I believe in culinary culture, both traditional and creative, and I am often inspired and moved by good-quality products.

Carme Ruscalleda chef

The girl with the Cordoban hat and the coloured shawl is an icon for all of us.

Quique Dacosta chef

At last, I dared to make paella in London. With the ingredients he had sent me,  which he continued to send in huge amounts, I was able to invite friends round to eat paella in my home. Word soon got around, and people came to expect paella from me. At the start, they thought I was a great cook because they didn't know about the magic properties

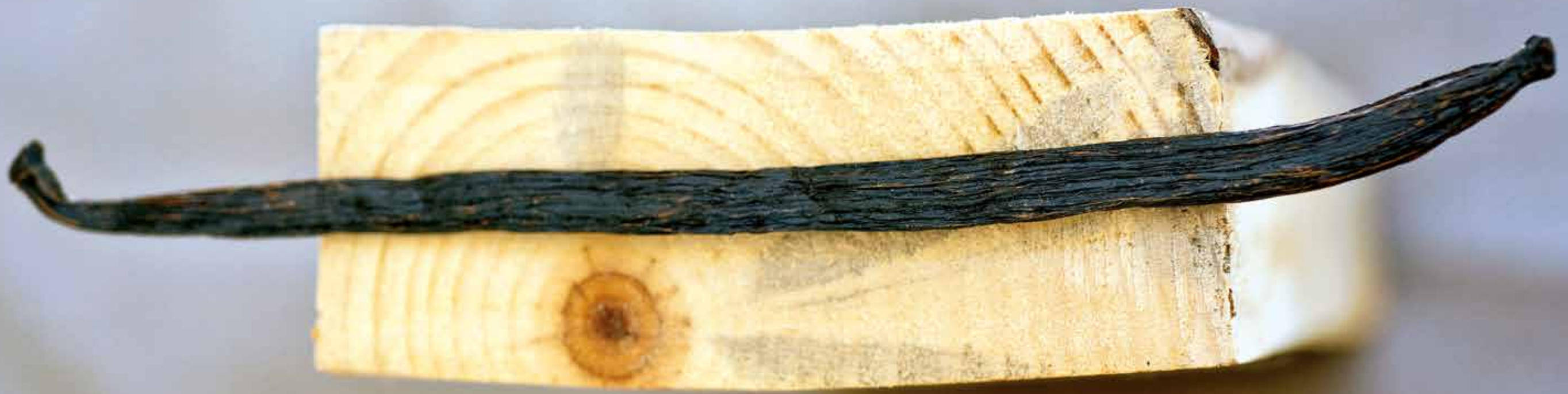
of the Paellero product.
I eventually had to tell
them that it had little to
do with my culinary skills,
that it was all thanks
to Carmencita and my
friend Jesús Navarro.
It didn't do my prestige
any good, but they kept
coming to visit and to enjoy
my paellas. Meanwhile,
my cooking must surely
have improved somewhere
along  the line!

Paul Preston historian


CARMENCITA'

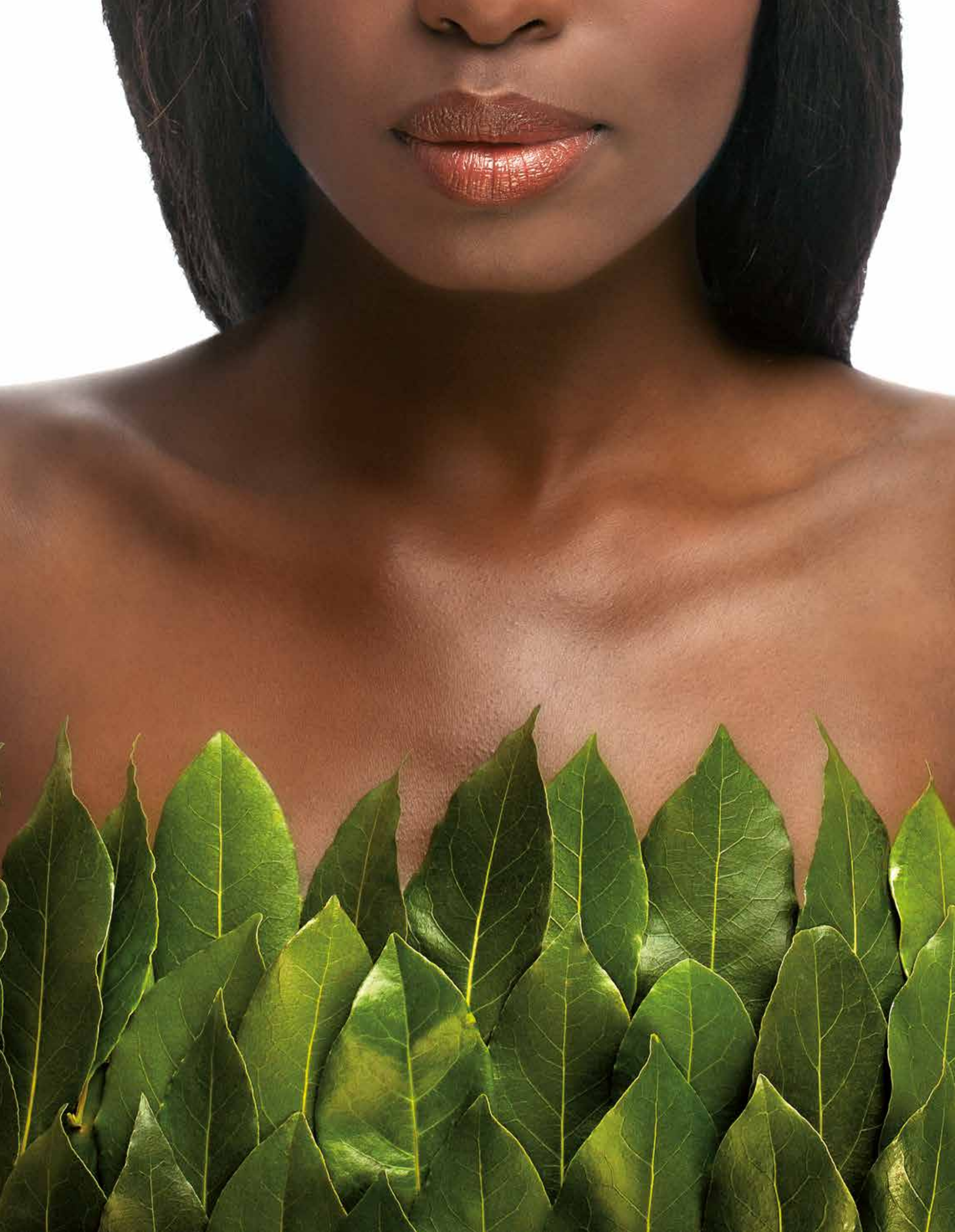
In home cooking
and professional cuisine,
spices allow us
to perfume and colour
foods while they
are being dressed,
marinated or cooked,
giving our recipes
gastronomic value,
appeal and personality.

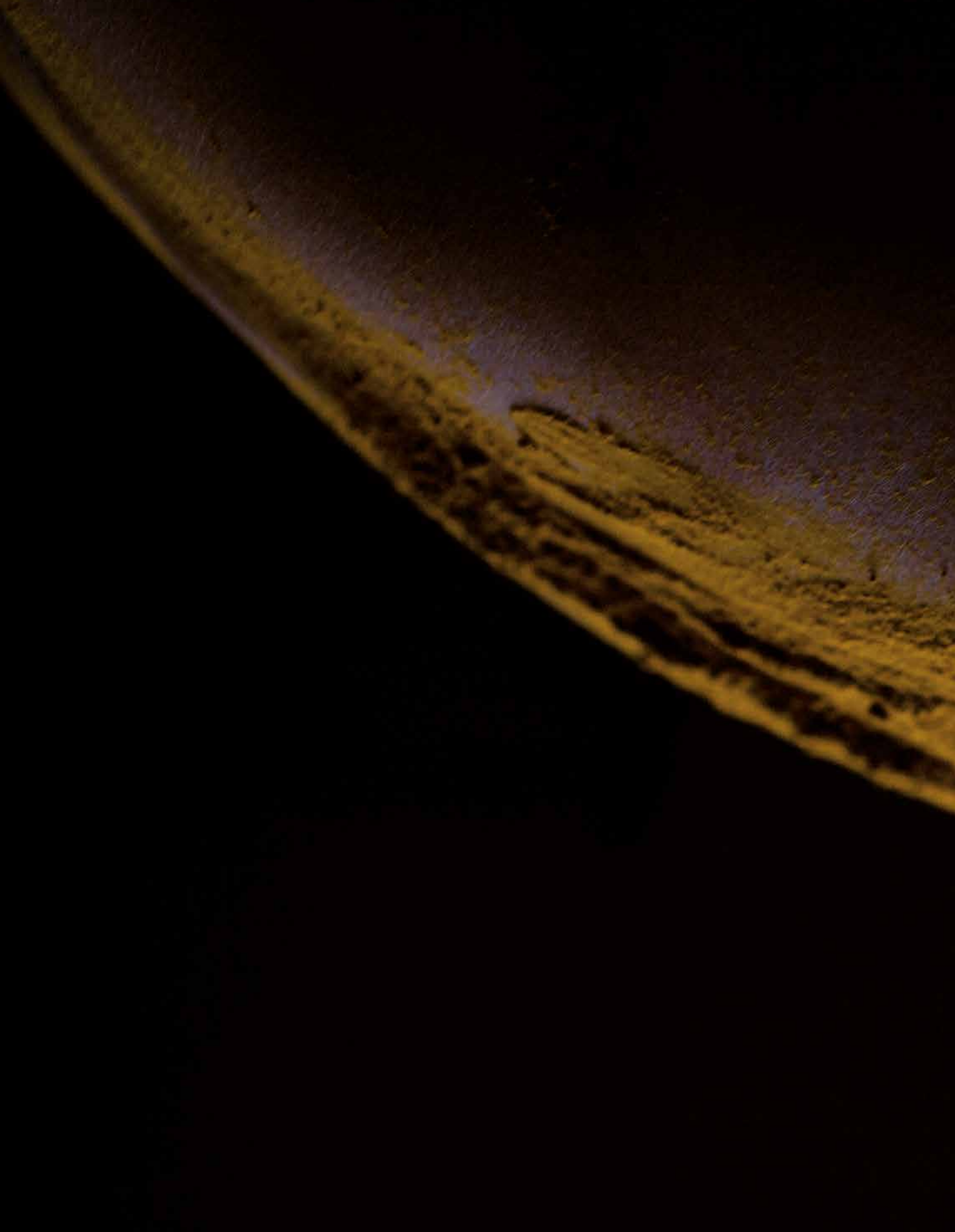
Carme Ruscalleda chef



...With Apollo
in hot pursuit,
Daphne fled to
the mountains.
When Apollo was
just about to catch
her, she prayed
to her father for
help...

...Peneus agreed and converted her into a tree. From her fingers grew leaves, her body was coated with bark, her feet grew roots and her hair turned into laurel leaves.






Carmencita
grinder
mediterranean
sea salt
sal

without giving
in to the
temptation
to renew,
holding on to
the authentic
flavours of
traditional foods.

María Dueñas writer

The Ancient Greeks called it "pungent rose" and considered it to be invigorating, recommending it to athletes during the Olympic Games. Magical powers were also attributed to it, and crowns of garlic were offered to Hekate, a dark goddess involved in witchcraft and magic, who could be found stalking at crossroads.


CARMENCITA®
Molinillo
ORÉGANO

Carmencita is also
there for sweets
*"Steamed apple with chocolate
and Carmencita saffron"*,
with its unique touch.
My saffron and spice
chocolates are world famous
products. With their touch of
saffron and spice they have
allowed us to be present in
gourmet shops around the
world. The light and sunshine
of our Mediterranean land
are inconceivable without
the Carmencita products.

Paco Torreblanca master pastry cook

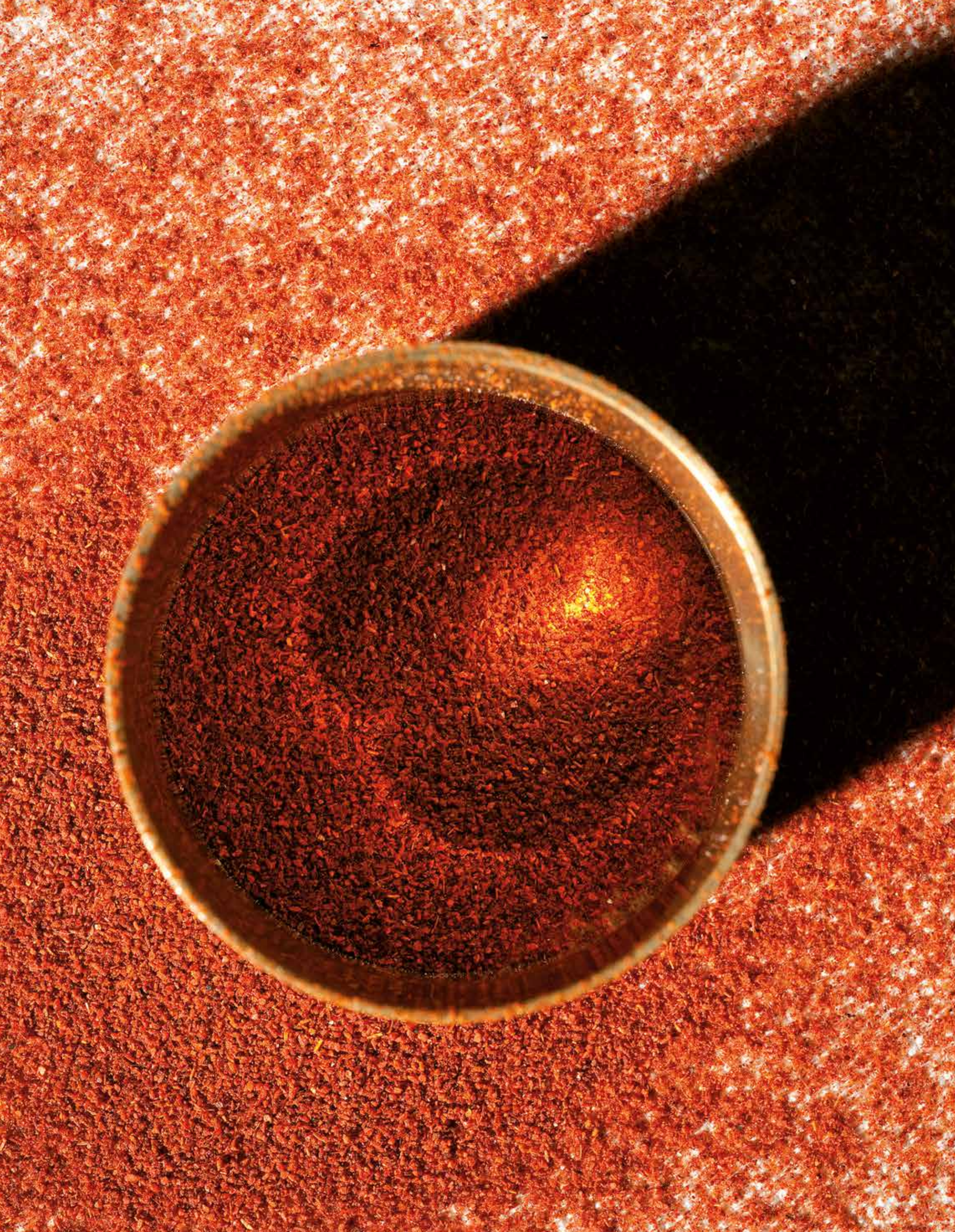
Carmencita has always been with me. When I was a child I heard the cook and the serving girls of my house talk of this magic word.

Manolo Blahnik designer


mencita
dentes del puerto de Tellicherry en la costa Mala
momento para aportar todo su aroma y sabor
ener en lugar fresco y seco. Selection of pepper ber
eal for table use. Grind when cooking to bring all its aroma
Navarro, S.A. c/Isaac Peral. 46 - 03660 Novelda Alicante

...I started to cook as an
amateur at the "Happy Chef"
Gastronomic Club I created
in Madrid. Now, at home,
when I try my hand at
more sophisticated dishes,
I sometimes perfume salads
with the saffron spray.

José Carlos Capel food writer



Herbs and spices occupy an important place in Spanish gastronomy.
It would be difficult to imagine without such well-established products as paprika or saffron.

Ferran Adrià chef

It is also a friendly herb, one that is happy to grow together with others and one with qualities that enhance dressings and dishes. There can be few foods that do not combine well with parsley.


CARMENCITA
CARMENCITA®
CARMENCITA®

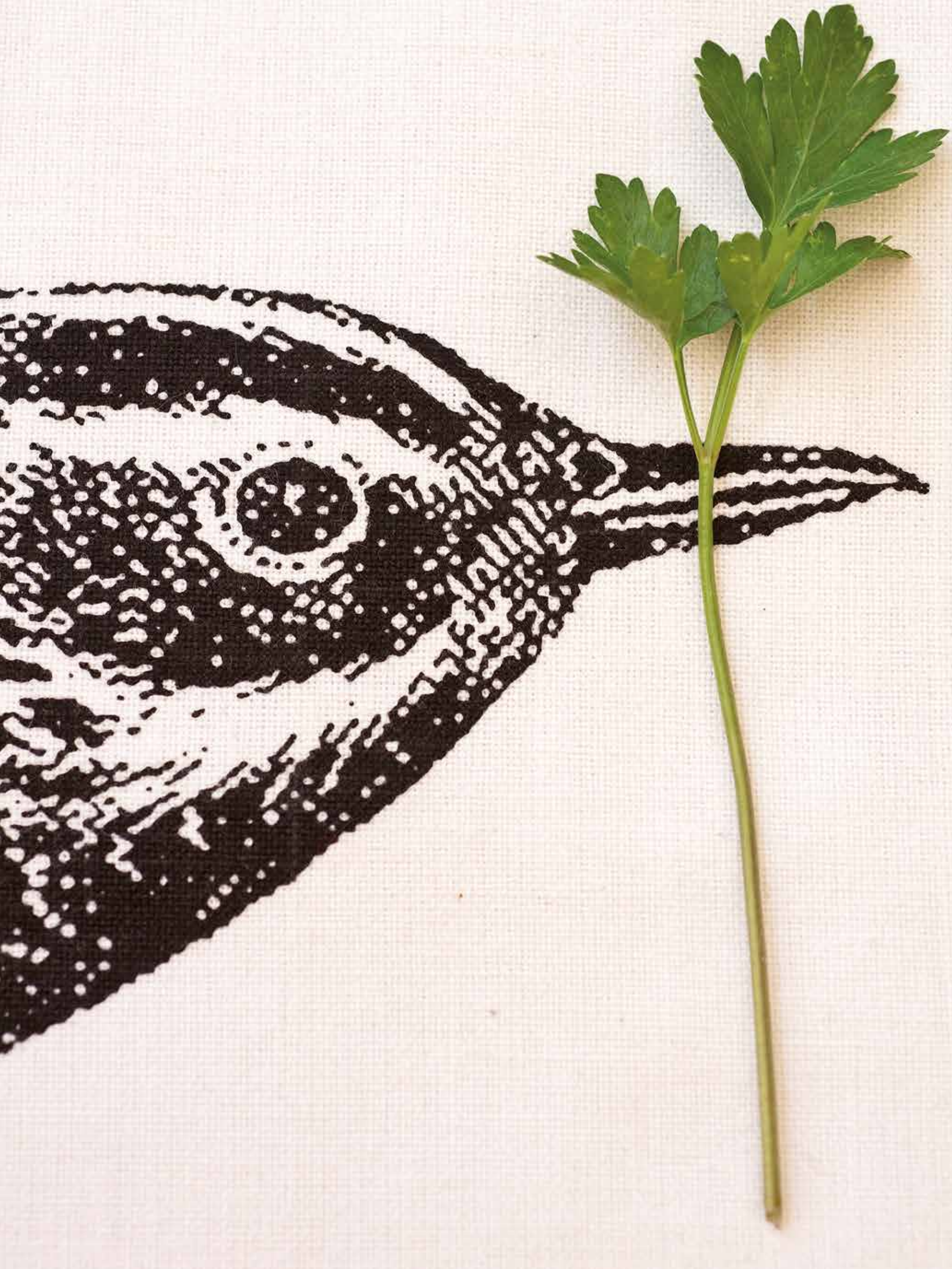
The *ñora* is a small jewel in the kitchen. It gives dishes an unmistakable flavour, one that is very different to that of other peppers. It is mostly used in the cuisine of Andalusia, Murcia, Extremadura, Galicia and Catalonia but is essential in Valencia, where it is used to flavour rice dishes and stews.

the game

For cooks, spices are fundamental and are often the *raison d'être* of their creations.
They can offer an element of surprise or fun, or added vivacity.

Rodrigo de la Calle chef

The Ancient Greeks liked to flavour their dishes with herbs: oregano, thyme, cumin, fennel and sage, and winemakers added a mixture of flour with honey, oregano, fruits, flowers and other herbs to their wines.



Jesús Navarro was a real visionary. He followed on from my intrepid, entrepreneurial predecessors and turned Carmencita into a world-renowned brand.

Javier Gómez Navarro

Saffron

The spices

Ángeles Ruiz

Bay laurel for victory

O laurel divine, with soul inaccessible,
always so silent, full of nobility!
Pour in my ears your divine history,
your wisdom, profound and sincere!
Tree that produces fruits of silence,
maestro of kisses and mage of orchestras,
formed from Daphne's roseate flesh
with Apollo's potent sap in your veins!

Invocation to the Laurel,
Federico García Lorca

Lorca took his inspiration for this poem from the unfortunate mix-up between the beautiful Apollo and the nymph Daphne, daughter of the god Peneus. The myth tells how Apollo laughed at the young Eros, god of love, who was practising with his bow and arrow. Out of vengeance, one day when the two lovers were walking by the river, Eros shot an arrow of gold carrying love at Apollo and another of lead, to destroy passion, at Daphne.

With Apollo in hot pursuit, Daphne fled to the mountains. When Apollo was just about to catch her, she prayed to her father for help. Peneus agreed and converted her into a tree. From her fingers grew leaves, her body was coated with bark, her feet grew roots and her hair turned into laurel leaves. By the time Apollo reached her, the metamorphosis was complete. In his despair, he pulled some green leaves from the tree and made them into a crown for his head.

Mythology, legend and symbols are inextricably bound to the story of the laurel or bay tree, *Laurusnobilis.* Originally from the Eastern Mediterranean and Asia Minor, it gradually spread to Europe and the Americas.

It is a robust, long-living tree but one that grows so slowly that it is said to never be seen fully-grown by the person who plants it. Its dark green, lanceolateleaves, are adorned with yellow flowers in the months of March and April. The trunk is firm and greyish and its wood, which is hard and robust, is used in marquetry and inlay to decorate furniture, chessboards, chests, etc.

It is not clear whether the word laurel comes from the Celt *laur* (green) or the Latin *laudo* (honour). But it is clear that the term 'laureate' for a person who receives an award stems from this plant. In ancient times, the laurel tree was considered to afford protection against evil and magic spells. Also, when thrown on a fire, if laurel leaves crackled noisily this was a good omen. If they just burnt quietly, terrible events could be expected. Homer tells how laurel branches were used to predict the future and of how the lawmakers of Crete used to consult them before they took important decisions or enacted laws.

The trees were also sacred. A plant was accorded to each god of the Olympus: the grapevine to Dionysius; the holm oak to Jupiter, protector of cities; the olive to Athena, and the laurel to Apollo, the god who protected poetry, music, artistic creation and prophecy. The Roman poet Horace referred to it as "the holy laurel", "the laurel consecrated to Apollo" and "garland for the head".

The laurel tree used to symbolise knowledge, wisdom and a connection with heaven, with what was beyond the earth. This was why oracles and magi wore a crown of laurel. In Delphos, a sacred place visited by Greeks in search of a prediction, the fountain of Castalia was surrounded by a wood of laurel trees and there the soothsayer was expected to interpret the oracle's messages for the mortals and make predictions. Later on, to ridicule pagan religions and eradicate the myth of the oracle, Christian writers of the 3rd and 4th centuries painted a picture of these soothsayers in a drunken trance, chewing laurel leaves and foaming at the mouth.

The Greeks and Romans used a variety of flowers, branches and leaves for their rites. At funerals, they crowned the corpse, when cities were freed the liberators were crowned, they made crowns for festivities and for marriage ceremonies. Their favourite plants were myrtle, olive (used in crowns for victors at the Olympic Games) and laurel (for the winners of drama and poetry contests).

In Ancient Rome, the laurel symbolised the triumph of generals and soldiers and the power of governors. When a general returned from battle he was received by the Senate and paraded victoriously escorted by his soldiers and acclaimed by the people. The streets were decorated and perfumed with incense, trumpets sounded and the procession was led by senators and magistrates. After them came chariots bearing the booty won, animals including white bulls to be sacrificed, the chained enemy leaders to be executed, and the prisoners to be sold as slaves. At the end came the general on a chariot drawn by white horses bearing laurel crowns. His face was painted with minium, the orange-red mineral that represented immortality, and he wore a tunic covered with golden stars. In one hand he

carried a branch of laurel and on his head he wore a laurel crown. Behind him, a servant bore on his head the golden crown of Jupiter Optimus Maximus. To prevent the general from being overwhelmed by such pomp and remind him of man's limitations, the servant repeated, *"Respice post te! Hominem teesse memento"* (Look behind you! Remember you are a man and not a god). This is the origin of the Latin expression *Memento mori*, which means "Remember you will die" and was much used in art and literature in reference to the fugacity of life.

On a different note, the laurel tree was also believed to afford protection against lightning. During thunderstorms, the Emperor Tiberius apparently used to place a crown of laurel on his head to avoid being struck by lightning. Another custom was to place laurel branches on the prow of boats to symbolise triumph, and crowns of laurel were used in ceremonies to pay tribute to dead heroes. In fact, a custom still exists in some places to throw crowns of laurel into the sea when a sailor dies.

But laurel also had its critics. One such was Pythagoras (6th century BC) who is known not only for his mathematical achievements but also for his theory on the "transmigration of souls". For this philosopher, the human soul was immortal and could be reincarnated in the form of a living being – man, animal or plant. Spiritual purity could be reached through knowledge and by accepting a number of prohibitions. One of these was to not consume bay leaves as they were considered impure. Others were to not wear rings, to always start with the right foot when putting on shoes and with the left for washing, to never look back when leaving home, to never give free rein to laughter, to not look at a mirror next to a lamp and to never allow a swallow to make its nest beneath your roof.

The belief that laurel has magic qualities is still with us today with some people still planting a bay tree at the door of their homes to protect against lightning and evil spirits. As a symbol of victory and nobility, it is present in the arms of a number of countries including Ecuador, the Dominican Republic and Mexico.

Both the leaves and the flowers of the bay tree are used in traditional medicine – in infusions, vapour baths or as an ointment, to stimulate the digestive system, as an expectorant, a diuretic and to reduce inflammation. Its essential oil is aromatic and features in the composition of perfumes, creams, lotions, soap and shampoo.

It is also often grown as an ornamental plant. Stems of laurel are often included in floristry as they last well and have a mild balsamic aroma when rubbed, and were traditionally used to perfume wardrobes. Today the leaves are sold for potpourri.

Uses and curiosities

Being a member of the family *Laureaceae,* the bay tree is related to cinnamon.

Bay leaves are mainly used in slow-cooked dishes, either fresh or dried. Bay goes with almost anything, from red meat, poultry and fish to sauces for pasta. The dried leaves give their characteristic aroma to all sorts of stews, pates and soups. If added to the milk for a béchamel sauce, they make it especially flavoursome. When one or two bay leaves are added to boiled rice, fish or pasta, they make it much more appetising.

Ground bay leaves can be used to give aroma to cold sauces or to fast-cooking dishes and are frequently an ingredient in spice mixes.

Bay is rich in volatile oil which contains 45% cineol, a bitter principle, and tannin.

Bay is often used in infusions to relieve stomach problems, improve the digestion, reduce high blood pressure and facilitate expectoration.

Bay makes a perfect partner for vinegar and the two are often used in combination in marinades for oily fish (sardines, tune, mackerel, etc.), or for poultry and game.

An essential in French cookery, bayforms part of the *bouquet garni,* a bundle of herbs used to make ragout, stocks and soups, alongside thyme, chervil, rosemary and sometimes tarragon, leek and celery.

It gives an interesting touch to vegetables cooked in vinegar, pulses and marinades and also blends very well with wine when used as a cooking liquid.

When steaming certain shellfish, especially mussels, clams and cockles, the ideal flavouring is a bay leaf with a few peppercorns and a piece of lemon.

But it needs to be used with moderation as the flavour is powerful. The best course is to add the bay leaves at the start of cooking so that they can release their flavour slowly, and remove them before serving.

A useful tip for cooking cauliflower is to add a few bay leaves to the cooking water. This reduces the unpleasant smell and gives an interesting flavour.

Cinnamon, the sweet wood of the garden of paradise

Spikenard and saffron; calamos and cinnamon with all trees of frankincense; myrrh and aloes, with all the chief spices.

Song of Solomon, Chapter IV

In ancient mythology, cinnamon is associated with the immortal phoenix which lived in the Garden of Paradise and was burnt in the magic fire to be reborn from its own ashes every five hundred years. In his Metamorphosis, the Roman poet Ovid tells how this unique bird, once it is five centuries old, flies to the highest branches of a palm tree and builds a nest lined with cassia and soft sprigs of spikenard, with crumbs of cinnamon and myrrh, and lay down in it to die surrounded by perfumes. And from its ashes, a new, young phoenix was born.

Cinnamon, both in stick and powder form, is one of the most widely-used spices the world over. It is the dried bark of several trees belonging to the family *Laureaceae*. It was used as a perfume in ancient times and was much prized for its medicinal properties.

But not all cinnamon is the same. It varies depending on the tree it comes from, although they all belong to the genus *cinnamomum L.* There are also different qualities of cinnamon, depending on the part of the tree they come from and the particular harvest.

The favoured type in Europe is *Cinnamomumzeylanicus,* from Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon), although the tree is also found in India and parts of tropical America. The harvesting process is comparable to that of cork from cork oaks. The cinnamon tree has a double bark that can be easily separated from the trunk. The layers the thickness of a sheet of paper are dried and rolled up like the leaves of a cigar, and end up as a round stick. After two or three years, the tree regenerates its bark and the spice can be harvested once again.

Cassia, or Chinese cinnamon, from the *Cinnamomum cassia* tree is the most commonly used cinnamon in America. In comparison with Sri Lanka cinnamon, its flavour is less delicate and slightly piquant, its appearance is coarser and its colour is a brighter red. Although it accounts for a large percentage of the cinnamon consumed in the world, it is generally considered of inferior quality.

The name cinnamon is also given to the product of the *Cinnamomumloureiroi,* or Vietnamese cinnamon tree. In fact this is more similar to cassia – its bark is rougher and uneven, its flavour is more complex and less delicate and its aroma is stronger.

The first references to cassia date back to 2700 BC and come from Chinese herbalists. Many references to cassia can be found in the sacred books of different religions because aromas have always been seen as a link between man and his gods, from the offerings of exquisite fragrances to appease divine rage, to a symbol for approval of the gods. In the Book of Exodus, which tells how the people of Israel fled from Egypt, God gave Moses the recipe for making the sacred oil, "Take thou also unto thee principal spices, of pure myrrh five hundred shekels, and of sweet cinnamon half so much, even two hundred and fifty shekels, and of sweet calamus two hundred and fifty shekels. And of cassia five hundred shekels, after the shekel of the sanctuary, and of oil olive anhin. And thou shalt make it an oil of holy ointment, an ointment compound after the art of the apothecary; it shall be an holy anointing oil." It was considered that anyone who anointed a stranger with this ointment or prepared a similar mixture would be excluded from the people of Israel.

Just as it symbolised saintliness, the perfume was also the gate to sin. The Book of Proverbs describes the wiles used by a married woman to win over her lover, "I have decked my bed with coverings of tapestry, with carved works, with fine linen of Egypt. I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon. Come, let us take our fill of love until the morning: let us solace ourselves with loves. For the Goodman is not at home, he is gone a long journey. He hath taken a bag of money with him, and will come home at the day appointed."

In addition to its aromatic uses, cassia was used in ancient Egypt for embalming. Herodotus, the Greek geographer and writer who lived from 484 to 425 BC and passed down much information about the early world, gives a profuse description of an embalming ceremony, "They take first a crooked piece of iron, and with it draw out the brain through the nostrils, thus getting rid of a portion, while the skull is cleared of the rest by rinsing with drugs; next they make a cut along the flank with a sharp Ethiopian stone, and take out the whole contents of the abdomen, which they then cleanse, washing it thoroughly with palm wine, and again frequently with an infusion of pounded aromatics. After this

they fill the cavity with the purest bruised myrrh, with cassia, and every other sort of spicery except frankincense, and sew up the opening."

The historian does, however, go on to say that he just reports what others tell him so cannot guarantee that what he is told is true.

Cinnamon was a very common ingredient in medieval and Renaissance cuisine. In France, in the Middle Ages, the favourite condiment was ginger, although saffron, pepper and cinnamon were also used. 'Cameline' was a 14th century sauce made from bread, grape juice, ginger, pepper and cinnamon.

It was also part of the traditional pharmacopeia, being used to improve circulation of the blood, to relieve fever, to facilitate digestion and regulate the menstrual cycle. It was also mentioned as a remedy for colds, difficulties in urinating and kidney disease. There are reports that a piece of cinnamon was sometimes coveted as if it were a true treasure.

Perhaps the best example of its commercial importance can be found in the history of Sri Lanka, the world's largest producer of cinnamon. In the early 16th century, when the island was occupied by the Portuguese, it was divided into seven kingdoms, each with its own government, and trading was carried out by Arab merchants. The Portuguese settled there, achieving an agreement whereby they were paid an annual tax of 12,000 kg, and took over the cinnamon trade. They held the monopoly until the Dutch expelled them from their forts in 1658 and took control of the territory. The full, turbulent history of the cinnamon trade cannot be described here. It passed from one people to another, and in 1796 it was the English who imposed themselves on the island and obtained the cinnamon trade.

Uses and curiosities

Cinnamon is one of the most frequently-used spices in cooking, although in Spain it is mainly used in pastry-making. In countries coming under Persian or Arab influence, it is often used in savoury dishes.

In Indian cuisine, cinnamon is found in many recipes and forms part of one of the most popular Indian spice combinations, *garam masala,* which is basically made of clove, cardamom, saffron, pepper, nutmeg and cinnamon, although it may also include other ingredients such as ginger, pimento, chilli, garlic, mustard seeds, cumin and fennel. One of the most international of Indian dishes is Chicken Vindaloo, which the Portuguese introduced into north-west India, in the region of Goa. Originally, the dish was not so highly seasoned but it was adapted to local customs and products and many spices were added, including cinnamon, ginger, pepper, cardamom and chilli.

In Arab countries, cinnamon can be found in many lamb and chicken dishes and in the North African *tajines.* It is also included in the exquisite *pastilla* from Morocco, a delicious pie made with very thin flaky pastry, filled with squab or pigeon (often replaced by chicken) and sprinkled with sugar and ground cinnamon.

Ground cinnamon should be added towards the end of the cooking process, about five minutes before the end to ensure its flavour and aroma are not lost. A sprinkling may also be added as a final touch for sauces and marinades, or as decoration in pastry-making. Cinnamon sticks are used to give flavour to liquids such as milk, stock and wine when these are to be cooked for a long time. It can also be used to flavour cooked fruit, in milk-based desserts, or in hot winter drinks with cider, brandy or wine. It makes a good match with chocolate. Cinnamon sticks should be added to liquid at the start of cooking to maximise their flavour and aroma. They should be broken into two pieces and any pieces removed before the dish is served. But if the whole stick is used, it may be used as decoration.

In the world of drinks, cinnamon makes its appearance in the Indian *chai* alongside black pepper, clove, ginger and cardamom. Less standard additions include nutmeg, liquorice, saffron, vanilla, star anise and fennel.

An original, exotic touch can be given to hot or cold tea by adding a cinnamon stick, a clove and a piece of lemon rind. And an easy way of passing the qualities of this spice to coffee or tea is to add sugar then stir it in using a cinnamon stick by way of spoon.

The Ancient Greeks and Romans used to flavour wine with cinnamon. This custom remains, for example, in *sangría,* as well as in hot wines served with fruit and spice and the glog traditionally served at Christmas time in Nordic countries, which is hot wine with cinnamon, clove, cardamom, ginger and raisins.

Cinnamon can also give an exotic touch to meat dishes. It marries well with honey and dried fruits and nuts – almonds, pine nuts, prunes, raisins and dried apricots.

It used in a huge range of cakes, pastries and desserts – rice pudding, custard, bread-and-butter pudding, etc. It gives a pleasing aroma and its characteristic sweetness to fruit preserves, chutneys, jams, fruit compote and fruit salad, and combines to perfection with orange, apple, banana and pear. It also features frequently in ice creams and liqueurs.

And cinnamon has always had close ties with chocolate. It was one of the ingredients in the original Mexican drink and, when cocoa was brought to Spain from the New World, the first formulae partnered it with cinnamon, clove, vanilla, sugar and chilli peppers.

A fact that is not always remembered is that cinnamon is sweet and in some cases may be a good substitute for sugar. If a teaspoonful of cinnamon is added, for example, to a pastry case before baking, it will improve the finished result.

Facts and figures

Four thousand square metres of land can produce 50 to 70 kg of cinnamon.

Cinnamon forms part of one of the world's best-kept secrets, the recipe for the world's most popular drink, Coca-Cola.

The anti-bacterial and anti-fungal properties of cinnamon mean that is it included in the composition of several oral hygiene products. And its pleasant aroma leads to its being found in soaps, oils, perfumes and shampoos.

In the field of personal hygiene, chewing on a cinnamon stick sweetens the breath, and a hair rinse made from cinnamon sticks boiled in water gives a special shine to the hair.

Cinnamon was traditionally used for its sedative effects. For example, when someone burnt their tongue from eating or drinking something that was too hot, they used to be encouraged to chew on a cinnamon stick to numb the affected area.

Cloves, the treasure brought by Juan Sebastián Elcano on his return from the first circumnavigation of the world

Add cherries to the turkey
Add cherries to the turkey
And I'll add sugar, cinnamon and clove
To the tender turkey.

Song, music by Juan Mostazo
and words by Ramón Perelló

The clove is so-called because it is similar in appearance to a nail, *clou* in French – elongated with a round head. The cloves are the dried flower buds of the *Syzygiumaromaticum* or Eugenia *Caryophyllata,* of the family *Myrtaceae.*

The plant is originally from the Molucca islands, once called the "Spice Islands", a volcanic archipelago in Indonesia located in the Pacific Ring of Fire and much fought-over because, along with Madagascar, it was one of two places where cloves could be harvested and the only one where nutmeg could be found. The two spices caused confrontation between Indian, Arab and Chinese merchants first and, later, Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and English traders, all keen to monopolise the spice market. A long and fascinating history that started out with the search for the much-coveted spices and featured large in one of the greatest of maritime endeavours, circumnavigation of the earth.

Trade in cloves and nutmeg as spices of great value already existed in the Middle Ages, as witnessed by their inclusion in medieval recipes that have come down to us today. The business back then was in the hands of Muslim merchants who made long trips by land and by sea to collect supplies. Although these journeys can by no means have been easy, the merchants exaggerated their feats, inventing fantastic stories to make their customers think that collecting spices was a truly dangerous occupation, with the intention of both preserving the secret of their exotic origin and pushing up prices.

It is reasonable to assume that the West was interested in discovering a sea route that would allow direct trade with the Indies, cutting out the middlemen who could only make the goods more expensive. And so it was commercial interests that led, in the 15th and 16th centuries, to maritime expeditions in search of the home ground of spices. It was clear that whoever dominated maritime trade would dominate the world's riches.

Christopher Columbus, on the voyage of discovery that took him in 1492 to America, hoped, by travelling in the opposite direction to the conventional route from Europe to the West, to reach the Far East (the "Indies") in order to trade in the most sought-after and costly goods – spices, silk and gold.

The conquest of new territories and exploitation of their riches inevitably led to conflict. In 1494, the Treaty of Tordesillas was signed between the Catholic Monarchs of Spain and King Juan II of Portugal, whereby they divided up the oceans and the territory still to be discovered. They established a dividing-line in the middle of the Atlantic, a meridian from the North Pole to the Antarctic 370 leagues from the islands of Cape Verde. By means of this agreement, the two monarchies undertook to respect the new demarcations, and each was to focus on exploring the zone assigned to it – the West for Spain and the East for Portugal. It was even agreed that any unexpected discovery in the zone of the other party would immediately be passed over to its rightful owner.

In 1511, the Portuguese were the first Europeans to reach the Molucca archipelago, calling it the "crazy islands" because it was so difficult to navigate around them. They set up operations in Ternate, and took control of the islands' spice market.

Meanwhile, Ferdinand Magellan decided to travel to the islands by another route. He was to travel westwards in the belief that, if the islands were beyond India, they could not be very far from the newly-conquered American territories. He negotiated with Charles I of Spain, arguing that the islands must be in the Spanish part of the world as determined by the Treaty of Tordesillas. After successfully convincing the monarch, he set out on 20 September 1519 with five ships – Trinidad, San Antonio, Victoria, Santiago and Concepción – and with 380 men.

But Magellan died after being fatally wounded in a skirmish in the Philippines. His men continued for twenty-seven months and finally arrived in the Moluccas demoralised and exhausted. Under the command of Juan Sebastián Elcano, the Victoria was loaded with spices and set out for home. On 6 September 1522, the ship sailed into Sanlúcar de Barrameda in Cádiz, arriving three years after the start of the expedition, with just eighteen survivors. It carried cloves, a much-prized treasure for the Spanish Crown and, more

importantly, the crew had managed for the first time ever to sail round the world.
For a period Spain and Portugal were in dispute over possession of the Spice Islands but finally, in 1529, they signed the Treaty of Zaragoza, whereby Spain gave up any claims to them in exchange for 350,000 gold crowns.
Control of the clove trade remained in the hands of the Portuguese until, in the 17th century, the Dutch East Indies Company wrested it from them. It was subsequently taken by the British, then France changed things for ever by extending cultivation and bringing down prices. In spite of strict prohibitions, French agronomist and colonial administrator Pierre Poivre managed to smuggle out some clove plantlets and establish them in other French colonies. His success gradually put an end to speculation and high prices.
It is difficult for us today to imagine that such a cheap spice as clove could have been behind such risky expeditions, conflicts between world powers and prices seven times greater than that of gold.

Uses and curiosities

If you take a clove and press it between your fingers, it will leave a persistent aroma that will remain for hours. This is because of its essential oil rich in eugenol (about 85%), a sweet and penetrating aromatic compound with antiseptic and anaesthetic properties. Eugenol is also present in bay leaves, cinnamon and nutmeg, although clove has a greater content.
Cloves have traditionally been associated with possible benefits for the digestive system, being used to relieve nausea and vomiting and to reduce flatulence. It was once also used to mitigate halitosis, to the extent that in China, during the Han dynasty, when courtiers were to be received by the Emperor, they were required to first chew a clove to sweeten their breath. As knowledge of the properties of clove increased, it started to be widely used in dentistry as a local anaesthetic, in mouthwashes and in dental products. It has a strong but warm smell and is also used in perfumes and for air fresheners and incense.
It is best bought whole rather than ground as it loses its flavour and aroma fast. Cloves should be intact, a reddish brown and thick. When crushed they release an intense aroma. The flavour is strong, slightly piquant at the start but becoming a little bitter and, finally, producing a sensation of cold in the mouth. Clove combines well with both sweet and savoury dishes and can be used in sauces, with pulses, in meat and vegetable dishes but also in pastries and desserts, but in all cases it must be used in moderation as its flavour is very strong. In meat dishes, a common method is to stick one or two cloves into an onion which is added to the cooking juices.
A small amount can be added to béchamel sauce and, in pulse dishes, a little clove not only gives aroma but helps the digestion.
If the clove is used whole it should be added at the start of the cooking process, but it can be added at the end providing it is first crushed in a mortar.
In Indian cooking, clove is an essential ingredient in many sauces and spice mixtures. It is added to rice to give it flavour, as in *biryani,* a dish of turkey, chicken or lamb and vegetables with yoghurt and spices. It is also part of one of the best-known Indian spice mixtures, *garam masala,* and of the many versions that exist of curry powder.
An interesting gastronomic contribution made by India and taken up by its British settlers is chutney, with a texture somewhere between sauce and jam. Chutneys are generally made with brown sugar, lemon or vinegar and spices, amongst which clove is a standard addition, and the basic ingredient can be any of a wide variety of fruits or vegetables – pineapple, blackberries, tomato, onion, mango, melon, cherries, mint, papaw, grapes, etc. Chutney makes an excellent partner for almost anything – cheese, meat, poultry, paté, etc.
In Oriental cooking, clove together with Chinese cinnamon or cassia, star anise, Sichuan pepper and fennel seeds makes up "five spice powder", a popular condiment that is said to represent the five basic flavours of Chinese cuisine – sweet, salt, bitter, umami and sour.
In French cuisine, "four spices" (clove, pepper, nutmeg and cinnamon) are used for poultry and pork preparations.
In the Mexican peninsula of Yucatan, clove forms part of a bright red paste called *recadorojo* used to baste meat to give it an intense hot flavour.
From a practical point of view, if clove is added to dishes containing pulses, it not only adds aroma but also makes them easier to digest.
A pleasant beverage is wine (or even tea) served with a cinnamon stick, lemon rind and cloves.
Since cloves are so aromatic, an effective freshener for the refrigerator can be made by sticking a few into half an apple. Also, cloves are considered to be excellent insect repellents and in some places the custom is to cut a lemon in half, stick cloves into it and place it near windows to repel mosquitos.

Facts and figures

Clove, nutmeg and cinnamon are used in the formula of what is known as *Agua del Carmen,* a remedy for nervous problems and natural relaxant based on essence of melissa and invented in the 17th century by members of the Discalced Carmelite order.
In Indonesia, the world's main consumer of cloves, aromatic cigarettes called *kretek* are popular and contain a large amount of ground cloves.
Cloves are used in many combinations, frequently with cinnamon and nutmeg. This was common practice in medieval pastry-making. There is also documentation on the use in medieval France of a sauce called *cameline,* which included clove, cinnamon, ginger, mace, pepper, vinegar, and bread as a thickener.

Cumin, pharaoh's oil

Riddle:
As tall as a pine tree
And weighs less than a cumin seed.

Smoke

The cumin seed may be tiny but it has great gastronomic value and was once considered very valuable for therapeutic purposes.

The most common cumin is the fruit of the species *Cuminumcyminum* originally from Turkistan (Central Asia, from the Caspian Sea to the Gobi Desert), Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean. It is used whole or crushed to flavour food. The seed is elongated, similar to a fennel seed and slightly smaller than a grain of rice. As it ripens, it turns from green to a yellowish brown. The flavour can be described as sweetish, not unlike aniseed, with bitter and slightly piquant notes. The aroma is outstandingly fine, sweet and pleasant.

There is also black cumin, *Nigella sativa*, a member of the family *Ranunculaceae*, which was used for medical purposes by the Ancient Egyptians and is well known as a remedy throughout Asia. Its seeds are used to make an oil, which is cold-pressed to preserve the biological properties and is commonly known as "Pharaohs' oil". The root of the plant is much-loved food by cattle, and some cattle-breeders associate it with enhanced milk production.

Common cumin was mentioned in the Old Testament Book of Isaiah. "Does the farmer plough continually to plant seed? Does he continually turn and harrow the ground? Does he not level its surface and sow dill and scatter cumin and plant wheat in rows, barley in its place and rye within its area? For his God instructs and teaches him properly. For dill is not threshed with a threshing sledge, nor is the cartwheel driven over cumin; but dill is beaten out with a rod, and cumin with a club."

In Israel, the Pharisees used cumin seeds as a currency. In the New Testament, (Matthew 23:23), Jesus addresses them, saying, "Woe unto you, scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone."

In Ancient Egypt, perfumed vegetable oils and seeds were used in mummification. Several sources mention cumin as one of the ingredients used together with natron, beeswax and cedar oil in the ceremony of binding the corpses.

The early Greeks, who were great fans of spices, used cumin to flavour fish dishes.

The Romans also enjoyed it, as was explained for us by Pliny the Elder (1st century BC), who mentioned cumin as being consumed with bread, water and wine. The History of Spanish Gastronomy by the doctor and historian Manuel Martínez Llopis, leader of a whole generation of Spanish food experts, states "The popularity of cumin was to last until the Middle Ages. For the Romans, Ethiopian cumin was considered more flavoursome than that grown in Galacia and Cilicia".

The Roman cookery book by Caius Apicius refers to what at the time were considered especially exquisite dishes, "And as you sip your wine let these relishes be brought to you — pig's belly and boiled sow's matrix floating in cumin and vinegar and silphium; also the tender tribe of birds roasted, such as the season affords." To prepare mussels, Apicius also recommended oil, wine, cumin and the mythical garum. In another recipe, bream is served with a sauce of pepper, coriander, cumin and thyme.

It was perhaps the Arabs who brought cumin to Europe via Andalusia. In Arab-Andalusian cooking, spices and herbs played an important role with the stress on cumin, saffron, aniseed, caraway, fennel, parsley, mint and coriander. Cumin was added to dishes with beans and chick-peas, to soups and fish dishes and to stews. There are records of its being cultivated in Andalusia in the 11th century.

Regarding the medical qualities of cumin, Dioscorides the doctor and botanist who wrote *De Materia Medica* which was to be the main reference still in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, mentioned two types of cumin, cultivated and wild. He described the former as 'mild-tasting' and considered the best quality to come from Ethiopia. He recommended mixing it with water and vinegar and administering it to patients with breathing problems. The latter apparently grew freely and the best came from "Lycia, Galatia in Asia and Cartagena in Spain". He recommended mixing the seeds

with water for stomach cramps and wind, or crushing it with honey and raisins as a poultice for bruises. This illustrious doctor was right about the carminative properties of cumin which can be used for flatulence and as a stomach tonic.

Amongst the many superstitions to be found in the world of herbs and spices that perhaps originated from the long journeys made to obtain them, there are theories whereby cumin can be used, amongst others, as a love filter, aphrodisiac or a symbol of fidelity and as a repellent for evil spirits.

Uses and curiosities

Indian cooks know that to obtain the full benefit of cumin, it should be toasted. All that is needed is to place the seeds in a hot pan for a few seconds, shaking it so they neither stick nor burn. For cold dishes, the seeds can be crushed in a mortar before adding them to the dish.

Another way of using cumin is in combination with other spices. They should first be crushed together with other spices in a mortar, then added to hot oil. This aromatic oil can then be used either as the base for dishes or as a dressing for finished dishes such as pasta or salads.

To give added flavour to bread or pastries, a good way of using cumin is to fry some seeds in oil together with lemon or orange rind. This oil can then be strained and added to dough.

Cumin is essential in the cuisine of most Arab countries. It is very frequently used in kebabs, tagines, couscous, with snails, and as a dressing for vegetables and salads. It is also a popular ingredient for *mechoui,* roast lamb, being added in ground form with salt at the end of the cooking process. It also forms part of the spice blend called *ras-el-hanout.*

Because it stimulates intestinal action, it is recommended for foods that cause flatulence such as chickpeas, beans, cauliflower, cabbage, etc. It is often recommended for *sauerkraut, falafel* (the chickpea and bean croquettes that are popular in Pakistan, India and Arab countries) and *hummus,* the delicious chickpea *paté* that is served in pita bread.

Cumin is a frequently-used spice in European cuisine. In Spain, it is probably in Andalusia where it is used most as a result of the historic Arab tradition in cuisine, as well as in the Canary Islands, where it is an important ingredient in the original *mojo* sauces.

In Holland, Leiden cow's milk cheese includes cumin. This is a cheese with a hard rind that bears the symbol of the city's university, two crossed keys.

Cumin is also representative in the cuisine of some parts of Latin America.

A very simple garnish for any meat dish can be made by heating a teaspoonful of cumin seeds in a pan with a few drops of oil and some chopped garlic and adding cooked rice.

Cumin also gives added appeal to marinades for fish.

Not only is cumin used in sweet and savoury dishes but it can also be useful to aid the digestion. After boiling a teaspoonful of cumin in a cupful of water for five minutes, leave it to stand for a few minutes, then drink.

Garlic, a health-giving condiment

…Now you take garlic,
First caress that precious ivory
Smell its irate fragrance
Then blend the chopped garlic
with the onion …

Oda al Caldillo de Congrio,
Pablo Neruda

Ajo blanco, ajo cabañil, ajo arriero, ajo pringue, ajo mataero, ajopuerco, allioli, sopa de ajo… Just a glance at any Spanish recipe book gives an idea of the huge number of dishes in which this condiment takes pride of place. When it is not the main ingredient, it tails along at the end of the recipe's name – rabbit, elvers, prawns, ribs, all of them *al ajillo.* And there are plenty of other dishes in which garlic does not feature in the title but is very much present in the content: *migas, gachas, bacalao al pilpil,* etc.

The *Allium sativum* bulb, a member of the family *Liliaceae* together with the leek and the onion, originated somewhere in central Asia from where it spread to Europe and was then taken to America by the Spaniards.

Several cultures have used it throughout their history, for its culinary and medical properties and even, in some cases, for certain magic attributes it was deemed to have. The Egyptians, Sumerians, Hebrews, Greeks and Romans were all captivated by its qualities.

In one of the earliest medical treatises that have come down to us, the Egyptian Ebers Papyrus (around 1500 BC), which describes how to treat diseases with plant substances, garlic is recommended on several occasions for its curative power.

Herodotus of Halicarnassus (484-425 BC) writes that, during a trip to Egypt to see the Great Pyramid of Giza, also known as the Keops pyramid after the Pharaoh who had it built, he saw an inscription stipulating the cost of the garlic, onion and radishes bought to feed the construction workers.

The Ancient Greeks called it "pungent rose" and considered it to be invigorating, recommending it to athletes during the Olympic Games. Magic powers were also attributed to it, and crowns of garlic were offered to Hekate, a goddess with witchcraft and magic connections who stood at crossroads.

The Romans included garlic in soldiers' rations and used it, mixed with ashes and animal fat, to cure wounds and infections. Their most famous physicians, Galenus and Dioscorides, sang its praises.

Galenus, who was from Turkey and became the doctor of the Roman court, is the father of modern pathology and his points of view dominated medicine for centuries. He investigated the curative properties of garlic. His 'medications' included a wine mixed with garlic, and for wounds he prescribed bandages impregnated with a mixture of flour, garlic and oil.

Dioscorides, a military surgeon for the Roman army and author of *De Materia Medica,* a 5-volume treatise that was still the main pharmacological reference in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, saw garlic as a panacea. When eaten, it expelled worms from the intestine; when applied as a dressing, it could save people bitten by rabid dogs; cooked, it relieved coughing; as a drink with oregano it could kill lice and nits; mixed with honey, it could remove freckles and dandruff and help protect against scabies; applied with oil, it could restore hair that had fallen out because of ringworm; with salt and oil it could cure scabs; cooked with tea and incense and used as a mouthwash, it could relieve toothache; and as a paste mixed with black olives, it could encourage urination. A real cure-all.

A Spanish proverb states, "eat garlic and drink wine, and the vipers will stay away". Garlic was long considered, for no scientific reason, to be an antidote to poison. The Roman writer and naturalist Pliny the Elder (AD 23 to 79) went even further, recommending it for cleaning bites by animals, from shrews to dogs and snakes, and considered it neutralised the effects of contact with poisonous plants, acted against intestinal parasites and served as a powerful aphrodisiac.

Much later, during the plague in the 14th century, though there was no known cause nor knowledge about how the disease was propagated, all sorts of remedies were devised. One theory was to supplement the diet with myrrh, saffron and pepper alongside garlic, onion and leeks.

Garlic is also known as the "poor man's medicine", because it is cheap and has played an important role in the naturalist tradition. To our knowledge, it is one of the earliest plants to be used for therapeutic purposes, and its fame has stood the tests of both time and medical advances.

But the first sound scientific description of the antibiotic properties of garlic only came with French chemist and physicist Louis Pasteur (1822-1895).

In some cultures, garlic is often used as a talisman. When mention is made of a head of garlic, we

all remember having read about it as the most effective antidote against vampires. Devils and other malign beings were said to be repulsed by it. In the Odyssey, the Greek epic poem written by Homer, the Trojan hero Ulysses used a plant called "golden garlic" offered by the god Hermes to deliver himself from the beautiful Circe, who was able to convert men into pigs.

As a food, no-one is indifferent to garlic. People either love it or hate it. Its history is full of stories in favour of and against eating it, although the former are the majority. The only thing its detractors can fully claim against it is that, when it is eaten, it impregnates the mucous membranes to such an extent that it is difficult to get rid of the smell.

It has been a basic food on the humblest of tables, so can be considered a plebeian condiment. The Spanish phrase book illustrates this: "He who works and walks naked, just garlic and wine", or "Take away garlic and that's the end of the villager". And Don Quixote says to Sancho, "Don't eat garlic, Sancho. From its smell, people will know your humble origins".

Uses and curiosities

Raw garlic has a sharp and pungent flavour and the smell is penetrating and persistent. Many of its properties are actually wasted when it is cooked. As the refrain says, "Boiled garlic, wasted garlic". The pungent, strong flavour will remain if the garlic is added towards the end of the cooking process but long cooking will make the flavour milder.

When buying garlic, the heads should be compact, firm and tight and the skin dry and papery. Green shoots, yellowish cloves or gaps when you press with your fingers all indicate that the garlic is past its best.

There are a multitude of handy tricks to get rid of the unpleasant smell left on your fingers after peeling garlic: with your hands underwater, rub your fingers on a metal object such as a spoon; rub your hands with salt or a few coffee grains so that their aromatic oil cancels out that of the garlic; rub your hands in water with some lemon juice; use a few sprigs of parsley, etc.

Garlic cloves can be peeled and frozen to be used later, but this will damage most of their qualities. The best way of peeling them, to keep all the goodness in, is to flatten them with the blade of a stiff knife so that they release their essential oils. This releases the allicin, a compound with antibiotic effects.

Garlic is an essential element in Mediterranean cuisine and is used in stews, sauces, marinades, pulse and vegetable dishes, and with meat and fish. The cloves can be added to dishes whole, with just an incision. If they are to be used without the skin and we wish to make sure the dish is easy to digest, after peeling them, cut them in half and remove the shoot in the centre as this tends to have a slightly bitter taste.

To reduce the intensity of garlic, it can be blanched for a few minutes in boiling water. The most sophisticated way of doing this is to submerge the cloves in a pan of cold, salted water and bring it to the boil. Then remove the cloves and place in cold water, repeating the operation three times. This makes the garlic sweeter and lighter.

Some suggestions for sweetening the breath after eating garlic are to eat a raw apple or celery stick, to chew a sprig of parsley or mint, to drink an infusion of wormwood or star anise, or to rinse your mouth with water and lemon juice.

To prevent fresh garlic from germinating, keep it in a cool, dry place. Garlic cloves will keep well if peeled and covered with oil, and this oil is useful for giving a garlic aroma to any type of dish. The cloves can also be prepared *en confit* in a pan with oil, and cooked at a very low temperature for about 20 minutes, ensuring the oil does not boil.

The most practical way of quickly adding garlic to dishes, without having to peel it or making your fingers smelly, is to use ground garlic, a perfect substitute for fresh garlic. There are some people who dislike finding pieces of garlic in their food and this method allows you to add garlic flavour without leaving any physical traces.

"Said the onion to the garlic, 'Stick by my side'". Garlic and onion form the basis for many of our dishes. The basic combination of olive oil, garlic and parsley is the perfect salad dressing, is ideal for adding to grilled fish or meat, to clams, mussels, shellfish, etc.

Undoubtedly, if there is a sauce that represents garlic, it is *aioli*, an emulsion of olive oil with garlic and salt. To make it the traditional way, all you need is a pestle and mortar and plenty of patience. It is a great accompaniment for rice dishes, *fideuà*, potatoes, pork products, grilled meat, etc. To make it, first peel the garlic cloves then place in the mortar with a little rock salt, and crush to extract all the oil and form a paste. Then, drop by drop, add oil and mix into the garlic paste, grinding with the pestle, always in the same direction. (A trick to ensure the mixture does not curdle is to add a few drops of lemon.) Continue adding oil and stirring. It takes about 15 minutes to achieve a light sauce, and skill to make it light while preventing it from curdling. The traditional method for showing that your aioli has been perfectly blended is to turn the mortar upside down, hopefully showing that the sauce does not move. Enemy number one of aioli is impatience because, if the oil is added too fast, the mixture will curdle.

If you lack time or skill, you can always use a blender to make a sauce of oil, salt, garlic and egg, which amounts to a mayonnaise with garlic but not an aioli. There is a clear difference in texture and flavour.

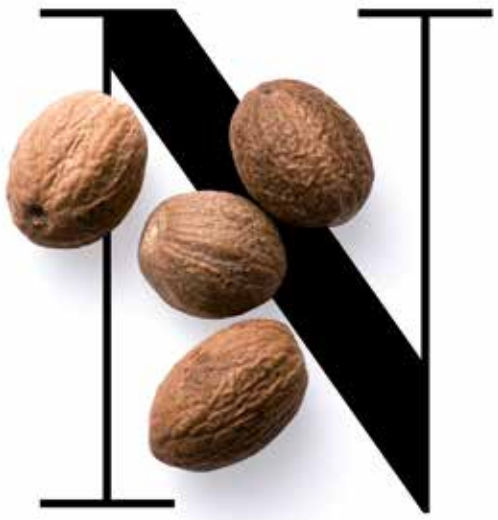
Another of the traditional dishes made with garlic is Castilian garlic soup. This is a simple, basic dish but a comforting one. Again, Spanish proverbs come to our rescue. "There can be no bell without a clapper, and no soup without garlic", or "Work brings good health, as does garlic soup".

To close, a dish of fried potatoes with garlic, as described by Pablo Neruda in one of his poems. Crispy potatoes sizzling and turning golden in boiling oil, with the earthy fragrance of garlic.

Facts and figures

Garlic used to be fed to certain animals. Fighting cocks were forced to eat garlic to eliminate their intestinal parasites, and garlic was rubbed in their wounds after the fight to reduce the swelling. Some breeders of cocks still today include a small clove of garlic in the weekly feed.

Nutmeg from the "crazy islands"



Cinnamon to make friends,
basil for remembrance,
nutmeg to cure old wounds.

From the film *The Mistress of Spices*,
directed by Paul Mayeda Berges

Nutmeg and mace are considered two separate spices but both come from the same tree, *Myristicafragrans*, commonly known as the nutmeg tree. This is a tropical plant with very aromatic leaves similar in shape to those of the pear. It can fruit for over forty years, and a mature tree gives about 2,000 fruits every year.

The nutmeg fruit comes wrapped like a luxury gift in a shell that is thin but difficult to break, as is also the case with macadamia nuts or hazelnuts. This shell is protected by an aril, a sort of soft, bright red mesh from which mace is obtained. Covering it is another shell in two halves, like the outer skin of an almond on the tree.

Harvesting takes place when the fruit falls from the tree. The mace is removed and the shell enclosing the nutmeg is left to dry until crisp so that it can be easily opened. The uncovered fruit is then treated with a lime solution to prevent attack by parasites or mould. After a few weeks of drying, the nutmegs are ready for use. They are smaller than cherries, greyish-brown, very hard, heavy and egg-shaped. The aroma is similar to that of clove though more subtle and lighter. The flavour is sweet, slightly piquant and persistent. Once the fruit has been grated it is possible to see the brown and cream marbling inside it.

Mace is bright red when collected but, as it dries, it gradually loses its shine and the red turns to orange. It is sold in slices or ground. Its organoleptic qualities are very similar to those of nutmeg although the experts define the aroma as more intense and the flavour as less sweet. But where mace has a very clear advantage over nutmeg is in its colouring power. Nutmegs offer no colour at all, but mace gives dishes a slight yellowish tone similar to that of saffron although the properties are very different.

Until the mid-19th century, nutmeg and mace were produced only on the Banda islands, a group of ten small islands in the Molucca archipelago. Inevitably, since their production area was so tiny, trade in these spices was always subject to speculation, high prices and mystery. The population of the islands took advantage of their spices, using them to barter with the Arab merchants who then sold them at great profit in the port of Venice in Italy, from where they were distributed around Europe.

Such a highly-prized merchandise inevitably led to a history of conflict between the islanders and conquerors who came from far-away lands in the hope of gaining control over trade. The Portuguese were the first Europeans to come to these islands (in 1512), which they called "crazy islands" because it was so difficult to navigate around them. And they dominated the spice trade for many years until the Dutch wrested it from them.

The Dutch were able to transform the spice trade in 1602 by setting up the Dutch East Indies Company, which was a new concept at the time but was to last for over two centuries. It was devised by the Dutch government to put an end to the increasingly frequent private expeditions to the spice islands by Dutch citizens. Such voyages when successful brought in huge profit but also entailed great risks from bad weather, shipwrecks, attacks by pirates and disease. And they led to competition amongst the Dutch merchants themselves who saw prices dropping because of the larger amounts that were reaching the distribution points.

The purpose of the Dutch East India Company was to align the country's interests and the trade. It was able to set up colonies, declare war and draw up treaties. It eliminated the traditional system of barter and established a price list based on its currency. By raising the volume of trade and the profit margins, it allowed the Dutch State to step up its naval development, increase its colonies and finance wars.

But others including the English were also interested in this market and there was a period of conflict amongst the powers to gain control of the Banda islands.

In 1667, France, England, Denmark and the Netherlands signed the Treaty of Breda. The geographical division established by this treaty allowed the Dutch to retain the island of Run (one of the Banda islands) and its nutmeg trade, but in exchange they had to surrender to the English their claims to New Amsterdam (today New York).

But peace on Banda Island was short-lived. The Dutch massacred the Banda leaders and decimated the local population, dividing the land into parcels and passing them over to new Dutch settlers, thus guaranteeing the monopoly on the supply of nutmeg. And where they had no control, they cut down the nutmeg trees to prevent others from dealing in it.

In 1810, the Dutch were forced out of the islands by the British. All in all, the history of nutmeg was blackened by attacks, counter-attacks, bombardment, ambushes, sieges, slavery, murders and massacres.

Myristicafragrans is undoubtedly the most highly-appreciated and most widely-grown of the nutmeg trees, and today is also grown on the island of Granada in the south-east Caribbean. But there are about four hundred species of the genus *Myristica,* only a small number of which are grown for nutmeg.

Next in importance are *Myristicaargentea* from New Guinea, called the Papua nut, and *Myristicamalabarica* or Bombay nut. Other types of nutmeg that are especially rich in essential oils are *MyristicaBicuhyba,* the Bucumba nut, from Brazil, *Myristicafatua* from Philippines and the Moluccas and *Myristicainers* from Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and Brunei.

Uses and curiosities

Nutmeg has a rich warm aroma that is not particularly intense, and a sweet, slightly citric and refreshing flavour. Like some other spices, it too can be used in both sweet and savoury dishes. It can be added to cabbage, cauliflower or vegetable soups but also to pasta dishes, meat stews, egg puddings, sauces and quiches.

It is most widely used in béchamel sauce, mashed potatoes and croquettes, all of which contain milk and are mild-tasting.

Nutmeg enhances any cream of vegetable soup containing courgettes, spinach or chard, or a *vichysoisse.* It is especially recommended in milk or egg puddings or soufflés, and goes well with all sorts of pasta, such as spaghetti bolognese, vegetable lasagne or ravioli with cheese or spinach.

It also makes a good partner for potatoes and eggs, not to mention roast or casseroled meat or meat pies.

It is an essential ingredient in the typical German sausage and in other pork products.

Indians and Indonesians use it in their dishes and Arabs in stewed lamb. It Italy, nutmeg is used in vegetable or beef dishes and in fillings for pasta, but also in honey cakes, desserts, and fruit punches.

Nutmeg needs to be kept in a sealed container, in a cool, dry place. Ground nutmeg is quick and easy to use but whole nutmegs should be as hard as wood and should not have any holes which might indicate insects. Whole nutmegs last longer than ground nutmeg and maximum benefit can be obtained from them as nutmeg is more aromatic when freshly grated. Special nutmeg graters can be used, and the early graters are today considered collectors' items. They used to be made from silver, wood or ivory, with a compartment to keep the whole nutmeg and another for the grated spice.

A curiosity about nutmeg is that, like clove, it was often used to sweeten the breath and today is used in some toothpaste formulae. It too is used in perfumery and in body oils. More unexpectedly, it also appears in the composition of cough mixtures and in the standard recipe for doughnuts.

Facts and figures

An urban legend exists about the qualities of nutmeg, largely based on the publication of studies that analyse the properties of nutmeg and consider it, when consumed in large doses, to be psychotropic. However, as physician and alchemist Paracelsus (1493-1541) stated, all substances are toxic, it all depends on the dose. So there is absolutely no reason why nutmeg should not be used for culinary purposes as it is only used in very small amounts.

Oregano, joy of the mountain

… until I found myself on a platform
or in a newly-planted field
a word: oregano
a word that unravelled me
as if it had taken me out of a labyrinth.
I was happy to learn just that one word.

Oregano, Pablo Neruda

The name 'oregano' comes from the Greek *oros* (mountain) and *ganos* (joy), leading to the nickname "joy of the mountain".

The robust oregano plant that grows wild on hills and mountains, cloaking the landscape, in Spanish gives rise to the phrase, *"No todo el monte es oregano"* (Not everything in the country is oregano), meaning that not everything is necessarily good. It grows in any sort of environment, even on stony ground. Some varieties do well in hot climates, some like the cold.

In fact, the term oregano covers several species of plant that are used for culinary purposes, the most common of which in Europe is *Origanum-vulgare,* a Mediterranean perennial herb with a warm, enticing aroma and a piquant flavour that stands out in any dish. It is related to mint, basil, lavender, thyme, rosemary and sage, all of them members of the family *Lamiaceae.*

In addition to common oregano, there are other varieties of plants that receive the same name: French oregano, *Coleus amboinicus Lour* from eastern Asia , which is acclimatised to tropical countries, has an aroma that is very similar to that of common oregano but a different morphology, and is widely used in Cuban and Mexican cuisine; also Cretan oregano, *Oreganumdictaminus,* and Greek oregano *Rigani.* To add to the confusion, in some places, marjoram, *Origanummajorana,* is known as oregano. This has an aroma similar to that of oregano, but the flavour is less piquant and sweeter.

In traditional medicine, it is considered to have anti-oxidising, anti-microbial, antiseptic, tonic and digestive qualities. It has been used for centuries in Chinese medicine and in other cultures for, amongst others, treating mouth ulcers, alleviating menstrual pain, relieving stomach pain, calming coughing, healing wounds and treating rheumatism.

In his History of Spanish Gastronomy, Manuel Martínez Llopis explains that the Ancient Greeks were fond of spices, using oregano, thyme, cumin, fennel and sage to season their dishes, and that vintners used to add to their wines flour mixed with honey, oregano, fruits, flowers and other herbs.

Uses and curiosities

The culinary uses of oregano are many. It is widely used to flavour tomato sauces, vegetables, grilled meat, roasts, fish sauces, etc.

It gives an excellent aromatic touch to minced meat and game although it is best known as an additive for Italian cuisine, especially pizza, but also pasta. In both, it is added towards the end of the cooking process.

It is also representative of Greek cuisine, where it is used on *sowlakia,* a char-grilled brochette comprising small pieces of meat (and sometimes vegetables).

Oregano also forms part of *Herbes de Provence,* a mixture of culinary plants used in southern France to give dishes greater flavour.

Although it combines very well with all sorts of meat, it can work miracles with some simple grilled vegetables, boiled artichokes or onion rings. Mixed with extra virgin olive oil and a pinch of salt, it gives a special touch to a salad.

A simple but very appealing summer dish is sliced tomatoes with mozzarella or goats' cheese dressed with oil, salt and oregano.

It is also an essential ingredient in *ratatouille,* a popular recipe from Provence that can be eaten either hot or cold, as a main dish or as an accompaniment. It is made from a variety of vegetables – tomato, aubergine, courgette, pepper, garlic and onion – sliced and arranged in layers, over which a splash of olive oil is added with salt, pepper and oregano (though some people prefer to use a *bouquet garni*) and baked. A pinch of oregano can also be added to the Spanish version of ratatouille called *pisto manchego.*

In cold preparations, oregano can be moistened with a liquid such as vinegar, lemon, oil or wine. Surprising results can be obtained with a carpaccio of courgette. Slice the courgette very thin, without peeling it, dress with lemon juice, salt, pepper, oregano and basil (either fresh or dried), a splash of olive oil and leave to marinate for at least half an hour before serving.

For an appetiser, add oregano, thyme and garlic to butter and serve with fresh bread.

Oregano can also be used to dress olives and to season oils and vinegars. When using it to cook, it is best to add it at the end of the cooking process to prevent its delicate flavour from being lost.

Facts and figures

The Spanish saying goes, *"Quiera Dios que oregano sea y no se nos vuelva alcaravea",* attributing good qualities to oregano and not so good to caraway. The latter is a slightly piquant, aniseed-flavoured spice that used to be used in bread and other baked goods but today has fallen out of favour. Caraway, *Carumcarvi,* is often confused with cumin as its flavour, size and appearance are similar.

Parsley
in every sauce

Are you going to Scarborough Fair?
Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme
Remember me to one who lives there,
For once she was a true love of mine.
Tell him to bring me an acre of land
Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme
Betwixt the salt water and the sea strand
Then he'll be a true lover of mine.
Tell him to plough it with a lamb's horn
Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme
And sow it all over with one peppercorn
Then he'll be a true lover of mine.

Traditional English folksong, anonymous

Parsley is a herb that can be used in a multitude of ways and there can be few kitchens where it is not used frequently.

It is also a friendly herb, one that is happy to grow together with others and one with qualities that enhance dressings and dishes. There can be few foods that do not combine well with parsley. Of the genus *Petroselinum* and the family *Apiaceae*, it grows all over the world. Its leaves when raw are rich in vitamins A, B1, B2, C and D. It contains large amounts of iron and calcium and is recommended for anaemia and for slimming diets. Today, it is mostly used for culinary purposes although natural medicine continues to sing its praises for a number of complaints because of its high vitamin and mineral content.

Its active principles act on the kidney function, making it a natural diuretic. It also helps to fix calcium in the bones and its magnesium content is good for the muscular system.

The two most common types of parsley are flat-leaved *(Petroselinumsativumlatifolium)* which has a strong flavour, is slightly bitter and is mostly used in cold dishes and sauces, and curly-leaf parsley *(Petroselinumsativumcrispum)*, which is milder and sweeter, and is appropriate for fish dishes and dishes requiring long cooking.

The origin of the plant is not clear. It has been suggested it originated in Sardinia. Other possible sources are Turkey, Libya and Algeria. Today it grows freely all over the Mediterranean area and has a marked presence in the Mediterranean diet but in fact it is grown and used on all five continents.

It was not always used for gastronomic purposes. In ancient times, eating parsley was not allowed because it was considered to be dedicated to the dead. This association comes from Greek mythology which tells the story of Opheltes, son of the King of Nemea, who was left for a minute by his nurse, Hypsipyle, in a field of parsley. When she returned, the child had died, poisoned by a huge snake. In honour of the child, the Olympic Games of Nemea were created in the Greek Peloponnese Islands and held every two years. The judges wore mourning and the winners received crowns of parsley.

The Greeks called the plant *petroselino*, which meant 'celery that grows on stones'. They had five types of celery, the most common of which was 'garden celery', what we call parsley.

In the Odyssey, Homer mentions celery, possibly in reference to the parsley plant that grew on the fantastic island of Ogigia, where the nymph Calypso conquered the hero Ulysses, offering him eternal youth and retaining him on the island for seven years. "And right there about the deep cave ran trailing a garden vine, richly laden with clusters. And fountains four in a row were flowing with bright water this way and that. And round about soft meadows of violets and parsley were blooming". Although the location of the island is unknown, both the Greek geographer Strabo and the historian Plutarch placed it in the Atlantic. More recent theories consider it could have been the Spanish island of Perejil (Parsley) if it is proven that Homer based the maritime scenario of his epic on the nautical instructions left by the Phoenicians and other Mediterranean navigators. But other claims have also been staked by Ireland and the Maltese island of Gozo, both of which could also have been the mythical Ogygia.

For the Romans, parsley was clearly useful for medical purposes. In his Medical Treatise, Dioscorides, a Roman military physician at the time of Emperor Nero, described it as a diuretic, as facilitating the start of menstruation, and as relief for discomforts of the stomach and abdomen. Other writers such as the Latin writer and naturalist, Pliny the Elder, spoke of its importance for making sauces.

While still associated with magic powers and the afterlife, it was in the Middle Ages that it became popular as a herb for cooking and found a place in the kitchen gardens of monasteries.

But in the case of Spain, it has left a real mark not only in gastronomy, medicine and legend but in the language, where it features in many popular phrases. One such is *"ser el perejil de todas las salsas"*, meaning a person who likes to be seen and heard, that is, a meddler or busybody.

The well-known Spanish chef Santi Santamaría wrote in El País about it, "I find parsley from an urban garden different to that grown near Barcelona. Is it because of its vitamin C and D content, or its mineral content? Perhaps. The nutritionists' reports are contradictory. But parsley is more

than just a first-class source of iron. It is a key ingredient in our culinary culture".

Uses and curiosities

Its versatility and decorative value have made parsley especially useful in cooking. It goes well with almost everything so can be used to decorate or as an ingredient in salads, dressings, sauces, fish, meat, stews. But it is best added fresh as most of its vitamins and minerals, as well as its aroma, are lost during cooking.

A good way to keep parsley fresh is in a vase of water as if it were a bunch of flowers, although the vitamins quickly disappear, but the best is to wrap it in kitchen paper and keep it in the refrigerator.

It is best to pull it into pieces with the fingers rather than chop it with a knife as this helps keep its bright green colour. It can also be frozen for use at any time. An easy-to use and always available alternative is dried and ground parsley.

A good way of using it as decoration is to fry a few sprigs in oil. The resulting crisp texture makes an original garnish.

This herb is essential for making *omelette aux fines herbes,* and is the protagonist in *salsa verde,* which is made from oil, garlic and parsley plus water or stock and a little flour to thicken.

Dried parsley mixed with a little ground garlic and breadcrumbs can be very useful for coating fish or croquettes. And an easy appetiser or snack is warm bread served with butter mixed with ground garlic and parsley.

Certain recipes are so simple that the parsley can hardly be left out. One such is *escargots persillade,* snails served in their shells and flavoured with butter, garlic and parsley.

An Arab dish in which parsley is essential is *tabbouleh,* a refreshing combination of herbs and vegetables with bulgur.

A sprinkling of chopped parsley over a potato salad, some cooked aubergines, white rice, grilled fish or a pasta dish will add flavour, colour and aroma.

Eating parsley is an excellent way of sweetening the breath, especially after eating garlic. A parsley infusion is a very useful and comforting drink after a party, one recommended by Chinese herbalists. To treat a hangover, it can also be liquidised with celery and tomato.

Its light aroma and flavour make it ideal for soups, vinaigrettes, paella, salads, shellfish, sauces and roast meat or fish.

It can be added directly to dishes at any stage of cooking.

Facts and figures

Aristoteles explained that, when two things usually come together, the appearance of one will immediately bring to mind the other. In Spain, Saint Pancras is immediately associated with parsley. A figure of Saint Pancras should never be without his sprig of parsley if he is to protect our health and work.

Saint Pancras was of Turkish origin, lost his parents as a child and moved to Rome where he was christened. The Emperor Diocletian had ordered the persecution of Christians and Pancras was decapitated on 12 May 305, at the age of just 14. His body was buried by Christians and his tomb became something of a sanctuary.

Today a figure of Saint Pancras is considered to bring good luck and is often given as a gift. It should be adorned with a sprig of parsley, and a few coins should be left at the foot. Why parsley? The most reasonable theory is that this is a pagan tradition stemming from the domestic altars that people used to dedicate to their gods.

Pepper, the most widely-consumed spice in the world

Everything was prepared with skilled fingers: the chopped lamb, chickpeas, pine nuts, cardamom grains, nutmeg, clove, ginger, pepper and herbs. And it was all so well made that each aroma could be distinguished.

A Thousand and One Nights,
the Barber's Sixth Brother

Pepper, "queen of spices" is, and always has been, one of the most highly-appreciated of spices. Not just because it accounts for 25% of world production of spices and is used as such everywhere but also because of its historical importance having been used as a currency, just like gold or salt.

Jamaica, Guinea, Java, Bengal, Sichuan, long, black, white, green, pink pepper. Each one has its own distinguishing characteristics that the experts know well, if not consumers, who tend to buy whichever is at hand, usually white or black pepper.

Black, white and green pepper all come from the same plant, *Piper nigrum,* a native of Malaysia, Indochina and India. Its fruits are small, round berries that grow in groups of twenty to fifty on spikes. Before they ripen, they are green then they gradually turn yellow then red. The final product depends on the time of harvesting and type of processing. Green pepper comes from unripe berries that are treated, with vinegar or salt amongst other methods, to preserve them and retain the colour. It is usually used as whole peppercorns. The flavour is fruity and slightly piquant, making this pepper ideal for fish, meat and poultry dishes, also for pork products, salads and cheese.

Black pepper comes from unripe fruits that are dried in the sun, when they become wrinkled and black. The flavour is intensely piquant and the resulting peppercorns can be used whole in soups, stews and marinades. White pepper comes from the ripe red fruits that are macerated in water, a process called retting, which softens the outer coating so that it can be removed, leaving only the inner seed. More piquant than black pepper, it can be used in pickles, pork products, stocks or fish dishes although it is most widely used in sauces and pastries in which we do not want it to leave visible traces.

Jamaica pepper, *Pimentadioica,* is light-brown and larger than black pepper. It is fragrant and sweetish in flavour, with notes of cinnamon and citrus. Its aroma increases considerably when crushed. It is used in pastries, in liqueurs and cold meats, with game and in pickles, and is perfect for char-grilled meats. It is much appreciated by the British who governed Jamaica for more than three hundred years. They call it 'allspice' because its complex flavour and aroma concentrate the essence of other spices such as cinnamon, nutmeg, clove and black pepper.

Sichuan pepper, *Zanthoxylumsimulans,* common in China, is considered one of the most piquant types of pepper. It also has lemon and wood notes and a stimulating flavour that lasts longer than that of other spices. To obtain maximum benefit, the grains should be gently toasted in a pan with no oil until they begin to smoke, then crushed. This goes well with fatty meats, duck and fish.

When tasted, Japanese pepper, *Zanthoxylumpiperitum* or sansho in Japanese, causes a slight tingling and numbness on the tip of the tongue. It has a strong peppery flavour but with hints of lemon.

Guinea pepper, *Piper guineense,* is widely used in Western Africa where it grows. It belongs to the ginger family and has an aroma reminiscent of nutmeg and wood. It is irregular in shape, not necessarily round. Also known as 'paradise grains' or 'bat pepper', during the 14th and 15th centuries it was used as a substitute for oriental pepper because it was cheaper. It is not widely used today although it forms part of the formula for a certain well-known type of gin.

Bengal, or long pepper, *Piper longum,* has a very different shape to other peppers. It is not round but elongated and brown, with a honeycombed texture. It is used whole, but does not appear in European cuisine or in European markets. It was once a much-prized pepper.

The name pepper is also given to the pink berries of the *Shinusterebinthifolius* tree, commonly known as 'false pepper', 'rose pepper' or 'Brazilian pepper'. This offers a more resinous flavour, with sweet, slightly piquant touches. It makes an attractive colourful addition to dishes, although its use in gastronomy is limited because its composition includes an irritant.

Black pepper, one of the most popular of seasonings today alongside salt, was mentioned in ancient Egyptian writings. It was one of the first spices to be brought from south-west Asia for sale in the West. The Greeks, who were expert bakers, made bread with milk, pork lard and pepper, and also used pepper in their desserts.

They knew so much about the qualities of pepper that they used it to replace *siphio*, a plant that is possibly extinct today and about which we know little but which was used by the Greeks for both gastronomic and medicinal purposes. The term pepper comes from the Greek *piperi* meaning berry.

There is plenty of evidence that for the Romans, too, pepper was a favourite. They used it not only to add flavour to food but also as an aid for digestion and as an aphrodisiac. It was exported to Egypt, the Roman territories in Northern Africa and Iberia. Both black and white pepper were taxed, but once the taxes were lifted, black pepper became cheaper so came to be more widely used.

An example of the economic relevance of pepper can be found in the sacking of Rome in AD 408 by the Visigoth army under Alaric I the Great. When the Roman population, confined within the walls and scathed by the plague and famine, had to surrender to the attackers, he negotiated the freedom of the city in exchange for five thousand pounds of gold, thirty thousand pounds of silver, silk tunics, purple-dyed leather and three thousand pounds of pepper, about 1,360 kilos.

In the Middle Ages, the importance of pepper increased. It was used to pay taxes and dowries, to buy freedom for slaves and to pay off debts. At that time, spices came to Europe from the Far East and were distributed by a quasi-monopoly in the hands of Genoese and Venetian merchants.

With the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans in 1453, the date that many historians consider marked the fall of Byzantium (the Eastern Roman Empire) and the end of the Middle Ages, new commercial challenges were established. Constantinople being under Muslim control, trade between Asia and Europe came up against many obstacles because merchants were unable to reach China or India to bring back spices.

Spain and Portugal took advantage of their position on the Atlantic to search for new trade routes. Vasco da Gama, on behalf of the Portuguese Crown, reached India in 1498. His voyages were very profitable and the Portuguese gained control of the pepper trade. While establishing bases in oriental territories, they transferred the centre of the spice trade and distribution from Italy to Portugal, controlling trade with India first and with China and Japan later.

In the 17th century, the pepper trade was taken over by the Dutch and British, its price dropped considerably and pepper was soon to be in widespread use in Europe.

Today, pepper is the spice that is most widely consumed all over the world, and India is the main producer of peppercorns, with one third of worldwide production. Spain is one of the three main exporters, and the USA is the country that imports most.

Uses and curiosities

Not only does pepper have great organoleptic qualities but there is a great variety of types of pepper, each with its own characteristics. This means that recipes including pepper are tremendously varied. And pepper is the only spice that may be used up to three times in a single recipe: when meat is seasoned to prepare it for cooking, during cooking when peppercorns may be added to boost flavour, and once cooked, at the table when a little freshly-ground pepper may be added, straight from the grinder.

Pepper is similar to coffee in that it can be used ground, but if bought in grain form and ground over food just as it is about to be eaten, the results are surprising as both the flavour and aroma increase substantially.

The whole grains have very good keeping qualities. They are difficult to spoil and easy to store, this being partly why pepper was used as currency. To keep ground pepper in peak condition, it should be stored in a sealed container in a cool, dry place. The best way of serving pepper is in a pepper mill, so that exactly the amount needed can be ground and it is neither wasted nor are dishes spoiled by an excessively generous serving.

Perhaps where pepper is best represented is in the mixture of white, black, green and pink pepper called "Pepper bouquet", a combination that is appropriate for sauces, red meat and fish. And pepper combined with salt and lemon rind is a perfect seasoning for fish.

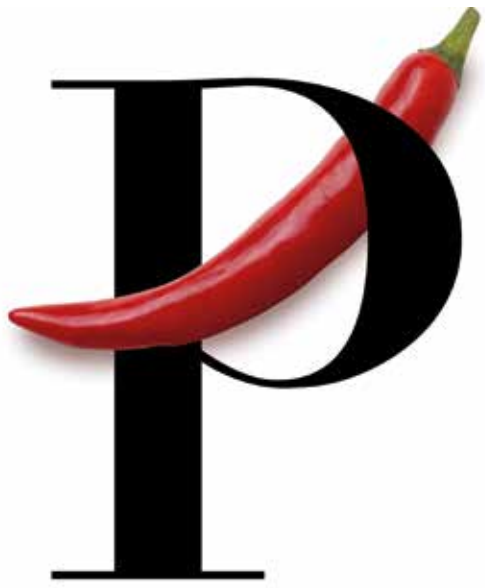
Some dishes and beverages are inseparably linked to this spice, such as the internationally-renowned Bloody Mary or some meats that are served with a very peppery sauce, such as *entrecote* (a boned steak cut off the sirloin) or *steak au poivre* (usually a filet mignon of beef or pork).

Facts and figures

The word 'aphrodisiac' comes from *Aphrodite*, the Greek goddess of love, beauty, pleasure and procreation. Since antiquity, certain foods have been considered aphrodisiacs, sometimes because of their shape (similar to male or female genitalia), sometimes because they excited the senses with their exotic, appealing fragrance (as with cinnamon, clove, vanilla or aniseed) and sometimes because of a cultural tradition or vasodilatory properties.

Several cultures have considered pepper to be an aphrodisiac because of its stimulating properties.

Paprika, ñora and cayenne pepper: sweet and hot peppers



And when there's no other alternative,
red chilli pepper, the most beautiful
and powerful,
But also the most dangerous of all spices.

The Mistress of Spices,
Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

There can be few fruits that can boast such a huge variety as the pepper. They can be red, yellow, orange, purple, green, white, maroon, conical, cubic, spherical, sweet, hot, long, short, etc.

They come from a herbaceous plant of the family *Solanaceae,* of which there about 2,300 species growing all over the world and also including the tomato and potato. More specifically, the pepper belongs to the genus *Capsicum,* a native of tropical and subtropical parts of America. This name comes from *capsa* which in Latin means box referring to its shape as a container for the many seeds inside.

Although it has been claimed that the pepper existed in the Iberian peninsula prior to the voyage made by Christopher Columbus to America, most historians consider this voyage to have been the occasion when peppers were first brought to the Old World.

But the pepper fruit has nothing to do with the spice of the same name. It was apparently Christopher Columbus who described chilli peppers as "pepper in pods", establishing the name that was to stick. Chilli peppers formed part of the diet of American natives and Columbus wrote in his diary, "There are also a lot of hot peppers that are more expensive than the spice pepper and people here can't eat without them. They consider them very good for their health".

So whenever we talk about chilli or cayenne we are talking about the capsicum group, of which there are varieties all over the world. Their success is due to their capsaicin content, which is what gives the characteristic heat and might have made it a substitute for black pepper *(Piper nigrum L)*. At the time, the latter was very popular in cuisine and was the object of east-west trade.

Hot pepper also formed part of the recipe for chocolate. Today we consume chocolate in sweet form but originally it was a spicy, foamed drink served cold. In addition to cocoa beans, it contained chilli pepper, pepper spice, vanilla and corn flour.

Since pepper seeds were easy to transport and kept well and the plants were easy to cultivate, they were brought first to Spain, then to Portugal, France and Italy and, finally, the whole of Europe.

Today, sweet peppers have a large market and are mainly consumed in preserves, as paprika (known in Spain as *pimentón)* or fresh. In fact, fresh peppers can now be obtained all year round, and Spain has one of the world's largest covered growing areas for winter vegetables including peppers.

Cayenne pepper, which is still mostly produced in the countries where the plant originates (Panama and Mexico), is now consumed all over the world and is essential in the cooking of India, Thailand and Indonesia.

Bright red colour

Although it was originally hot peppers that reaped the greatest success, sweet peppers are now in the lead. The dried, crushed flesh of some red pepper varieties is used to make paprika, known in Spain as 'pimentón', which allows us to give colour and flavour to or dishes all year round.

Originally, it was made by hand, being crushed in a mortar. It was then transformed into powdered pepper that was sold in packs but, in the first third of the 19th century, it became an industrial product. It soon became essential in Spanish cuisine and, towards the end of that century, paradoxically the fruits that had been brought from America were being sent back to their place of origin converted into a dried, crushed, aromatic spice that was easy to add to dishes to give them colour.

So pimentón ended up being a Spanish spice that defined the cooking of the poorest. Its striking colour, great flavour and aroma often make it as important as the dish it is included in.

In order to obtain pimentón, peppers have to first be dehydrated, usually by prolonged exposure to the sun, the most natural method. This method is still used today in places such as Guardamar del Segura in Alicante, Spain, where the round red peppers *(ñoras)* are laid on the fine sand dunes, previously unprotected but today under plastic coverings, just a few metres from the beach.

Industrial methods of drying are also used, using hot air tunnels, this being the main method in the region of Murcia, or over oak or holm-oak wood fires (with the fruits laid on wooden trays) which gives the paprika a characteristic smoky flavour.
The drying process changes the colour of the pepper. It becomes lighter, and the skin changes from smooth and bright to crumbly and wrinkled.
Once the pepper is dry it is crushed to a fine dust. Obviously, the quality of the peppers used will determine the end result, and the different processes will affect purity, flavour (sweet, sweet-sour, hot or slightly smoked), aroma, colour and texture. In Spain, the main production areas for *pimentón* are Murcia and the district of La Vera in the province of Cáceres.

Uses and curiosities

Pimentón is an essential seasoning in many of Spain's pork products. Where would *sobrasada* or *chorizo* be without paprika? In Spanish cuisine, it is ubiquitous – in humble garlic soup, in Galician-style octopus, in marinated dogfish from Cádiz, in sauces such as the well-known Canary *mojo picón,* in peasant dishes such as *migas* (breadcrumbs) or in the famous Madrid-style tripe *(Callos a la madrileña)*. It raises the tone wherever it is used.
The extract of red peppers made in Hungary is essential in that most international of Hungarian dishes, *goulash,* a beef stew, and also in *paprikache,* a dish containing paprika and cream.
In South America, the most popular pepper is what is called *ajímolido* or *ají de color,* which is very hot and slightly smoky. It is made from red pepper or chilli pepper. Its capsaicin content gives it an antibiotic property that is very valuable in hot, humid climates.
To use paprika correctly, it is important that it does not burn. If it is to be added to oil, first heat the oil then remove the pan from the heat, add the teaspoonful of paprika and leave it to cook in the residual heat.
It gives a very intense aroma and flavour and colours the dishes in which it is used. In stews, it is usually fried with onion and garlic before any liquid is added. In sautéed or fried dishes, it is added just before cooking is complete, normally once the pan has been removed from the heat because if it is overheated it may become bitter.
Paprika is often used to colour dishes served *au gratin,* as well as fried eggs and potato or fish dishes. In Galician-style octopus or other tapas, it is sprinkled on the cooked dish while hot, just before serving.
One of the varieties of pepper used to make paprika is the *ñora,* a round pepper. The less perfect peppers are crushed into paprika while the top-quality ones are sold whole, either packed or tied in strings, each weighing about one kilo. This is a small jewel in the kitchen. It gives dishes an unmistakable flavour, one that is very different to that of other peppers. It is mostly used in the cuisine of Andalusia, Murcia, Extremadura, Galicia and Catalonia but is essential in Valencia, where it is used to flavour rice dishes and stews.
There are two ways of preparing a *ñora* which, when bought take the form of wrinkled, dried fruits. The first is to remove the stem and the seeds inside and fry it in plenty of hot oil for a few seconds, taking care that it does not burn as that would make the flavour bitter, then crush it in a mortar with garlic and salt. This mixture forms the basis of many rice dishes. The second is to submerge it for a few minutes in very hot water to soak it. Then remove the seeds and extract the flesh using a teaspoon. This flesh is then fried.
To make a concentrate of *ñoras* that can be frozen for use when necessary, take about fifteen dried *ñoras* with their seeds removed and crush with a pinch of salt in a kitchen robot. Then add water to cover and bake for fifteen minutes at 100°C. This preparation is perfect for flavouring paella, sauces, pasta and stews

Facts and figures

To relieve the burning sensation produced by hot peppers, drinking water will not help as capsaicin is not soluble in water. It is preferable to drink something containing alcohol, sugar, oil or fat. A good option is full-fat milk.
The tear gas used for personal defence contains resins from hot peppers.
For a time peppers were considered to have aphrodisiac properties and were not recommended as they led to "desire and ruin".

Rosemary, sea-dew

Rosemary flowers
Child Isabel,
Today are blue flowers
Tomorrow will be honey

Luis de Góngora

The honey produced by bees from rosemary flowers has an unusual flavour that is much in demand in naturist markets for its many health-giving properties.

The rosemary plant grows throughout the Mediterranean basin, especially in dry, sunny, sheltered spots. It is often to be found alongside its inseparable partner, thyme, which has the same preferences regarding climate and soil. It is easy to find it growing wild in Valencia, Catalonia and the Balearic Islands. It can be easily propagated from cuttings and requires little care, so is a favourite with gardeners and landscape artists. It also grows happily in window-boxes, contributing its penetrating fragrance to both the indoors and to culinary creations. Its small flowers may be white, pink, purple or blue and start to appear in the early spring.

Superstitions about plants are as old as human beings. They go back to prehistoric times, when man ate all sorts of ripe fruits and the soft parts of vegetables (berries, stems, young leaves, buds, flowers, seeds), and to the need to identify which were edible and which were not.

Since then, the extraordinary power attributed by popular beliefs to plants has them working miracles, being used in prophesies, serving sacred purposes for funerals or marriages or even affording immortality. Rosemary is no exception. It is considered to have a multitude of therapeutic properties being antiseptic, anti-oxidant, anti-fungal, a tonic and a stimulant. Hippocrates recommended it to prevent diseases of the spleen and the liver. It was once used to disinfect sickrooms and, during plague epidemics, a sprig of rosemary was carried to distract the sense of smell in affected areas. It was used for "weak minds", to comfort the heart and stomach and improve the memory.

But the most incredible of the stories tells of Queen Elizabeth of Hungary who had aged from rheumatics and gout but, after using a lotion made of rosemary prepared by an alchemist, recovered to the extent that she was able to conquer the king of Poland. Whether true or not, in the 17th century a substance used to cure paralysis and gout was made by distilling alcohol with various aromatic substances including rosemary and called "Hungary water". Today rosemary is sold as a cleanser and anti-wrinkle agent for the face and body.

Rosemary has various nicknames: the "wreath herb" because corpses were buried with a sprig of rosemary in their hand or a crown of rosemary and myrtle; or "students' plant" because in Ancient Greece it was believed to stimulate the memory.

It is also associated with marital fidelity and is considered an aphrodisiac. There is many a ritual involving rosemary. In Andalusia, on New Year's Eve, good luck is attracted to homes by burning a sprig of rosemary so that its penetrating smoke perfumes the rooms while the inhabitants chant, "Holy rosemary, blessed rosemary, out with the bad and in with the good". And another saying goes, "He who sees rosemary and does not pluck it, cannot complain about any evil befalling him".

The botanical name *Rosmarinusofficinalis* comes from the Latin *ros-marinus* meaning "sea-dew" because it grows in coastal areas, although the etymology also takes us back to the Greek *rhops* (shrub) and *myrino* (aromatic).

Uses and curiosities

Rosemary is an essential herb in classic cuisine of the Mediterranean basin, its natural growing area. Its leaves, either fresh or dry, are used to season a variety of dishes and make an ideal substitute for salt when diets require a reduction in salt intake. They are thin and pointed and their flavour is intense, powerful and astringent, reminiscent of pine needles. The main scenario for rosemary is Italian, French and Spanish cuisine.

It marries well with poultry – chicken and turkey – bringing out the flavour, and also goes well with rabbit and lamb. Strong-tasting meat, especially game, can also be enhanced with rosemary. It can be used with oily fish

(sardines or mackerel) or in marinades for rabbit or other game.
Soups and stocks also benefit from the addition of rosemary, as do all sorts of pasta dishes. In French cuisine, rosemary forms part of the *herbes provençales* mixture comprising rosemary, thyme, oregano, marjoram and sometimes tarragon, chervil, savory and even lavender, basil and bay. This blend is used to season meat to be barbecued, sauces, fish and vegetable dishes.
In tomato sauce, rosemary combines well with thyme and bay and, in small amounts, goes well with onion and other spices such as pepper.
It should be added during cooking but always in moderation as its aroma is very intense.
It figures in recipes for *gazpacho manchego,* a mixture of meats (rabbit, partridge, young pigeon) served on a classic flat bread and in which the touch of thyme and rosemary give a rustic flavour. This is also the aim when a sprig of rosemary is added at the last minute to *paella*.
If oil or vinegar in which rosemary has been marinated is used to dress a salad, this gives a special touch. Rosemary is often found in marinades for fish and in pickles, especially in the dressing for olives. There are also cheeses that are preserved with a coating of rosemary.
A little rosemary is sometimes sprinkled on bread before baking. And using rosemary with vegetables often gives very good results. A fresh tomato served with a pinch of salt and a little rosemary can be a dish fit for a king. Rosemary is also used in the liqueur industry and in the preparation of herbal teas.

Facts and figures

Charlemagne included rosemary amongst the plants that figure in the 'Capitularies' requiring them to be grown in all the monasteries of the Empire.
The most famous of rosemary honeys, with properties that have been praised since antiquity, is called "Narbonne honey". It is pale in colour and has a mild flavour.
In cosmetics, rosemary is used to make cologne water and shampoo as it stimulates the scalp. Traditionally, an infusion of rosemary leaves was used to wash the hair and lighten the hair colour. It was also used in inhalations as a tonic for the face, stimulating blood circulation. It is also an effective repellent for moths and other insects.

Saffron, red gold

Now Dawn the saffron-robed was spreading over the face of all the earth, and Zeus that hurleth the thunderbolt made a gathering of the gods upon the topmost peak of many-ridged Olympus, and himself addressed their gathering; and all the gods gave ear:
"Hearken unto me, all ye gods and goddesses, that I may speak what the heart in my breast biddeth me."

Iliad, Book 8, Homer
(Translation by A.T. Murray)

Saffron has become the most expensive spice on the market, at prices similar to those of gold. It has thus become known as "red gold" and the saying goes, "ounce of saffron, ounce of gold". Though its prices are certainly high, saffron goes a long way as only a tiny amount is needed to achieve the desired effect. About 50,000 flowers, the equivalent of a growing area the size of a football pitch, are needed to obtain 0.45 kg of dry saffron. But just a few threads (0.125 gr) are needed to transfer its properties to a recipe for four. Every strand of saffron holds enormous potential.

Saffron comes from the stigma of the *Crocus sativus L* flower, a member of the family *Iridaceae*. It has been much appreciated since ancient times for the slight bitterness, strong aroma and characteristic colour it gives to dishes. The Greeks called it *krokos* and the Romans *crocum*, but in modern languages the name stems from the Persian root *safra*, meaning yellow – in English *saffron*, in French and German *safran*, in Portuguese *açafrão*, in Spanish *azafrán* and in Italian *zafferano*.

The origins of saffron lie in Asia Minor from where it spread through the Orient and throughout the Mediterranean basin. In Spain, the Arabs were the first to cultivate it, back in the 10th century.

In Spanish, there is a saying, "Rain in August, saffron, honey and must". And, as usual, the popular wisdom rings true because at the end of August the saffron bulb wakes from its dormant period and drinks up any moisture.

Though the saffron flower is extremely fragile and beautiful, the plant can tolerate limy and clay soils and a very dry climate. It can survive with practically no irrigation, just rainwater. But the flowers only appear in late October or early November, spreading a purple carpet over the fields. Harvesting lasts for 15 to 20 days, when the flowers emerge, still closed, from their bulbs and open during the same day. They have to be picked immediately, before nightfall, before the flower withers making it difficult to extract the stamens. And all the harvesting has to be done by hand. The flowers are cut by the thumbnail against the forefinger then carefully laid in baskets.

From the ovary of the flower grow three flexible, aromatic, red stigmas, which are the saffron threads, joined to a white stylus. These have to be separated from the flower by a delicate manual process, traditionally done by women. A cut is made at the part where the red threads join the stylus. If any of the stylus is left on the threads, this reduces the quality of the saffron. The strands are then dried over a gentle heat, giving them a more intense aroma and greater colouring power. Their characteristic red colour, slightly earthy taste with touches of sweetness and bitterness and their fragrance, sometimes compared to that of hay, have made saffron the queen of condiments and a legendary symbol of quality.

As a crop, saffron is vulnerable to harsh weather conditions, and harvesting and selection have to be carried out intensively over a very short period of time. These factors have led to a drastic reduction in saffron cultivation in Spain, which formerly was the world's leading exporter but is now importing it.

Uses and curiosities

The attractive colour that saffron gives to dishes and its characteristic, slightly bitter taste are due to a number of water-soluble pigments. It is important to know how to obtain the maximum benefit from just a few strands. It is not a matter of increasing the amount used.

We have all made the mistake of adding a few threads of paella to the top of our paella. The result is always disappointing – white rice with a few yellowish stains where the threads fell.

To bring out all the properties, experienced cooks usually toast the threads. The most traditional method is to wrap them in foil and place the parcel on the lid of a pan on the cooker. After a few seconds of heat, you then press the saffron within the foil or crush it using a pestle and mortar.

A more modern way is to place the saffron threads on a saucer and heat them for two

minutes in the microwave at 700 W. They can then be crushed in a mortar and dissolved in stock or water, or they can be crushed by hand directly into a hot stock. This is then added to the recipe just a few minutes before the end of the cooking process. If these instructions are followed, the aromatic properties and colour of the saffron will be evenly distributed throughout the dish.

The research department at Carmencita has developed new products to meet the needs of today's cooks, saving time and making cooking easier. They include finely ground saffron, and saffron spray which with just a few squirts transfers the properties of saffron to the nearly-cooked dish.

Saffron does not last for ever. It cannot be left indefinitely on the spice rack as it gradually loses its properties. It should also be remembered that there are different qualities of saffron, with different characteristics depending on the place of origin and the amount of stylus left on the threads.

It is important to keep it in a dry place to maintain its aromatic qualities and out of direct light which may affect the colour. The toasted threads used to be wrapped in cotton fabric and kept in tins, but today saffron is packed in such a way that it reaches consumers in optimal conditions.

As a condiment, saffron is very versatile and can be used in all sorts of dishes – stews, meat, fish, eggs, sauces, vegetables, shellfish, etc. It is essential in rice dishes and *fideuà*. And a paella without the typical golden colour cannot be considered paella! It is also essential for one of the best-known Provençal dishes, bouillabaisse, also called 'soup of gold' and the flagship of Marseilles cuisine. It was originally a fisherman's soup made from the leftovers of the catch, but it has developed into a luxury dish often made from more than six different types of fish and even lobster.

Saffron, together with cheese and rice, makes up the ingredients of one of Italy's most international dishes, *Risotto alla Milanese*. The origin of this dish is probably medieval but it gave rise to the legend involving Valerio di Flande, the author of the magnificent stained glass windows of the Duomo di Milan. The story goes that, at the marriage of his daughter on 8 September 1574, he served his guests a bright yellow dish that he had cooked with saffron, the same product he added to his pigments to obtain unusual colourful effects.

Saffron is also essential in a large number of spice mixes, such as the Indian *biryani*. This is basically a rice dish seasoned with clove, cinnamon, bay leaf, cardamom, ginger, garlic, mint and coriander. Though one or more of these ingredients may be omitted, in the most exquisite versions, saffron is a must.

The same can be said about *Ras el Hanout*, a mixture of eleven spices that is characteristic of Moroccan cuisine, and is also used in Tunisia and Algeria, for tagines and couscous and other lamb dishes. Although there is no single recipe, varying from place to place and even from cook to cook, it generally includes saffron, cardamom, black pepper, Jamaica pepper, cinnamon or cassia, nutmeg, ginger and turmeric.

Saffron has also been used in the beverages sector to colour and aromatise drinks. Used in infusions together with other herbs, or in tea or coffee (as with Arabic coffee), the result is excellent.

Facts and figures

In ancient times, the marriage bed was often decorated with saffron flowers, a custom that died out long ago. In some villages in La Mancha, however, it is still common for the bridal pair to receive some little packets of saffron as a symbol of their future prosperity.

Laws have been passed to guarantee the purity of saffron, and institutions set up to guarantee compliance, such as the Nuremberg *Safranscahau* in 15th-century Germany, and the *Ufficio dello Zafferano,* an armed force that watched over saffron dealers in Italy.

The famous zarzuela *La rosa del azafrán,* written by Federico Romero and Guillermo Fernández-Shaw with music by Jacinto Guerrero, received its first performance in 1930 in the Teatro Calderón in Madrid. Set in a village in La Mancha in about 1860, it compares love with ephemerality of the saffron flower. "The saffron rose is an arrogant flower that comes out with the sun and dies in the afternoon". In one of the acts, the women's chorus is engaged in selecting the saffron threads and sings, "I am not proud of sorting flowers because I have no lover to help me". This is in reference to the customer whereby, on Sundays, when suitors visited their prospective partners, if they found the girl working with the saffron flowers, they used to help them extract the stigmas.

The 19th century *Colla del Xafrà* school of painting (the 'Saffron School') received its name because of the predominant ochre-yellow colour that appeared in the paintings of its members Joaquín Mir Trinxet, Joaquín Sunyer, Isidre Nonell, Ricard Canals and Ramón Pichot y Gironès.

Perfume, ink, medicine and aphrodisiacs

History has left us with plenty of references to the virtues of saffron, the oldest going back to 1700 and 1600 BC.

A painting discovered in the palace of Knossos shows a human figure collecting saffron, and a Minoan fresco (from what today is the Greek island of Santorini), dated 1500 BC, shows two women wearing brightly-coloured clothing who are collecting saffron flowers.

Some engravings from Sumerian clay tablets 5,000 years old prove that the inhabitants of Mesopotamia knew this plant. Many documents throw light on the important role of saffron in the everyday life of different cultures. In the Song of Songs, one of the books of the Christian Bible and of the Hebrew Tanaj, it is mentioned as one of the most highly-esteemed plant products.

In ancient Egypt, saffron had several uses – for decoration (its flowers were used in garlands), rituals (for mummification), medicine (as a poultice) and beauty (body oils). The Ebers Papyrus, written about 1500 BC, gives formulae for essential oils that include saffron.

The most popular legend involving saffron in

Ancient Greek culture is the love story between Crocus and Smilax. The beautiful Crocus pursues the nymph who is flattered but soon loses interest. Crocus ends up converted into a brightly-coloured saffron flower, the symbol of beauty and passion, and his nymph becomes a harsh sarsaparilla.

Another version has it that this plant was created by the god Hermes, one day when he was practising throwing a disc. He accidentally hit and killed his friend, the young Crocos, and the drops of blood that spurted from his wound became bright flowers with red styluses.

In the Iliad, the Greek epic poem, the oldest poem in western literature and attributed to Homer, there are a number of references to saffron. "…the son of Kronos took his wife in his arms. The divine land produced green grass, fresh lotus flowers, saffron and thick hyacinths for them to lie on". Saffron is also mentioned in reference to dawn, "Eos, with her saffron veil, rose from the ocean current to take light to the gods and to men".

Hippocrates, considered the father of western medicine and the first doctor to reject the superstitions that blamed disease on supernatural forces, mentioned saffron in his studies.

The Romans followed the tradition of the Greeks, using saffron to perfume streets, theatres, temples and baths. They also used it as a symbol of social class for colouring their clothing. For cosmetic purposes, they had a number of perfumed oils and ointments, including saffron-based *crocinum*. And they considered that saffron could help prevent a hangover, so used to consume saffron infusions before banquets and added it to wine. Since it was expensive, they sometimes replaced it with safflower, a cheaper substitute.

In his novel Satyricon, the writer and politician Petronius, known as the *arbiter elegantiae* for his grand ideas when organising entertainments for Nero's court, described life in the first century AD. Its best-known episode, the 'banquet of Trimalcion', he tells of a meal offered in his home by this very rich freedman. "Trimalcion called for the desserts. The slaves removed the tables and brought others. They sprinkled the floor with sawdust coloured with saffron and cinnabar – something I had never seen before – and with powdered specular stone."

Virgil, born in 70 BC and author of the *Aeneid,* says in his Georgics, "Invite them to gardens perfumed with the saffron flower and have the guardian of thieves and birds look after them with his willow scythe". The virtues of saffron were also described by the Roman scientist, naturalist and soldier Pliny the Elder and, in the early years of the Christian era, the farming writer Columella.

Saffron was used in ancient times to cure a wide range of complaints, including stomach problems, the plague, tuberculosis and smallpox.

The medieval alchemists and herbalists based their idea of pharmacology on the "doctrine of signs", whereby God gave every plant signs in their morphology (shape, colour, size, roots, etc.) indicating how they could be used therapeutically. On the basis of this doctrine, saffron used to be recommended to cure the yellow colouring of the skin and mucous membranes caused by jaundice.

Some tricksters used to refer to saffron as a powerful antidote. They added it to wine and gave it to royal children under the pretence that it would thus be impossible to poison them.

It also played an important part in medieval cuisine when dishes were often coloured with saffron and "dragon's blood", a bright red resin. Spices, though often costly, were much in demand in medieval times. In France, a dessert called *fromentée* was made from cooked, ground wheat, with meat stock, egg yolk, milk, ginger and saffron. In Germany, the favourites were cinnamon and saffron, while the Italians preferred nutmeg and the English mace and cinnamon. In Spain, many recipes included ginger, saffron, cinnamon and pepper, as described in the medieval cookery book, *Llibre del coch,* published in 1520 in Barcelona and an essential source of information on eating habits in the early 16th century. It was widely believed at the time that saffron helped stomach disorders and had aphrodisiac powers.

Saffron was used to dye paper, fabrics, fibre and skins until it was replaced by synthetic colorants. It was much in demand in the Middle Ages for dying fabrics as the resulting bright yellow colour was considered to symbolise light and nobility.

The salt of life

Bare black salt, salt
that came through the canal!
At the mouth of the gulf
the black island rows
white and blue with salt.
Salt born black in the north
Bare salt, black salt
I'm coming through the canal!

Marinero en tierra, Rafael Alberti

Of all the mineral salts that exist, the most widely used is common salt. Like water, it is an essential natural resource for life, one that is so much a part of our daily lives that we forget how important it is. But, though today it is cheap, during the history of mankind it has been one of the most coveted of substances. Dissolved in the water of oceans and seas, forming a solid layer on dried-out lakes and present in mineral form in rocks, over the years the search for salt created trade routes, supported empires and subsidised wars.

Salt can be chemically defined as a compound resulting from the reaction between an acid and an alkali and called sodium chloride (NaCl). Sodium, which accounts for 39% of the weight of salt, is a bio-element found in all animals and essential for life to the extent that a shortage of salt in the body leads to disease. It is present in cell processes, in the transport of nutrients and in the transmission of impulses. Chlorine, which accounts for the remaining 61% of salt content, plays an essential role in maintaining body fluid stability and the right pH in gastric juices.

Salt can basically be obtained in one of two ways: as a precipitate of sea water from salt pans, or from underground deposits. In both its natural and processed states, salt is made up of cubic crystals.

It is difficult to imagine today that such a humble, cheap, common product can have been the object of great ambition, to the extent that certain cultures based their activity on it, converting salt into one of the world's main international commercial goods and salt production into one of man's first industries.

Most historians agree that the name comes from the ancient city of Es-Salt, close to one of the world's most popular sources of salt, the Dead Sea. Today we know that almost everywhere on the planet can produce salt, but this knowledge only came with modern geological science. In the past, mankind searched for salt with desperation.

A Chinese pharmacological treatise dated around 2700 BC devotes much effort to explaining methods for obtaining salt, some of which are still in use, and salt varieties, of which there were considered to be forty types.

Salt has given rise to many words in many languages. The *Via Salaria* was an old Roman road built to transport this precious product from the salt pans in Ostia, a city and port at the mouth of the river Tiber, to the city. The soldiers whose job it was to watch over the road received part of their wage in salt. This was called the *salarium argentum,* the root of the word 'salary'.

The Ancient Romans used to season vegetables with salt to counteract their natural bitterness, giving rise to the word 'salad'. We talk of the 'salt of life', or of 'turning into a statue of salt', which is what happened to Lot's wife for turning back to see how a sulphur rainfall destroyed Sodom and Gomorra. From Greek comes the phrase 'to be worth your salt', stemming from payment in salt in the slave market. Also popular is the expression 'salt of youth' indicating vigour and passion, as used by Shakespeare.

For Homer, the 8th century BC poet, salt was a 'divine substance', and Greek philosopher Plato considered salt to be highly-prized by the gods. The Egyptians also used salt in mummification processes, and containers of table salt have been found amongst funereal offerings. In Christianity, *salsapientia* is the salt of wisdom and, for the Jewish people, salt is a symbol of the eternal nature of the divine alliance with man.

People have been fascinated by salt to the extent that it has formed part of a multitude of religious and pagan rituals. It featured in sacrifices and offerings, marriages and funerals, and in alliances and healing and magic rituals.

Amongst the superstitions regarding salt, it was said to cure the 'evil eye', banish evil spirits and break spells. In almost all Europe, it was once the custom to protect new-born infants by bathing them in salted water or placing a twist of salt in the cradle. In wedding ceremonies, men were expected to carry some salt in their pockets to prevent impotence, and women sprinkled their shoes with salt to increase their fertility. Salt was also once believed to stimulate the sex urge, so celibate Egyptian priests abstained from consuming salt.

In wakes, it was often placed beneath the bed of the corpse to help guide the soul to the afterlife.

The Abyssinians used to offer their guests a piece of rock salt which they were expected to lick, and when a new house was entered for the first time, a welcome gift of salt was given. Salt was said to help people get to sleep if placed in a bowl of water under the bed and to cure common complaints such as stomach ache or headache.

One of the main characteristics of salt is its great versatility, with up to 14,000 applications. It is used in the chemicals industry as a raw material for the production of sodium carbonate, sodium hypochlorite (bleach), plastics, caustic soda, etc. and to disinfect water.

It forms part of the production process for wood pulp, industrial oils and fats, colorants and pigments for textiles, is used to correct soil content, in pesticides and herbicides, in the vulcanisation of rubber, in the tanning of leather, in solvents and detergents and in metallurgy.

It is also essential in both the human food sector for preserving fish and meat, for curing olives, making ice cream, baked goods and dairy products, and the animal feed sector.

Some of its properties come as a surprise, and others that used to be important have now been ousted by more sophisticated products. For example, it can be used as starch, to clean furniture, remove rust, as a stain remover, to keep cut flowers fresh, to make soap, to prevent the formation of ice on roads and to help extinguish fires caused by accumulations of fat. It can also be used to extract silver, for glazing ceramics, in tanning, in refrigerants, in the preservation of wood for ship-building, etc.

It has played an exceptional role in the history of gastronomy, especially once it was discovered that it served to prolong the life of meat and fish. This used to be the main method of food preservation. In cooking today, the great chefs go to great pains to find the exact type of salt that will best suit each of their dishes.

There are many varieties of salt on the market today, named according to their colour, shape or place of origin. One of the best-known is Maldon salt, which comes in the form of flakes from salt pans in the county of Essex (England), and is particularly pure and intense in flavour.

Also highly-esteemed is the salt from the Guérande peninsula in Brittany, France, which is greyish in colour because of the clay particles it contains.

Pink Himalayan salt is a very pure fossil salt with large grains and a fine flavour. The salt from the Peruvian Andes also has a characteristic pinkish colour and is rich in minerals such as calcium, iron, magnesium, zinc and copper.

A brighter colour can be found in the Red Alaea salt from Hawai, which is coloured by volcanic clay and contains iron oxide.

The unusual Black Indian salt, which is not black but a greyish-pink, has an earthy, slightly sulphurous flavour.

Other unusual salts are the Japanese 'jewel of the oceans', South African salt flakes, black Cyprus salt, brownish Korean salt, and Icelandic salt with its low sodium chloride content. Combinations of salt with different spices are another alternative, giving a wide range of tastes to suit every dish.

In his film 'A Touch of Spice', director and scriptwriter Tasos Boulmetis says, "You should talk to others about the things they can't see because we all like the unknown. The same happens with food. Who cares if you can't see the salt as long as the food tastes good. You can't see it, but the essence is in the salt".

The romans and saltfish

The Romans were fans of salt, an essential element in their industry and their gastronomy. The presence of broken pieces of pottery indicate that they used to obtain it by boiling seawater in earthenware vessels which they then broke once the salt had turned into a hard block. They also obtained it from mines, pumped seawater into evaporation ponds, used brine from wetlands and burnt wetland plants to obtain salt from their ashes.

Roman food was highly seasoned, and salt was widely used to preserve foods.

The *almadraba* method of fishing tuna and fish preservation were at the core of trade in Roman times. The method of salting fish to preserve it turned the red tuna of the Mediterranean into one of the most highly-prized of marine species. Other fish such as bonito, sardines, grey mullet and mackerel were also of commercial value. The entrails of such fish were salted and fermented and used to make sauces, including the very popular *garum,* a sort of intense flavour enhancer. The cookery book *De re coquinaria* gives a number of recipes using this garum sauce.

Meat was also preserved with salt, and salt was even added to wine to improve its keeping qualities. The Roman government ensured that all plebeians had salt, insisting that everyone was entitled to it as salt was 'common', a concept that has come down to us today. For plebeians, salt was served on sea shells whereas patricians used silver salt cellars. These were essential in any celebration because they symbolised an intention to reach agreements to the extent that if there was no salt cellar on a banquet table this could be interpreted as a sign of rivalry.

The Roman Consul Marcus Livius invented a system of prices that imposed a salt tax on plebeians based on how far they were from the salt pans. This gave him the cognomen 'Salinator', a name that was subsequently given to all government officials responsible for the price of salt.

Gandhi and the salt march

Salt played an important part in the fight for independence for the Indian people. After failed attempts to achieve something similar to what had been done in Canada by obtaining a dominion or independence, in March 1930, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi launched a campaign of civil disobedience. He called on the Indian people to demonstrate against the rising salt tax, salt being a British monopoly, and against the prohibition on their collecting it. The salt needed by one person for one month was worth three days' work for a farmer. Gandhi and his followers began a pacific walk lasting 15 days and covering 400 kilometres, from Ahmedabad to the Arabian Sea. Thousands of Indians joined them, including huge numbers of women who from then on were included in the fight for independence.

When they reached the seashore, in a symbolic gesture Gandhi collected water in a container and evaporated it, converting it into salt, though this was illegal. His example was followed all over the country, in full sight of the British, who responded by jailing 60,000 people under the accusation of robbing salt. Gandhi, too, was arrested. The people resisted and eventually the British government was forced to free the prisoners and allow the people to collect salt.

"Only organised non-violence can be used against the organised violence of the British government", said Gandhi.

Facts and figures

Our body fluids (sweat, tears, urine, semen and even blood) all contain salt, and it is estimated that an adult body contains 250g of salt.

The Great Wall of China was financed by profits from the sale of salt.

Sea water contains an average concentration of 30g of salt per litre, and world reserves are estimated at about 40,000 trillion tons.

20% of the sea salt produced in Spain is for domestic purposes, 36% for industrial processes and 44% for export.

On the tables of medieval and Renaissance courts in France, there was always a *nef,* a large, elaborate salt cellar made of gold and silver and profusely decorated with precious stones. Sometimes goldsmiths created nefs in the shape of large sailing ships, seascapes or gods. Their location on the table marked the different social classes. They were always placed close to the host or most important guest to indicate who presided. Moreover, there was a specific protocol for taking a pinch of salt – the little finger had to be used.

The Valencian humanist and pedagogue Luis Vives once said, "The salt of life is friendship".

Thyme, the tears of Helen of Troy

There will be green wheat fields
and brown mules working the furrows,
and farmers sowing late crops for the April rain
and bees will drink from thyme and rosemary.

Campos de Castilla, Antonio Machado

Thyme is a robust shrub that grows wild throughout the western Mediterranean. The plant has many branches, very small leaves and white or pink flower spikes. It belongs to the genus *Thymus,* of which there are more than sixty different species, all morphologically similar so difficult to differentiate. The name comes from the Greek *Thym,* meaning to perfume and alluding to the intense and penetrating aroma, which in turn comes from *Tham,* the name of a species used in Ancient Egypt as an embalming ointment.

According to Greek mythology, thyme was born from a teardrop of Helen of Troy, the most beautiful of women and daughter of Zeus. And out of that single tear centuries of legend were created, in which thyme was associated with vigour and courage on the battlefield.

The Romans related thyme with valour and made offerings to the gods in which thyme was present. They extracted the essential oils from it for use in their baths before leaving for battle.

From the gastronomic point of view, for the Romans spices were exotic products that came from distant countries and fetched extremely high prices so were a visible symbol of power and distinction. In fact, they used such seasonings to excess, as we can see from the only early treatise on cuisine that has come down to us in a more or less complete state and which contains the recipes that were served at the great patrician tables during the first centuries of the Roman Empire. This manual, written in Latin and entitled *De re coquinaria,* is mostly attributed to Marcus Gaius Apicius but was perhaps not written only by him as it comes to us in the form of a 5th century manuscript to which additions had been made.

Of Apicius we know he lived during the reign of the Emperor Tiberius and that he was famed for his culinary extravagance, on which he spent all his family fortune. His excentricity led him to recommend exotic, over-elaborate and costly dishes – flamingo or nightingale tongue, sow's nipples, trout fattened on dried figs. According to his contemporaries, he ended up in ruin and committed suicide in the fear that he would not be able to continue with his flashy lifestyle.

De re coquinaria is one of the best sources we have of information about Roman Imperial cuisine because not only does it give detailed descriptions of the most sophisticated of recipes, it also talks about the products they used and gives culinary tips. They used thyme in marinades for fish and meat and for sauces, and in fact it is one of the spices that appear most frequently in this manual. For example, a sauce to accompany tuna is made as follows. "Roast the tuna. Crush pepper, cumin, thyme, coriander, onion, raisins, vinegar, wine, garum, honey and oil. Heat and bind with starch. Serve on the tuna."

From ancient times, thyme has been considered to have medicinal properties. The Egyptians used it in embalming, the Greeks as an antiseptic or for pain in the joints, as well as in incense to perfume their temples. The Romans used it as an air freshener and to ward off insects. In natural medicine it is used as a cure for common complaints such as colds, respiratory problems, headaches and menstrual pains. It was described by naturist Nicholas Culpeper (1616-1654) as a fortifier of the lungs and a remedy for convulsive coughing in children.

In 1725, German apothecary Newmann distilled thyme to obtain its essential oil which is today used as a powerful antiseptic in many pharmaceutical and cosmetic formulae.

Since then, it has been widely cultivated for its essence, which is much used in the perfume and liqueur industries.

Uses and curiosities

Thyme is so versatile that it is one of the basic seasonings in Mediterranean cuisine. It can be used to season meat, fish and vegetables, forms part of sauces, pickles and salad dressings and gives flavour and aroma to food for barbecuing. It also features in the preparation of oils and vinegars, liqueurs and infusions. The mixture used for preparing pickles often includes thyme, especially those for dressing olives.

Thyme improves sauces made of tomato and wine, flavours vegetable soups, seasons patés and marinades for pork and for chicken and is also recommended for game dishes. It is the perfect partner for mushrooms, leeks, corn, aubergines, tomatoes and pulses. When sprinkled on grilled vegetables, it gives them a delicious flavour. It is also frequently added to stews and casseroles, and to rice and pasta dishes.

The experts recommend adding it at the start of cooking either fresh or dried and either alone or together with other herbs. Thyme and rosemary often go together. They both form part of the *herbes provençales* mixture used in sauces, with roasts and fish and on tomatoes or curd cheese. It is a mixture of thyme, oregano, rosemary, tarragon, chervil, bay, savory, basil and in some cases lavender and orange rind. Thyme also features in the *fines herbes* mixture that can be made from home-grown herbs. This usually comprises parsley, chervil, tarragon and chive, plus thyme and dill and sometimes marjoram, basil and coriander.

Thyme is an essential ingredient in the *bouquet garni* used in French cuisine especially to flavour stocks.

Together with sesame and sumac (a spice belonging to the family *Anarcardiaceae* that is traditionally used in the Middle East and takes the form of dark red berries sold in powdered form), thyme is used in the *Dukka or Za'atar* spice mixes. An unusual and quick-and-easy snack can be made from a piece of bread dipped in oil then into one of these spice mixes. Thyme can also be used to enrich certain cheeses, and is perfect with feta cheese.

Grown domestically in a window box it brings a pleasant perfume into the house and, like savory or basil, acts as a natural mosquito repellent.

Because of its anti-microbial power, thyme oil has been used in mouthwashes and creams.

Facts and figures

When thyme is mentioned, one of the first associations we make is with honey. The Ancient Greeks were very fond of honey made from the flowers of *herpellon,* a sort of thyme that grew in the mountains around Athens. Aromatic thyme-flavoured honey, with its attractive light amber colour, is not only delicious but has many health-giving properties. Traditional medicine prescribed it for inflammation of the respiratory system, as an antiseptic, to activate the intestine and as a tonic to cure fatigue and asthenia. An infusion of thyme, lemon and honey has been used for a sore throat ever since the 5th century BC, when Hippocrates recommended honey for a long life.

Many references to thyme-flavoured honey exist in literature. In the *Georgics* by the Roman poet Virgil, born in 70 BC, which describes the work to be done in the fields and vineyards, how to grow cereals, keep bees and cattle, the author states, "Such workers should bring thyme and pines from the high mountains and plant them around beehives".

The spice map

Germany

- Dill

France

- Tarragon
- Provençal Herbs
- Parsley
- Thyme

USA

- Basil
- Tarragon
- Mint
- Parsley

Spain

- Garlic
- Anise
- Saffron
- Bay leaves
- Ñoras
- Pebrella
- Parsley
- Sweet Paprika
- Hot Paprika
- Chorizo peppers
- Pine Nuts
- Rosemary
- Thyme

Jamaica

- Turmeric

Serbia

- Rosemary

Mexico

- Coriander
- Oregano

Hungary

- Dill
- Sweet Paprika
- Hot Paprika

Brazil

- Nutmeg
- Black Pepper
- White Pepper
- Green Pepper

Turkey

- Anise
- Bay leaves
- Oregano

Chile

- Oregano

The Spice Map.
Source: Carmencita, 2012

Iran

- Cumin
- Saffron

Russia

- Coriander

Pakistan

- Cayenne

China

- Garlic
- Sesame
- Onion
- Ginger

Burma

- Sesame

Sri Lanka

- Cinnamon
- Nutmeg

India

- Garlic
- Sesame
- Cayenne
- Onion
- Cumin
- Turmeric
- Curry
- Ginger

Indonesia

- Black Pepper
- White Pepper
- Green Pepper

Egypt

- Basil
- Mint

Madagascar

- Clove
- Vainilla Pods

Vietnam

- Cinnamon
- Black Pepper
- White Pepper
- Green Pepper

Zanzibar

- Clove

For cooks, spices are fundamental and are often the *raison d'être* of their creations. They can offer an element of surprise or fun, or added vivacity. For example, few meat dishes are conceivable without a base of herbs such as bay leaf, thyme or oregano, and the world of desserts would be unimaginable without cinnamon or sugar.

Recipes

Rodrigo de la Calle

Spices are the essence of food today, both modern and traditional. Where would rice dishes be without saffron, or gazpacho without garlic and cumin? In fact, not only are they an essential ingredient but they often are the main protagonists.

Tagliarini with octopus and oregano

Serves 4
½ kg fresh pasta (tagliarini)
1 small octopus
50g Parmesan cheese
1dl olive oil
Carmencita oregano
1dl Teriyaki sauce
Olive oil

Preparation

Cook the octopus covered with gently simmering water until soft. Cut into discs and sauté in a frying-pan to brown. Place the olive oil with oregano in a blender and blend to form a thick oil. Cook the fresh pasta in half the octopus cooking water for 3 minutes. Strain and add a little olive oil.

To serve

Place the Teriyaki sauce, ¼ litre of the pasta cooking water and a little grated Parmesan in a frying-pan. When the mixture begins to boil, add the pasta and sauté/cook for 3 minutes. Add the octopus. Serve the pasta and top with the octopus. Finish with grated cheese and oregano oil.

Steak tartare with mixed pepper

Serves 4
450g veal sirloin
4 egg yolks
1dl oil
25g reduction of balsamic vinegar
Carmencita mixed peppers,
20 twists of the mill
Rock salt
10 capers
1 spring onion
10g mustard with herbs

Preparation

Chop the meat using a sharp knife. Add the oil, salt, reduced vinegar, pepper, mustard, capers and chopped spring onion. Mix well and leave to stand for 10 minutes in the refrigerator.

To serve

Serve the meat at the centre of the plate, shaping it with a mould. Next to it, place the egg yolk. Decorate with dressed watercress and rocket and a piece of toast.

Boiled eggs with potato and nutmeg

Serves 4
8 fresh eggs
4 potatoes (for frying)
2 Carmencita chorizo peppers
Flour
Carmencita hot paprika
Carmencita nutmeg
1dl chicken stock
½ onion
1 clove garlic
Olive oil
Chives

Preparation

Cook the eggs in water at 65ºC for 20 minutes. Shell and set aside in warm water.

For the sauce, place two tbsp olive oil in a pan and brown the garlic and onion. Add the paprika and flour and mix well. Pour in the chicken stock, simmer for half an hour, then blend, strain and add the grated nutmeg. Season with salt.

To serve

Cut the potatoes in small pieces and fry, together with the chorizo peppers. Serve the eggs, taking care not to break them, the potatoes and peppers and add the nutmeg sauce. Decorate with chives, some whole, some chopped.

Steak tartare
with mixed peppers

Selection of cheeses with rosemary ice cream

Serves 4
100g ash-coated goats' cheese
100g Manchego cheese
100g Iriazábal cheese
1 dozen wafer biscuits
Carmencita rosemary
½ litre milk
15g glucose
150g sugar

Preparation

For the ice cream, heat the milk and add 20g rosemary. Cover and infuse for 10 minutes over a low heat. Add the glucose and sugar, strain, cool then place in the freezer. Beat every 10 minutes to ensure the mixture freezes uniformly.
For the cheeses, cut the Iriazábal into wafers using a grater, cut the Manchego into thin slices and the goats' cheese into pieces.

To serve

Crush the wafer biscuits into crumbs and place at the centre of the plate.
Top with a ball of ice cream and surround with the cheeses. Finish with a few sprigs of rosemary.

Iberico pork tails flavoured with clove

Serves 4
8 Iberico pork tails
1 onion
1 carrot
1 green pepper
1 red pepper
2 cloves garlic
1 bottle young red wine
1 sweet potato
1 potato
50g butter
Meat stock
6 Carmencita cloves
12 Carmencita black peppercorns
1 Carmencita bay leaf
Chives
1dl olive oil

Preparation

Prepare the **pork tails** the day before. Fry the finely chopped garlic, onion and peppers in the olive oil until brown. Then add the red wine and reduce. Add the pork tails, spices and salt and cover with meat stock. Bring to the boil and simmer for 4½ hours. Check for salt.
For the creamed potato, cook the potato in its skin, then blend with the butter in a blender. Season with salt and pepper. Add a little meat stock to give a creamy texture.

To serve

Serve a little creamed potato and top with the tails and some sauce. Finish with a piece of fried sweet potato and sprinkle with chives.

Iberico pork with green pepper

Serves 4
4 pork fillets, 200g each
1 bundle garlic shoots
100g mixed fresh salad leaves
1dl fresh cream
Carmencita green pepper
1dl meat jus
Olive oil
Carmencita rock salt

Preparation

Wash **the salad** leaves, place in a bowl and dress with oil and salt.
Sear **the pork** in a frying-pan over a high heat until brown. Roast in the oven at 140ºC for 10 minutes.
For the sauce, in the frying-pan used for the meat, sauté the garlic shoots, add the cream and pepper and reduce to half.

To serve

Serve the freshly-roast pork, with the dressed salad to one side. Add meat jus and the green pepper sauce.

Iberico pork
with green
pepper

Prawns in a crust with curry sauce

Serves 4
16 large prawns
220g dried pork rinds
Carmencita curry powder
2dl fresh cream
Mediterranean salt
Watercress
Flour and eggs (to make a batter)

Preparation

Remove the heads from the prawns and peel the body, leaving the tail on. Crush the dried pork rinds in a robot to form crumbs. Dip the prawns first in flour, then in egg, then in crushed pork rinds. Set aside.
For the sauce, heat the cream in a frying-pan and reduce over a low heat. Add two small teaspoonfuls of curry powder. Season with Mediterranean salt and reduce to form a thick sauce.

To serve

Fry the prawns in a deep-fryer at 190ºC until the pork rinds swell. Remove to a plate covered with absorbent paper.
Serve the fried prawns on a flat plate with a few drops of curry sauce. Finish with a few sprigs of watercress.

French toast soaked in meringue flavoured milk

Serves 4
1 brioche-type loaf
½ litre full-cream milk
½ litre fresh cream
4 egg whites
4 egg yolks
1 limequat
1 kumquat
1 Carmencita cinnamon stick
Carmencita ground cinnamon
275g sugar
Sugar and butter
(to caramelise the French toast)

Preparation

Mix the milk with the cream and sugar and bring to the boil. Add the cinnamon, citrus fruit peel and egg yolks. Stir well, cover and leave to cool. Beat the egg whites until stiff and mix into the milk.
Cut the bread into rectangles and place in the milk. Leave to soak for 1 hour.

To serve

Melt a knob of butter in a frying-pan over a low heat and sprinkle with sugar. When a caramel is beginning to form, add a piece of French toast and brown on all sides.
Serve hot with the remainder of the milk mixture.

Paella valenciana

Serves 4
300g Bomba rice
1 litre chicken stock
8 prawns, peeled
¼ kg chicken, cut into pieces
8 mussels
50g flageolet beans
15 Carmencita saffron threads
½ onion
100g fresh, crushed tomato
1 small tsp Carmencita sweet paprika
Olive oil

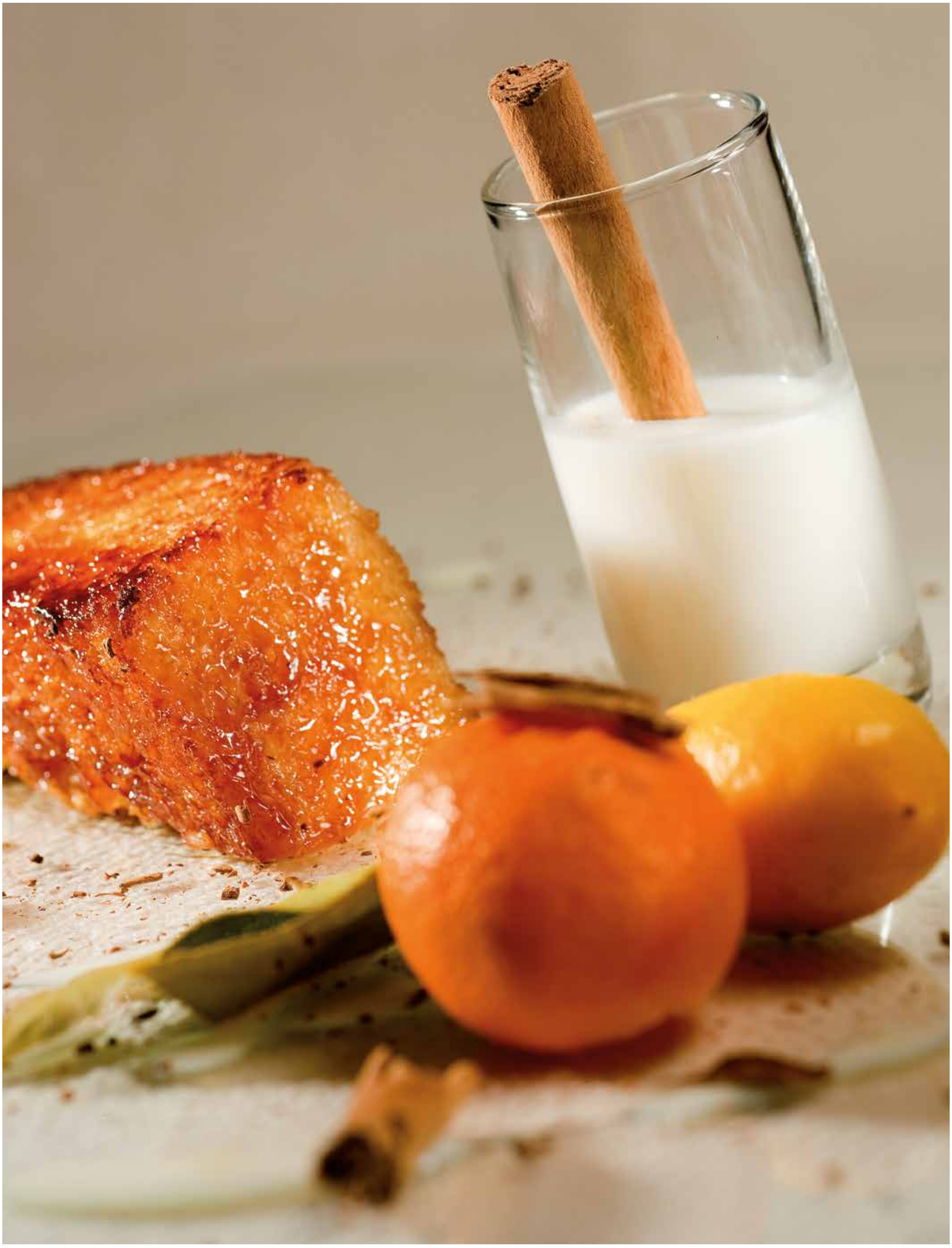
Preparation

In a paella pan, place a little oil and brown the chicken pieces. Remove, add the chopped onion and cook until soft. Add the saffron, paprika and tomato and cook together for 3 minutes. Add the chicken, beans and prawns then the stock, and bring to the boil. Boil for 5 minutes. Add the rice and, when the mixture returns to the boil, turn the heat as low as possible. Add the mussels just before cooking is complete. Check for salt.

To serve

Once the stock has evaporated, check that the rice is cooked and add a little more stock if necessary. Leave to stand for 5 minutes.
Serve with aioli and a wedge of green lemon.

French toast
soaked in meringue
flavoured milk



Millefeuille of roast peppers with cumin

Serves 4
1 sheet filo pastry
4 red peppers
1 red onion
4 cloves garlic
Carmencita cumin
Carmencita smoked salt
1 dl olive oil
Sherry vinegar
½ litre water
3g soy lecithin

Preparation

Arrange t**he peppers** on a baking tray, season with smoked salt and olive oil. Cover and bake for 50 minutes at 180ºC. Remove from the oven, peel and cut into julienne strips. Recover the juices from the pan by adding a little water. Strain and add to the peppers. Also add julienne strips of onion.
For the cumin dressing, heat the water then add cumin seeds, soy lecithin and 5g salt. Leave to stand until cold.
Using an upside-down glass, cut the filo pastry into discs, and bake for 15 minutes at 200ºC.

To serve

Transfer the cumin dressing to a tall container and beat until a foam forms. On a flat plate, place one filo disc and top with roast peppers, then another disc and more peppers and top with a third disc. Finish with a few roast peppers and the cooking juices. Add cumin foam around the millefeuille to finish.

Trout casserole

Serves 4
4 large potatoes
1 organic trout (approx. 500 gr)
1 jar trout roe
½ red pepper
1 small onion
2 cloves garlic
3 Carmencita chorizo peppers
1dl dry white wine
Fish stock
1dl olive oil
Salt
¼ litre tomato sauce

Preparation

Fillet the trout, removing all bones. Cut into pieces.
To make the sauce, thinly slice the garlic, onion and peppers. Heat oil in a pan, add the vegetables and brown for 3-4 minutes. Turn the heat as low as possible, add the chorizo peppers and sauté gently. Add the wine and reduce.
Add the tomato sauce and cook for a further 5 minutes. Blend.
Transfer the sauce to a large pan, add the potatoes cut in large pieces and cover with fish stock. Cover, bring to the boil and simmer until the potatoes are soft.

To serve

When the potatoes are cooked, remove the pan from the heat, add the pieces of trout and shake the pan to mix them in. Leave them to cook in the hot sauce off the heat. In a soup bowl, serve a portion of trout casserole and finish with chives, both chopped and some whole stems. Decorate with the trout roe.

Baked cod fillet with raw vegetable salad

Serves 4
8 cod fillets (approx. 100g each)
½ escarole
½ red cabbage
4 ripe red tomatoes
Carmencita Zanzibar fish seasoning
1dl olive oil
1dl fish stock

Preparation

Cut the vegetables very finely and place in a bowl.
Place the cod fillets on an oven dish with the oil and fish stock. Add Zanzibar seasoning and bake at 140ºC for 15 minutes.
Remove the hearts from the tomatoes.

To serve

Add the cod cooking juices to the vegetables and stir well. Place the vegetables at the centre of a flat plate, top with the cod and decorate with the tomato hearts. Dress with any remaining juices.

Trout casserole

Haricot beans with artichokes and pork

Serves 4
½ kg haricot beans
1 chorizo
1 blood sausage
1 piece ham
200g salted Iberico dewlap
3 litres meat stock
8 artichokes
Carmencita sweet paprika
Carmencita chorizo peppers
Olive oil
Fresh thyme

Preparation

The day before, place the beans in water and leave to soak.
In a large pan, place the meat stock, chorizo, blood sausage, ham, dewlap and vegetables (artichokes and chorizo peppers), cover and simmer over a low heat for 1 hour. Remove the vegetables and add the beans. Cover and simmer for 1 hour more. Chop the vegetables and set aside. In a frying-pan with a little olive oil, brown the chorizo peppers, add the paprika, then immediately add the chopped vegetables. Fry together for 15 minutes then blend in a robot. Add to the stewed meat and beans. Cut the artichokes into pieces and add to the stew for the last 15 minutes.

To serve

Cook until the beans are soft. Cut the meats into pieces and serve hot. Finish with a sprig of thyme.

Green asparagus in tempura

Serves 4
1 bundle green asparagus spears
125g tempura flour
1dl water
Salt
1 egg
3 cloves garlic
¼ litre organic olive oil
2g Carmencita ground saffron

Preparation

For the tempura, mix the water with the flour and a pinch of salt and leave to stand for 1 hour. Cut off the bases of the asparagus spears, wash and dry.
For the alioli, heat the oil to 40ºC, add the saffron and leave to infuse until the oil is cold. Place the garlic, egg and a pinch of salt in a blender. Blend, gradually adding the saffron-flavoured oil in a thin stream as if making a mayonnaise. Chill.

To serve

Coat the asparagus spears with tempura (one by one) and fry in a deep-fryer at 180ºC. Remove and drain on absorbent paper.
Serve accompanied with the saffron-flavoured aioli.

Grilled lettuce hearts with squid and parsley oil

Serves 4
4 lettuce hearts
1 clean squid body
Carmencita vegetable grill seasoning
Carmencita parsley
Olive oil
Carmencita salt flakes
Chives

Preparation

Cut the lettuce hearts in half lengthwise and wash in plenty of running water. Add the Carmencita vegetable grill seasoning and a little olive oil. Leave to stand.
Cut the squid body open. Make incisions on the inside but without cutting through. Cut into strips.
For the parsley oil, place two tablespoonfuls of Carmencita parsley in a blender, add the same amount of water and leave to soak for 10 minutes. Add the oil and blend for 3 minutes. Strain.

To serve

In a very hot frying-pan, brown the lettuce hearts, cut side down. In the same pan, add a few drops of oil, then fry the squid strips until they curl.
On a flat plate, arrange the browned lettuce hearts, and top with the squid strips. Dress with parsley oil and decorate with chives.

Haricot beans with artichokes and pork

Steamed cockles with bay leaf, pepper and citrus

Serves 4
½ kg large cockles
4 Carmencita bay leaves
10 Carmencita black peppercorns
Olive oil
1 Limequat

Preparation

Prepare the cooking water by heating ½ litre of water with the Carmencita peppercorns and Carmencita bay leaves. Cover and cook for 3 minutes.

To serve

Wash the cockles and place in the boiling water. As soon as they open, remove. On a flat plate, place a few drops of olive oil, grate a little limequat and serve the cockles hot and freshly steamed.

Rice with lobster and black mayonnaise

Serves 4
300g Bomba rice
2 lobsters
½ onion
½ pepper
½ courgette
½ carrot
4 Carmencita ñoras
3 cloves garlic
½ dl olive oil
¼ litre crushed fresh tomato
1 kumquat
Fresh herbs
30g mayonnaise
15g squid ink
150g squid

Preparation

Shell the lobsters, reserve the body and claws. Cut the heads into pieces. Place a little oil in a pan and brown the pieces of head with the other shells. Add 3 litres water and simmer until reduced to 1 litre. Strain and set aside.
For the rice, place a little oil in a paella pan and brown the lobster body and claws. Set aside. Chop all the vegetables with the squid and sauté for 3 minutes.
Add the lobster stock and cook for a further 10 minutes. Leave to stand.
For the ñoras, heat ½ dl of oil and brown the garlic. Add the chopped ñoras and brown lightly. Add the crushed fresh tomato and sauté gently for half an hour. Blend and strain.
For the black mayonnaise, in a bowl mix the mayonnaise with the ink. Chill.

To serve

Bring the stock to the boil and add the rice. Add the ñora emulsion and cook over a minimum heat. Add the lobster flesh for the last three minutes of the cooking time. Leave to stand for 5 minutes.
Serve the rice on a flat dish, top with the lobster flesh and accompany with the black mayonnaise. Finish with a few sprigs of fresh herbs.

Chicken wings with three sauces

Serves 4
16 chicken wings
Carmencita ajillo
(a mixture of garlic with spices)
1dl olive oil
1dl ketchup
Carmencita Louisiana pepper mixture
2dl fresh cream
Carmencita sesame
Carmencita green pepper
Fresh thyme
Soy sauce
Sherry vinegar

Preparation

Cut each chicken wing into two pieces. Place in a bowl with the oil and the ajillo seasoning. Leave to macerate for 3 hours in the refrigerator.
For the barbecue sauce, pour the ketchup into an ovenproof bowl, add the Louisiana seasoning and bake at 180ºC for 20 minutes. Remove from the oven, blend and strain. Keep hot.
For the sesame sauce, place over a low heat 1 dl cream with the sesame and a few drops of sherry vinegar. Reduce and keep hot.
For the green pepper sauce, heat 1dl cream together with some green pepper and soy sauce. Reduce to half, blend, strain and keep hot.

To serve

Roast the chicken wings at 190ºC for 40 minutes. Serve hot, decorated with a few sprigs of fresh thyme, with the three sauces.

Steamed
cockles with bay leaf,
pepper and citrus

Chocolate soufflé with thyme sorbet

Serves 4

For the biscuit:
25g sugar
25g flour
25g egg whites
1g ground cinnamon
25g butter

For the soufflé:
150g chocolate covering
7 eggs
100g butter
120g flour
200g sugar
1dl milk
2g baking powder

For the sorbet:
½ litre cream
Carmencita thyme
500 g sugar
2 sheets neutral gelatine
¼ litre syrup
Fresh thyme

Preparation

For the soufflé, place the eggs and sugar in the robot and beat. Gradually add the softened butter, then the milk and melted chocolate. Add the flour and baking powder. Transfer to small moulds lined with sugar and butter and chill. Leave overnight.

For the biscuit, mix the egg whites with the flour, softened butter, sugar and cinnamon. Beat well and spread over a baking sheet. Bake at 180ºC for 4 minutes. Cut into large pieces.

For the sorbet, mix the cream and thyme and bring to the boil. Add the sugar and gelatine and cook. Add the syrup and bring to the boil. Strain, then freeze, stirring every 10 minutes until frozen.

To serve

Bake the soufflé at 210ºC for 8 minutes. Turn out carefully to prevent it from breaking, onto the centre of the dish. Serve the sorbet and top with a few biscuit crumbs and stick a biscuit into the soufflé. Finish with a sprig of fresh thyme.

Fruit salad with vanilla soup

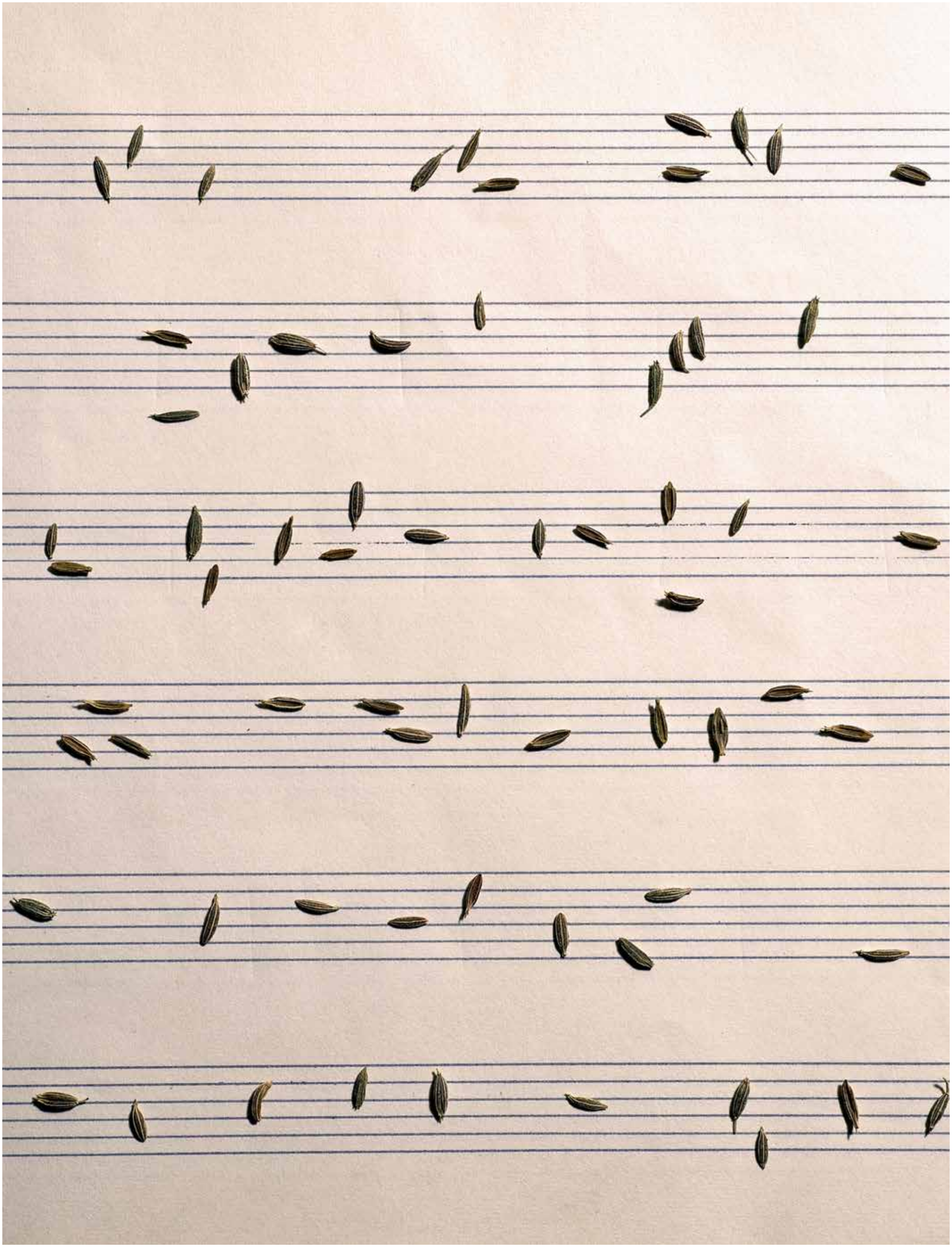
Serves 4
1 green apple
1 kiwi
1 orange
20g raspberries
25g cranberries
8 strawberries
Mint and dill leaves
2 Carmencita vanilla pods
½ litre horchata
½ litre milk
250g sugar

Preparation

To make the soup, heat the milk with the horchata and the vanilla. Cook until reduced by 1 third. Leave to cool.
Wash and cut the fruit into pieces to make the fruit salad. Chill.

To serve

Serve the vanilla soup in a bowl surrounded with the fruit salad. Finish with a few leaves of mint and dill.



Talking of Carmencita

Alberto Fabra Part

President of the Government of the Valencian Community

Tradition and modernity are not antagonists. In fact, they often go hand in hand, in a synthesis that is always fertile, based on the best of the past but looking towards the future. We in the Community of Valencia are proud of our history, our culture and our customs and are fully aware of their value and potential.

Our gastronomy, built up over centuries with contributions from many different parts, is one of the many legacies that have given us our singularity and made us known the world over. The great dishes that bear the name of our Community, and the wonderful products that grow in our fields or are made in our workshops, bakeries and factories, based on the flavours we have inherited, serve as outstanding ambassadors for our land.

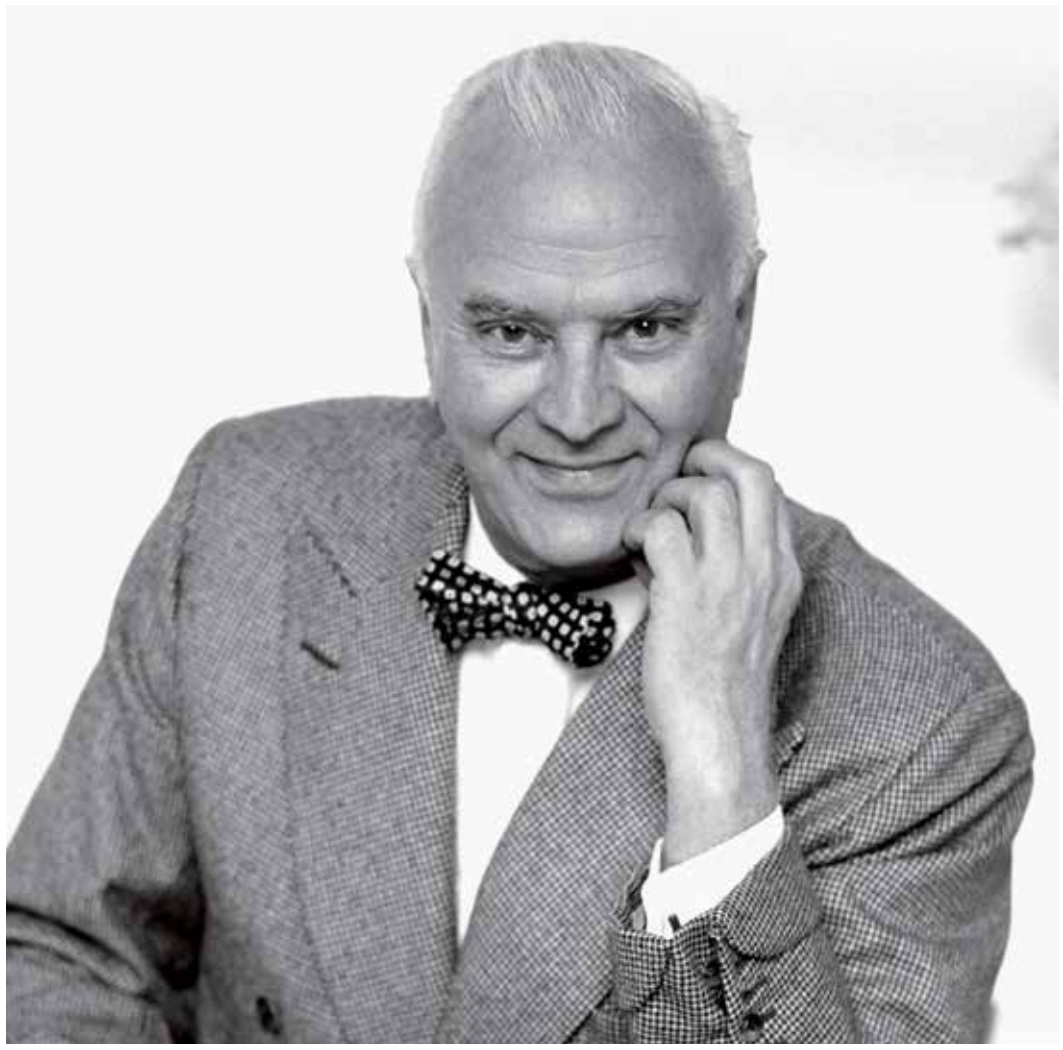
The Valencian spice tradition goes back over centuries, with the herbs and spices that are basic to our cuisine being produced and traded here for years. Our trading vocation, our consolidated ports and the fact that many of our cities function as emporia have allowed the name of our land to be taken to every corner of the world and, with it, much-prized goods that travelled thousands of kilometres by every possible means of transport to their final destinations, to tables the world over where they added that special touch.

This traditional trade is now a booming industry, one that has kept up with the times, innovating, entering new markets and constantly seeking for excellence. The Carmencita brand has managed to bring together tradition and modernity, transmitting to its products identity, prestige and a recognisable image that is loved by consumers everywhere.

The inhabitants of the Valencian Community are proud of these companies that have shown a forward-looking vision while preserving their roots and proclaiming their history. For years, firms such as Carmencita have formed part of our everyday life and we can be sure they will continue with us for many more.

Manolo Blahnik

Designer

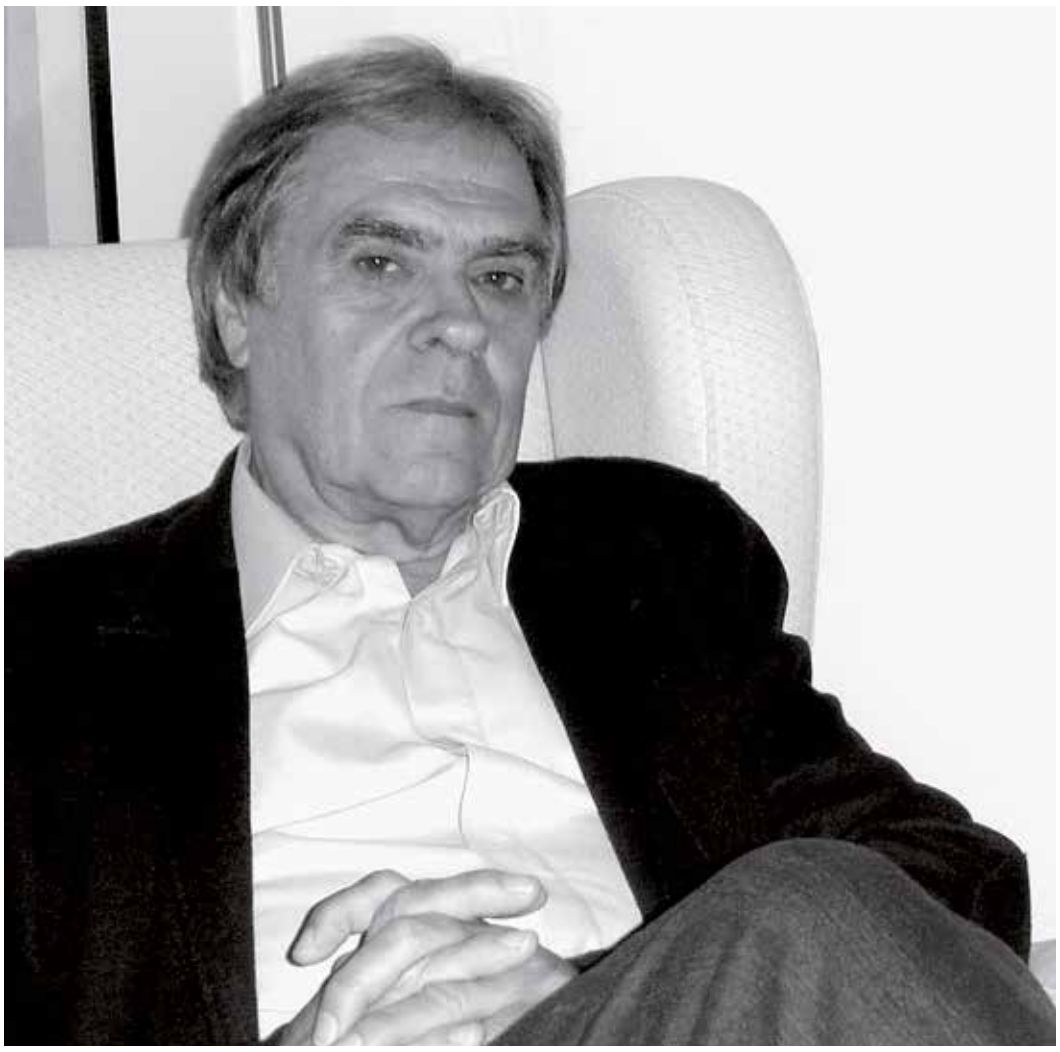


To my mind, Spain is not Spain without Carmencita.

Carmencita has always been with me. When I was a child I heard the cook and the serving girls of my house talk of this magic word. Carmencita products to work their magic on our palates. And saffron is always present in my kitchen. It is part of tradition.

Oscar Strada Bello

Psychoanalyst

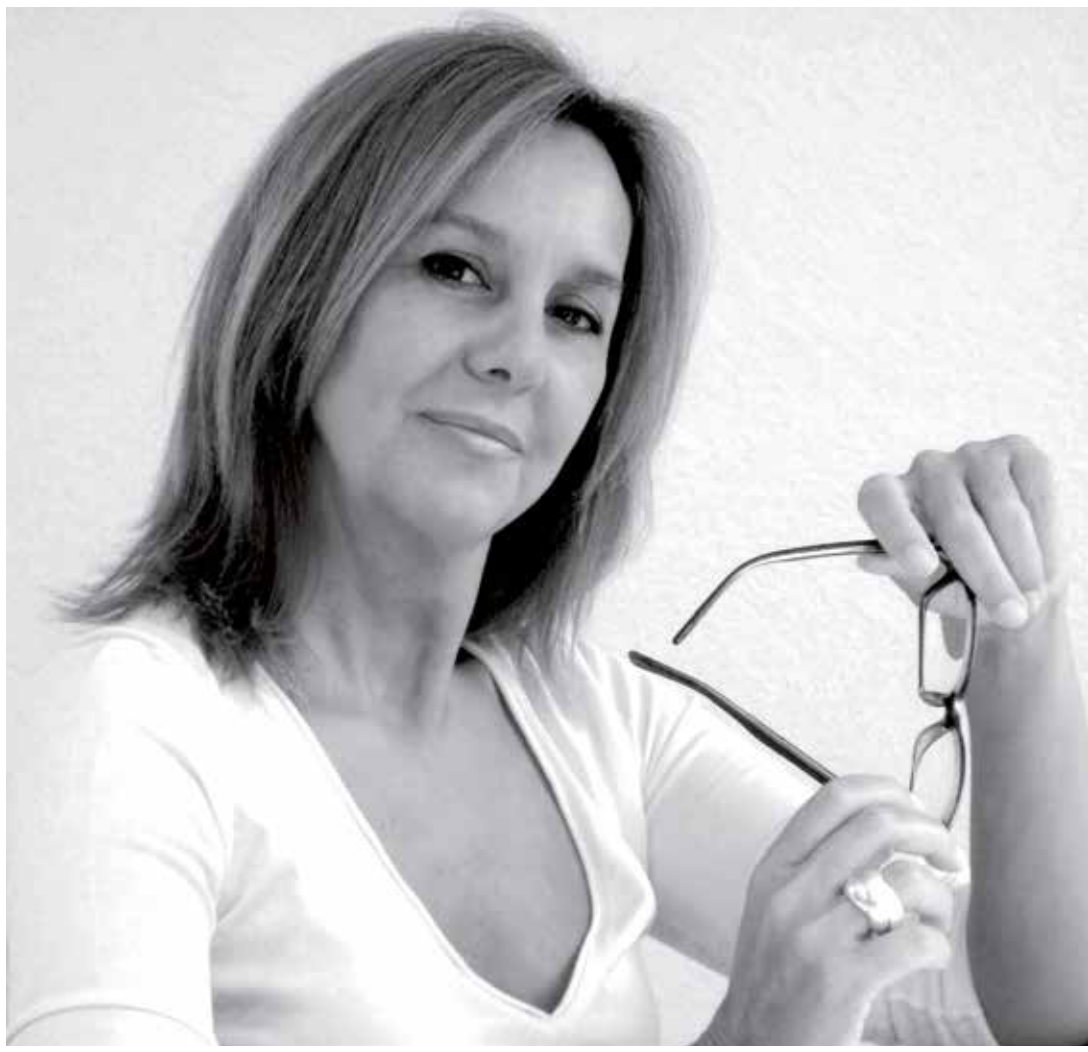


Some things in life are significant and some are insignificant. The insignificant things serve no useful purpose, are trivial, become lost in oblivion. But the significant things are exactly the opposite, they always lead somewhere. They enter people's minds and may stay there for generations. And that is what has happened with the signifier "Carmencita", which no longer, in either Spain or elsewhere, is just the diminutive of Carmen. The signifier Carmencita has changed grammatical rules and has entered social, commercial and gastronomic imagery to become an image with a smell and the taste of saffron. What we see and smell is what remains in the imaginary periphery, but Carmencita has another dimension, one that I believe explains its huge success and that takes us inevitably to the signifier "family". It takes us to family because the Carmencita of the image, not just the marketing image, is a real image of a historical member of the Navarro family. This makes Carmencita familiar. And this has been the practice of the company's owners and managers. Almost 10 years ago, when I first met Jesús Navarro in a corporate activity, we almost immediately found ourselves talking about his father, his mother, his wife, his children and even his closest employees. I quickly understood that this was a man permeated by the family signifier, a real "Carmencita" man.

I believe this understanding helped to create the solid, warm friendship we now enjoy.

María Dueñas

Writer



Just as I like the flavours of the Carmencita products, I like the name.

Carmencita is one of those words that reminds you of the past. It is the essence of things Spanish and is a name that makes us nostalgic, stirring up memories of a kitchen fire, a wooden spoon, an earthenware dish. It is a name that might easily have belonged to the young women who sang as they filled little packs of saffron and spices, a name that belonged to the sort of young girls that have long since disappeared.

But the brand has by no means remained anchored in the past. Its products have evolved and, though the original image has not been lost, its graphic identity has been partially adapted to keep in line with the times. The company has progressed in its working methods and has expanded. But the name has remained unchanged. For me, whose job it is to put words together and use them to tell stories, there is something rather special about that.

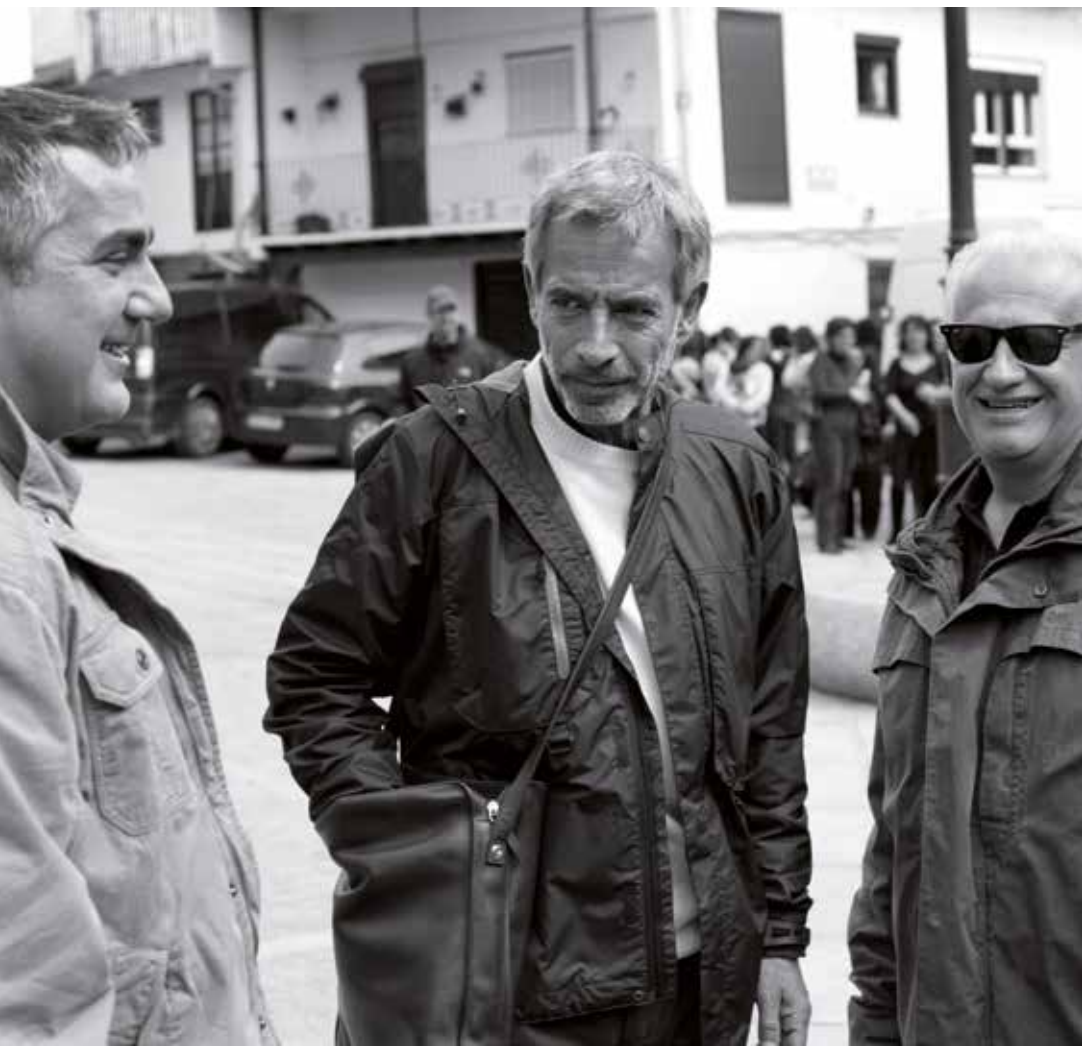
How many little girls called Carmencita were there in Spain when the brand was created? Probably hundreds of thousands. Carmencitas, Antoñitas, Pepitas, Luisitas. Then fashions changed and, with the arrival of what we were led to believe was 'wellbeing', we left behind those much-loved diminutives and started to use names preceded or followed by 'Mari' – Mari Pili, Rosa Mari, Mari Flor. And then we tried to catch up with what we considered to be the very latest of trends, calling our daughters names that made them seem to be descended from some sort of mythological character, or an English lord - Daphne, Penelope, Vanessa, Jessica.

But, far from jumping on the bandwagon, the Carmencita brand turned its back on fashion, and determined to continue bearing its original name. Without giving in to the temptation to renew, holding on to the authentic flavours of traditional foods.

Just as I am pleased to hear that the 'old-fashioned' names are coming back for girls born in the second decade of the new millennium, I am also delighted to see that Carmencita has remained faithful to itself and has ended up by teaching us all a lesson, one of wisdom and authenticity.

Juan Echanove, Imanol Arias, Tonino Guitián

'Un país para comérselo' (TV programme)



We were astonished, when we started studying the history, to find out that the commercial spirit of the Navarro family had enabled them years ago to sell their saffron even as far away as India. But there's no need to go that far back, because saffron also featured in our mothers' pantries. The carefully-packed stamens had to be treated gently. First a few threads were extracted, then wrapped in clean paper and placed on the lid of a pan or near enough to a source of heat for them to be lightly toasted without the paper burning. Then they were crushed and dissolved in stock. The result of this culinary procedure was a dish with a special touch, slightly bitter yet floral, as well as an appealing, golden colour that, if you didn't watch out, ended up colouring the wooden spoon and the tips of your fingers. Spain is a large, varied country but one with an identity that is partly expressed through such dishes. They make us feel as if we are at once of noble and common descent, our fortune being that, if the ingredients are properly combined, it makes no difference.

Martín Berasategui

Chef

The traditional cuisine of the Basque Country never focused much on the use of herbs and spices. They used to be expensive, and Basque cuisine comes from a poor background in which food was largely a matter of survival. Times have changed, but I was always fascinated by things exotic in cooking, by hot food, food that has things to tell us, that takes us back to a remote past, to a thousand and one civilisations that are as diverse as they are exciting. I remember, as a child, when a supplier brought to our family restaurant the famous Carmencita sachets of saffron. I sensed that there was a whole world inside them, that the girl with the Cordoban hat and the coloured shawl had a multitude of secrets to tell. I was not wrong. The herbs and spices that I use with moderation bring with them undreamed-of nuances that make dishes special, alive, and give them soul. I am now clear that they are an essential magic ingredient.

Miguel Ángel Jiménez

Spanish Golf Ambassador to the world

During one of my visits to Novelda in Alicante, I learnt about Carmencita's products. Since then, many of them have accompanied me on my travels. On one of my recent visits to Miami in the USA, when I was making a paella for my friends, I commented, "What I pity I don't have any Carmencita Paellero". And within minutes the owner of the house produced what I was looking for. I never did find out if he had it in the pantry or had to go out to a nearby supermarket to buy it.

The fact is that I never make a paella without Paellero Carmencita.

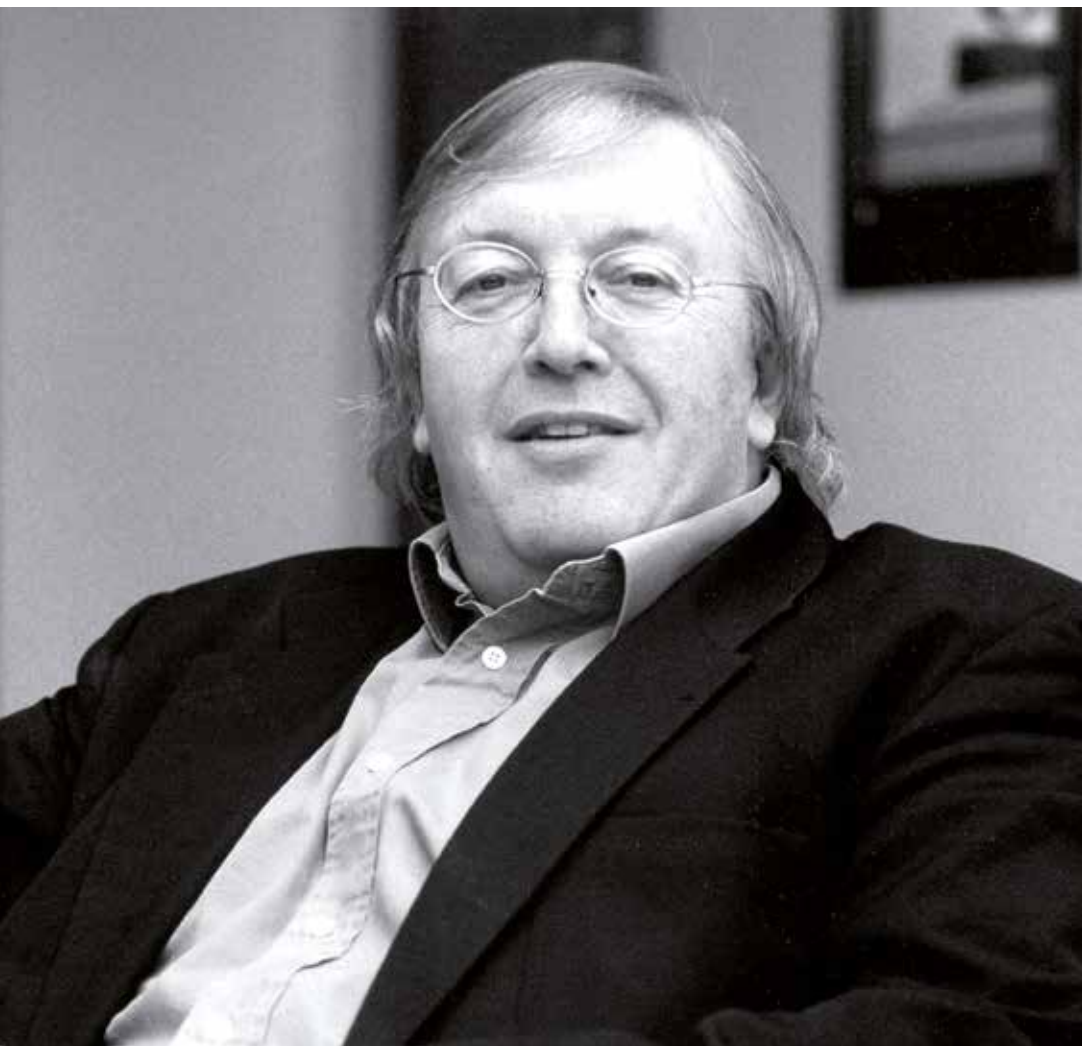
Rafael García Santos

Food writer

After so many years writing about food, I have discovered that companies are essentially people. It is the human element that determines the quality and success of business initiatives. During a visit to the Carmencita premises, I met Jesús Navarro Valero, a key person in the history and fame of Carmencita. I was impressed by his intelligence, common sense and outstanding social skills. And Carmencita, an internationally-renowned company that is omnipresent in the world of Spanish rice dishes, has worked its way up over almost 100 years, into the lead in the market for herbs and spices, enriching the aromatic and gustatory power of our dishes, giving them excellence and identity.

Paul Preston

Historian



About five years ago, I wrote in a publication on the experience of the town of Novelda in the Spanish Civil War and as a result I had the great fortune of becoming friends with Jesús Navarro Alberola. He turned out to be such a generous person that I started to receive in my London home boxes of Carmencita products – a huge variety of herbs and spices, especially saffron, and something that was to have a great impact on my social life. This was what in English we might call 'a paella kit', with a paella pan, and the exact amounts of rice, oil and spices for a tasty rice dish. All I had to do was add whatever meat, fish or shellfish I fancied. So, at last, I dared to make paella in London. With the ingredients he had sent me, and which he continued to send in huge amounts, I was able to invite friends round to eat paella in my home. Word soon got around, and people came to expect paella from me. At the start, they thought I was a great cook because they didn't know about the magic properties of the Paellero product. I eventually had to tell them that it had little to do with my culinary skills, that it was all thanks to Carmencita and my friend Jesús Navarro. It didn't do my prestige any good, but they kept coming to visit and to enjoy my paellas. Meanwhile, my cooking must surely have improved somewhere along the line!

Quique Dacosta

Chef

What if I were to tell you that Spain's most important herb and spice business is located in Alicante? I know it seems strange, especially if it's a chef from Valencia saying it. And if I tell you that it's not only the company with the greatest volume of trade in spices but that it has also achieved the best quality? And, not only that, but they have managed to produce little containers full of spirit in which can be found the essence of countries, cultures, products, dishes, and plenty of childhood memories, the essences and aromas our grandmothers and mothers used in their kitchens and that I now use in the kitchens of my restaurants.

Carmencita today is undoubtedly part of our Spanish national heritage. Carmencita no longer belongs only to the Navarro family, it belongs to us all. All of us have lived with, smelt and tasted the Carmencita aromas. The girl with the Cordoban hat and the coloured shawl is an icon for all of us in the same way that the Osborne bull is an icon. The little jars of what I like to call 'gastronomic essences and aromas' remind us of who we are.

José Carlos Capel

Food writer

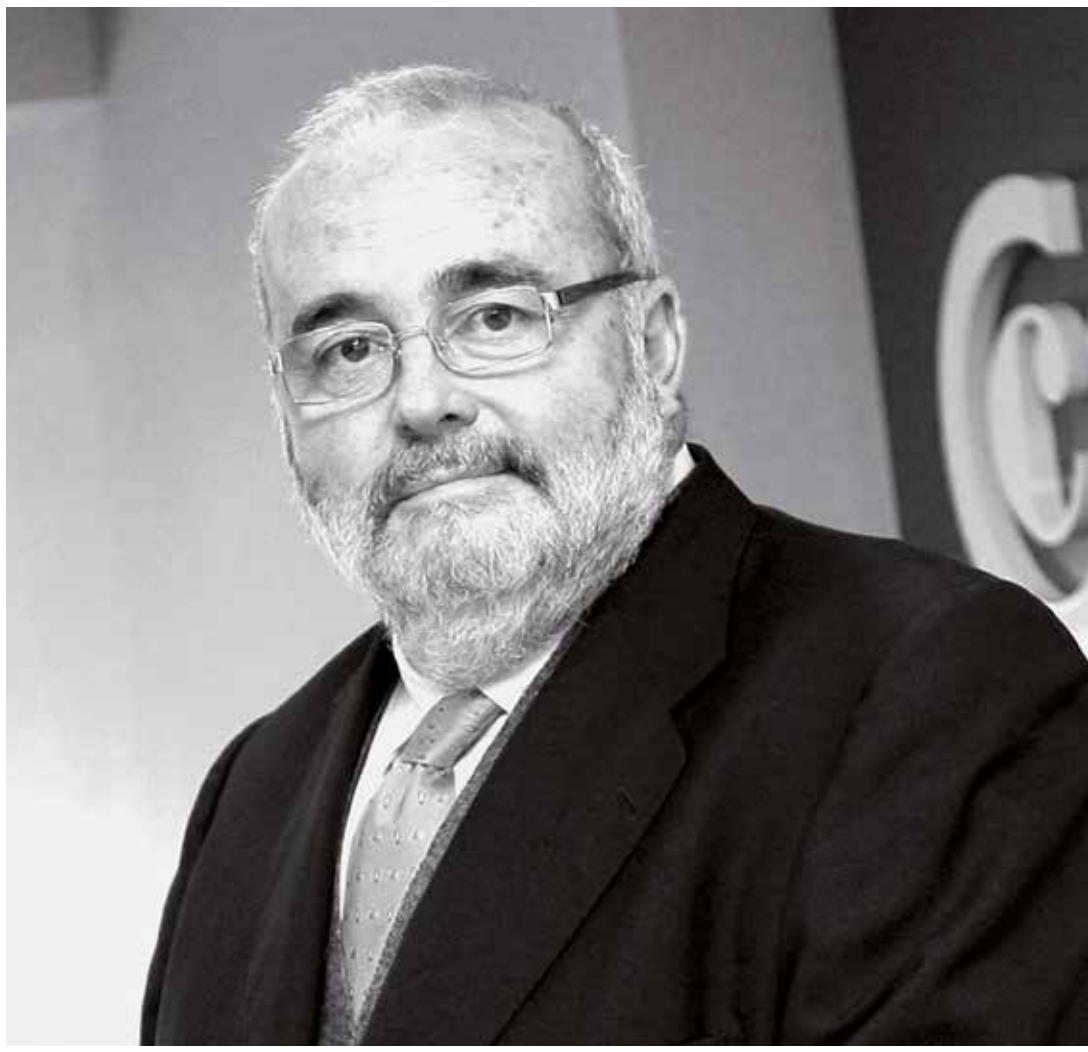
As a child, I was always fascinated by my mother's cooking and by how she was able to make tasty dishes from just a few ingredients, especially rice dishes, her speciality. Though I don't remember how old I was at the time, I do know that I was always happy to chop vegetables, grate cheese or dress salads, anything to avoid having to do my homework. In the family kitchen, there were always those famous little sachets of saffron. Mysterious, delicate sachets bearing the portrait of a girl, Carmencita, with the same name as my cousin, a commercial brand name that I didn't understand back then. And I loved to watch the ritual they involved. My mother used to open the sachets with great care, gently taking out the threads and placing them on a hot pan to toast them lightly, for a very short time, until they released an intense aroma. Then she would drop them in a pan of water and bring it to the boil. This enabled her to extract all the essence which she then transferred to the rice.

The Carmencita products have always been a part of my life. First, when I started to cook as an amateur at the "Happy Chef" Gastronomic Club I set up in Madrid. Now, at home, when I try my hand at more sophisticated dishes, I sometimes perfume salads with the saffron spray. No-one can say I'm not creative!

Congratulations, Carmencita, for a history you can be proud of.

Javier Gómez Navarro

President of Aldeasa



Jesús Navarro was a real visionary when, 85 years ago, he created the Carmencita brand. He followed on from my intrepid, entrepreneurial predecessors, including my great-grandmother Antonia Navarro Mira, who was the first to export saffron to India. Jesús Navarro developed the emblematic Carmencita label, creating the foundations for a brand that was to achieve success and renown the world over.

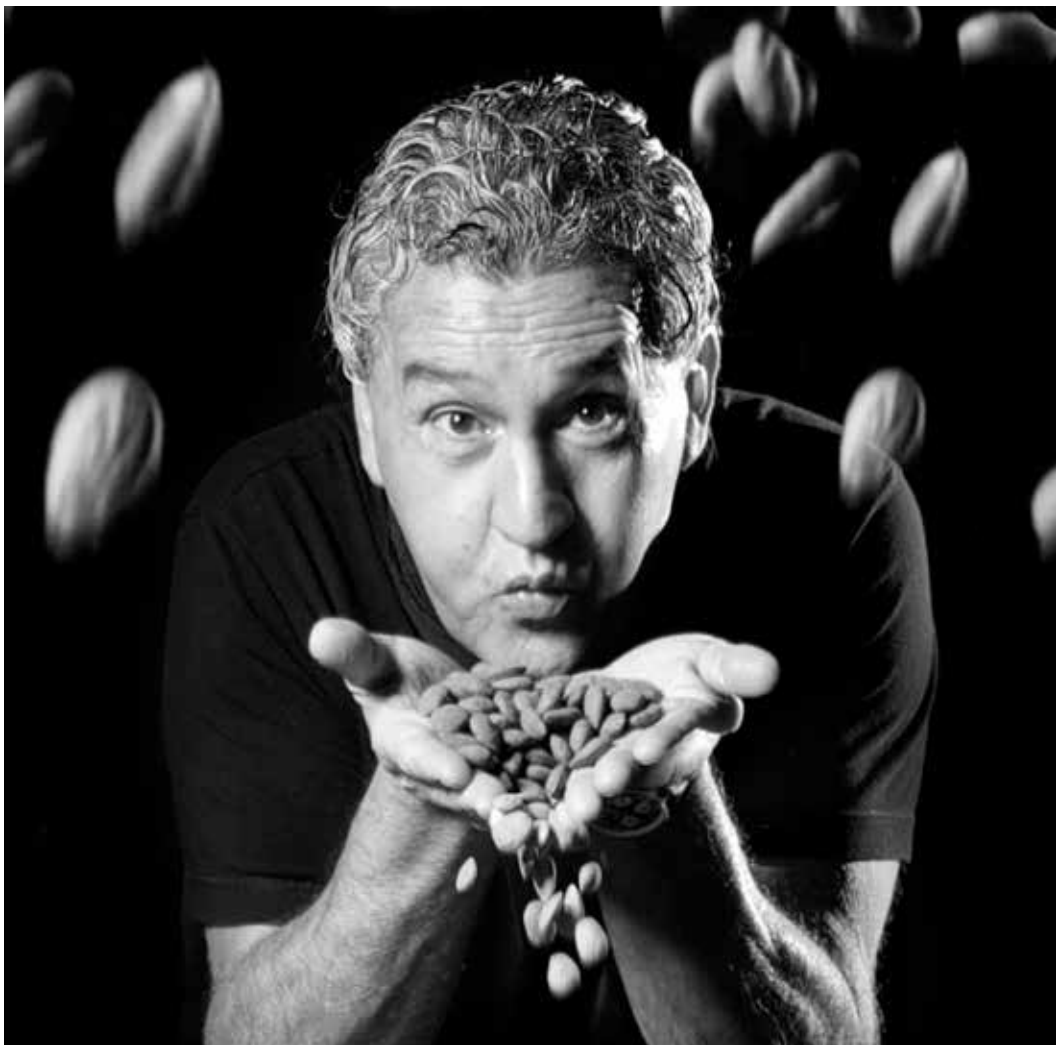
Ferrán Adrià

Chef

Herbs and spices occupy an important place in Spanish gastronomy. It would be difficult to imagine without such well-established products as paprika or saffron. Undoubtedly, our cuisine would not be the same without them. For many years, Carmencita has been introducing this rich gastronomic heritage into Spanish homes and restaurants, enriching our cuisine and helping preserve an important aspect of our identity.

Paco Torreblanca

Master pastry cook



It's always Carmencita for spices or saffron, and not only for savoury foods. Carmencita is also there for sweets – "Steamed apple with chocolate and Carmencita saffron", with its unique touch. My saffron and spice chocolates are world famous products. With their touch of saffron and spice they have allowed us to be present in gourmet shops around the world. The light and sunshine of our Mediterranean land are inconceivable without the Carmencita products.

Carme Ruscalleda

Chef

In home cooking and professional cuisine, spices allow us to perfume and colour foods while they are being dressed, marinated or cooked, giving our recipes gastronomic value, appeal and personality.

The success of a dish will depend on both the quality of the products chosen and on the skill and experience of the cook.

My childhood left me with an abundance of culinary memories. I always felt drawn towards the kitchen.

I believe in culinary culture, both traditional and creative, and I am often inspired and moved by good-quality products.

The Carmencita brand of herbs and spices was present in the kitchen I grew up in and today is present in my professional kitchen.

Rodrigo de la Calle

Chef

The way people used to eat is completely different to how we eat today. Until the human race stopped being hunter-gathers and became farmers, fishermen and cattle breeders, we had nomadic customs which meant we could only eat when food was available, and what was available went in parallel with the seasons.

With the birth of farming 10,000 years ago, man became sedentary and mainly ate the crops he grew (wheat, rice or maize, depending on location) as well as meat or fish which were stored by different methods – freezing, drying, salting, dehydration or smoking – to make perishable foods last longer.

Spices are parts or extracts of certain dried or dehydrated plant species that were used in small amounts as condiments to bring out flavours, as preservatives to mask the rancid flavours of stored foods or as disinfectants.

Knowledge of spices has existed for centuries and is attributed to oriental cultures (especially China and India). It was mostly brought to the West via the Persian Gulf by Arab people and by the first European traveller to the East, Marco Polo.

Initially, many spices were primarily used for medicinal purposes, and such uses developed in parallel with culinary knowledge and skills.

For cooks, spices are fundamental and are often the *raison d'être* of their creations. They can offer an element of surprise or fun, or added vivacity. For example, few meat dishes are conceivable without a base of herbs such as bay leaf, thyme or oregano, and the world of desserts would be unimaginable without cinnamon or sugar.

Spices are the essence of food today, both modern and traditional. Where would rice dishes be without saffron, or gazpacho without garlic and cumin? In fact, not only are they an essential ingredient but they often are the main protagonists.

Juan Mari y Elena Arzak

Chefs

As Spanish chefs, we have to be very grateful to Carmencita for deciding to publish a book as a tribute to the success of Spanish cuisine in recent years. This company started out way back in the 1920s in Novelda (Alicante) where there was a brisk trade in the prize product of saffron. It came from La Mancha and travelled far, even to the Far East, along a new silk road. And back from those exotic lands – India, China, and the Arab countries – came spices and condiments for our domestic market. This trade aroused passion and excitement, and enriched our civilisation. It brought colour, new aromas and intense flavours to our best tables. It has been rightly stated that while good food products and the best raw materials are the prose of cuisine, salt, spices and herbs are its poetry.

Sergio Serra

Chef

When I think of spices, I always think of the annual pig slaughter that I used to witness as a child. In the kitchen of my maternal grandparents, my mother (also called Carmencita) would prepare pig's trotters with black pepper, garlic and bay leaf, pickles with clove and pepper, croquettes with nutmeg and, as dessert, crème caramel with its sweet aroma of vanilla.

And those little containers full of history, culture and labour that we in the culinary world use to enrich our dishes, to bring different cultures closer together, merging them under the dark watchful eyes of Carmencita.

Today, in Alicante, the land of Carmencita, my daily life is perfumed with saffron, *ñora*, pepper, rosemary, thyme.

Jesús and I often talk about places, people, companies that we feel have a soul. Certainly, the soul of Carmencita is apparent is its many aromas, colours and sensations.

El Gran Wyoming

Presenter

The first time I ever heard the word saffron was in the village where my maternal grandparents lived, in the province of Cuenca. They sent me to the neighbour's house to ask for a sack of saffron. I must have been about six at the time and enjoyed running errands for them. But she gave me nothing - just a laugh, and two noisy kisses on my cheeks. "Pobrecito mío", she said. And back I went, empty-handed, in a state of total confusion.

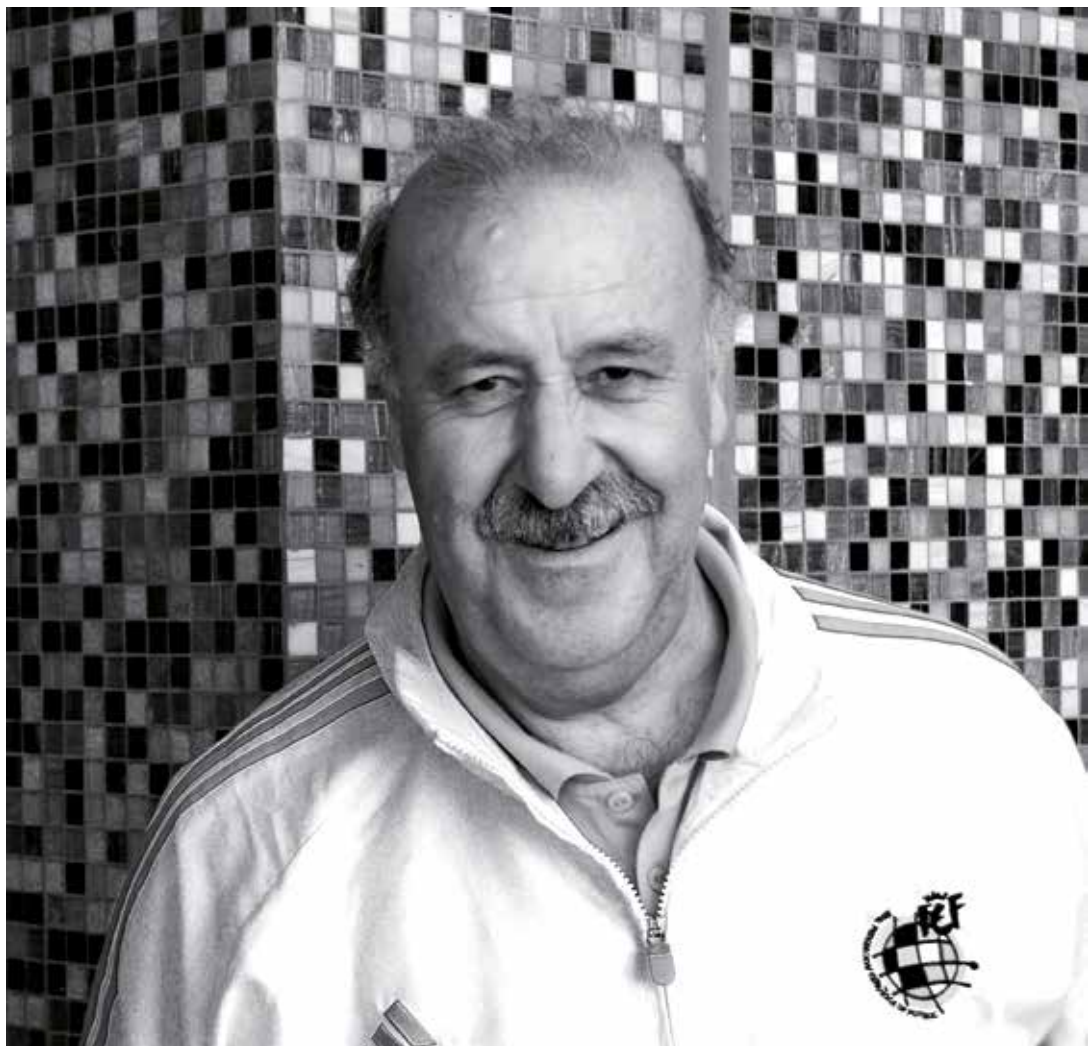
They often explained to me that saffron didn't come in sacks and I accepted their explanation just to change the subject, which they thought extremely funny. There can be nothing worse than being in the midst of a group where everyone is laughing except you. I didn't understand what difference it made if it was sold in sacks, boxes or demijohns. Nobody ever thought of explaining what saffron actually was and, obviously, I never dared ask because I didn't want to look even more ridiculous. Back then, in La Mancha at a time when barter still existed, there can't have been more than one child, me, who had no idea what saffron was.

That sensation of not understanding what is going on around me is something that still comes upon me at times. It has nothing to do with childhood. In fact, it seems to get worse as I get older.

This little story is my way of expressing my appreciation to the whole of the Carmencita family.

Vicente del Bosque

Manager of the Spanish National Football Team



I had the opportunity of visiting the Carmencita premises in Novelda back in 2002. The warm welcome I received from everyone there – from managers to the factory staff – corroborated the familiar, congenial image created by that girl with her Cordoban hat, an image that I remember from my childhood and that can be found in almost all Spanish kitchens.


Cannecita

The protagonists

Sergio Mira Jordán

Nieves Caparrós Navarro

Telephonist

For twenty-two years, Nieves has been the warm, kind-hearted voice that everyone hears when they phone the company. At the start, there were just two incoming lines and three extensions. Today, fourteen calls can be dealt with simultaneously and there are almost forty extensions. With her "Carmencita, can I help you?", Nieves hopes that callers receive a good impression, the same good impression that they receive from the Carmencita herbs and spices.

Hortensia Tortosa Guardiola

Head of the caramel custard machine

It is hard to believe that during her shift, the machine can prepare 13,000 boxes of caramel custard, 10,000 of custard and 16,000 sachets for fajitas and burritos, but it's true. The machine achieves almost 90% performance. Hortensia works at 100%. Even in the supermarket, when she sees someone wondering which product to buy, she never hesitates to go up to them and say, "Take Carmencita. I work there and it's the best".

Previous page

José Francisco Navarro Pérez

Mechanic

José Francisco has been working with the company for over thirty years. A lifetime of machines. He has seen the advancement of technology and has had to advance with it. He now says he wouldn't know how to work anywhere else. Carmencita is almost his second family, his second home. It's where he hopes to retire. And he says this with pride. He hopes to retire doing what he does best – looking after the machines that give flavour and aroma to our dishes.

Eva Benito Aznar

Administration

After more than forty years working for the company, half of that time as head of accounts, she still remembers her first job on the switchboard. She doesn't get to work with the products, but everything passes through her computer. She is proud to have known the company's founder personally and to be working today with the second and third generations. For Eva, these human ties have made this a company with a soul, one in which there is a spirit of harmony and collaboration.

Juani Monserrate Alarcón

In charge of management standards

When she was doing her work practice as part of a diploma in Statistics, back in 1999, Juani never imagined she would end up on the staff of Carmencita. She is now in charge of product content (as it figures on the labels, next to the weight) and she helped apply the world standards on quality, safety and environmental responsibility. This, she thinks, is the best way of guaranteeing consumers' trust in the Carmencita products.

Agustina Abad Zaragoza

Cleaner

Agustina has been working for two years with the company in charge of making sure the Carmencita premises – common areas, offices and laboratories - are perfectly hygienic. What she likes most is that she is not treated as "just a cleaner" but as a member of the staff. This makes her feel at ease and contented. And she plans to continue, always doing her best for the company, and "always with a smile".

Vicente José Gonzálbez Alba

In charge of production

When a group of Argentinians visited the plant, they described Vicente's job as that of "facilitator". And they were right. It is up to him to ensure that workers at machines have sufficient product to work with, calling suppliers, etc. Basically, he makes sure that everything runs smoothly. When he entered the company three decades ago, 7,000 glass jars were leaving the plant every day. Today the figure has reached 300,000, and he still feels the same satisfaction and pride now that Carmencita is present the world over. He considers himself very fortunate to be working here.

Pedro Luis Palomares Navarro

Mixer

When he started to work at Carmencita ten years ago, the machine only made three mixtures – caramel custard, custard and caramel custard with sugar. Today it makes eighty different mixtures, some with up to nineteen ingredients. It might seem a tough job (moving about 4,000 kg a day), but Pedro Luis considers it the best section in the whole plant, and wouldn't change it for any other. And he was the first to use the machine. He knows its workings better than the mechanics.

Daniel Beltrá Pérez

Warehouse

Daniel has always had close ties with the brand (his father was the company's miller) and started working at Carmencita when he was just sixteen. Back then, when a truck came in, they stopped the machines and all the men formed a chain to unload the sacks and containers. Today, such things have been mechanised. But his satisfaction at belonging to a great company and his pride at seeing the product in supermarkets are still the same.

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Shortly before this book went to press, Jesús Navarro Valero died in Novelda, where he had always lived. A much-loved, emblematic figure in his home town, he will always be remembered for his decisive role in building up Carmencita. This book, that he was so keen to see, bears witness to his life, and is therefore dedicated to him.

This book
has been printed in
Brizzolis' workshops, on October 8, 2012.
On paper Phoenix Motion Xenon, with the typography
Baskerville and in the middle of an intense
smell of ink, saffron and
cinnamon.