

MOROCCAN CUISINE AT THE CROSSROADS

“Tell me what you eat and I
will tell you who you are.”

– Anthelme Brillat-Savarin,
Physiologie du gout (1825)

Wandering the spice *souks* of Morocco is truly a sensory experience. The amazing aromas of sweet, spicy and smoky set your mouth watering, and a panoply of brilliant colors envelopes you: the rich golden yellow of turmeric, the warm beige of cumin and the deep red of paprika, along with the textures of star anise, cardamom pods and saffron threads. What led to this extraordinary bounty?

Morocco's prominent coastal location made it a crossroads of many civilizations. Political refugees fled Iraq in the Middle Ages and brought their traditional recipes with them, many of which combined fruit with meat. The Spanish Moriscos (Muslim refugees), Turks and the native Berbers also contributed their favorite dishes. The Moroccans took these recipes and infused them with rich spices to create a diverse, flavorful cuisine.

Morocco's native fruits and vegetables, as well as sheep, poultry and cattle, all serve as a foundation for the cuisine. Cumin, coriander, saffron, chilies, ginger, cinnamon and paprika are standard ingredients, as is *harissa* (a paste of garlic, chilies, olive oil and salt). *Harissa* makes for pungent dishes that stand out among the milder foods more common in Mediterranean cooking. In the past, the *ras el hanout* (head of the shop) had his own secret blend that might combine anywhere from 10 to 100 spices. Today, *ras el hanout* is the common name for these mixtures, and spice vendors compete to produce the most sought-after blend.

Lunch is the most important meal, and Ghizlane Bouttouch of our Morocco office says, “Most gather in family to assist for lunch of *tagine* (the name of both the cooking pot and the stew) — either chicken, lamb or fish with different vegetables. There is a big variety of salads (maybe from one to four) served with the main meal. Bread is important. As a dessert, people eat fresh fruit and drink mint tea.”

The reputation of these traditional dishes with their diverse ingredients has deservedly grown, and many Moroccan restaurants have surfaced throughout the world. Why wouldn't they? Once you've tasted a *tagine* (slow-cooked casserole of meat, aromatic vegetables and sauce) or have had a recipe enhanced by *harissa*, your palate will yearn for an encore.

On the Origin of Spices

The Spice Route that stretched from China through the Middle East and Africa to Europe was as important a trade route as the Silk Road. Foods consumed in ancient and medieval times were not always palatable, and the spices brought back via the Spice Route by European explorers were welcome additions – and extremely valuable commodities. Cinnamon, for example, was so prized by the first century AD that just 12 ounces of it had the same value as 11 pounds of silver. Roman Emperor Nero showed his supposed remorse for killing his wife by burning a year's supply of cinnamon on her funeral pyre.

Take a look at the journey of some of Morocco's classic spices.



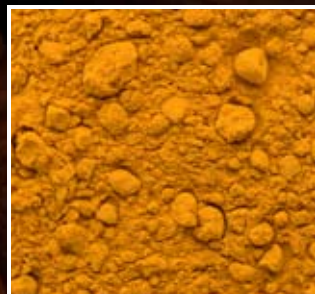
Cardamom is native to India and has been used for culinary purposes and spiritual rituals for more than 5,000 years. Alexander the Great's soldiers brought it to Europe around 325 BC.



Hot paprika was supposedly brought to Spain by Christopher Columbus, who served it to Ferdinand and Isabella. While they thought it too spicy, it was very well received throughout the rest of the country.



Saffron, originally from Asia Minor, was once used as currency, as a cosmetic in Greece and as a dye for Buddhist robes. It was brought to Spain in the seventh or eighth century.



Turmeric – with origins in India, China and Indonesia – has been used as a flavoring, dye and medicine since 600 BC. In the late 13th century, Marco Polo was taken with its brilliant yellow color and similarity to saffron.

Cinnamon (Ceylon cinnamon from South America) and Cassia (Chinese cinnamon from China and Indonesia) were used in ancient Egypt for cooking as well as embalming. The spice made its way to medieval Europe and North Africa before the 15th century to disguise the smell and taste of old meat.



Moroccan Beef *Tagine*

Serves 4

- 1 ½ lbs of beef stew meat or round steak, cut in chunks
- 1 large yellow onion, chopped
- 3 cloves garlic, chopped
- 3 large carrots, peeled and cut into similar-sized pieces
- 1c dried apricots
- 1 can of chickpeas, drained and rinsed
- 1 red bell pepper, seeded and chopped
- 2T olive oil
- 2-2 ½ c of chicken stock or water
- ½ c slivered or blanched almonds, toasted
- 1T honey
- 2t cinnamon
- 1t cumin
- ½ t turmeric
- ½ t cayenne pepper
- ½ t salt
- ½ c chopped coriander (cilantro)
- 1t grated orange rind (for decoration)

Ras el hanout

(2t cinnamon, 2t cumin, 1t coriander, 1t allspice, 1t turmeric, 1t cayenne, 1t mint, 1t ground cloves) – Mix together in a glass jar; save the remainder for future use

Mix about 2t (or as much as needed) of ras el hanout to coat the beef. Set aside beef for an hour or up to overnight. Heat olive oil in a large skillet on medium. Add onion, garlic and red bell pepper to skillet. After 3-4 minutes, add the beef and sear. Put contents of skillet as well as remaining ingredients (except for almonds, orange rind and coriander) into a crock pot (cook on low for 8-10 hours), oven-safe casserole dish or clay *tagine* pot (cook in oven at 350 for 3 hours). Shortly before serving, gently toast the almonds in a skillet until they start to brown. Chop the fresh coriander. Serve *tagine* over steamed couscous and top with toasted almonds, grated orange rind and chopped coriander.

Recipe by Pam Wehbi

Feast on all Morocco has to offer on **Splendors of Morocco** (12 days, from \$5,810).