



IAN HEMPHILL

The man behind the successful Herbie's Spices is a modern-day merchant, scouring the globe for the finest herbs and seasonings, concocting his own unique blends and protecting consumers from the fakery that plagues his industry.

IF IAN HEMPHILL HAD HIS WAY, HE WOULD THROW OUT MOST OF YOUR HERBS AND SPICES, BECAUSE IF YOU BOUGHT THEM AT A SUPERMARKET, THEY ARE PROBABLY OF INFERIOR QUALITY, AND IF THEY'VE BEEN LANGUISHING AT THE BACK OF A PANTRY, THEY ARE PROBABLY STALE.

We may have become much more discerning about fresh fruit and vegetables, but Ian thinks we are still pretty ignorant when it comes to how to buy, store and use some of the most complex and intriguing flavours that can turn a meal from monochrome to technicolour in just one shake, which is why he has the zeal of the missionary when he talks about herbs and spices.

Now 62, and with no plans for retirement, Ian is an authority on the subject. His jovial demeanour and warm personality downplay his serious knowledge and expertise. Think of him as the herb and spice equivalent of a master of wine or creator of perfumes with a truffle-nose for quality. Forty years in the business has also given him a well-tuned radar for some of the fakery that plagues the world of exotic and costly ingredients. His natural gift as a communicator includes a sense of fun that finds its way into some of the names for his personally created blends such as the Aussie version of the traditional nut-based Egyptian *dukkah* which he's called Ockkah. After being asked by a customer, he also invented an addictive, handbag-sized shaker of cinnamon, cocoa, vanilla and rose petals called Spice Dust to sprinkle over your cappuccino.

When Ian picked herbs for pocket money during school holidays on the Somerset Cottage herb farm his parents John and Rosemary established at Dural in NSW (his mum Rosemary was the first person in Australia to write a book about spices in 1959), he knew his rosemary from his basil, but the food at home was simple Anglo fare: roast lamb with mint sauce was his favourite meal. Today he's more likely to share a fragrant laksa, curry or slow-cooked beef enhanced with a Lebanese *baharat* blend with wife Liz, who shares the running of the business. The two have been inseparable since they met at the age of 18, and still spend every Friday and Saturday behind the counter of their terrace house shop in Sydney's inner west. "It's how we learn what customers want," says Ian, better known as Herbie, the nickname he earned at school when his

lunchboxes didn't smell or taste quite like everyone else's. When Herbie's opened for business 14 years ago, the area was "slightly dodgy" and only one other pioneer had picked its potential: Tetsuya Wakuda had opened his first restaurant just metres away. He's been a regular customer ever since (the Moroccan tagine spice mix is one of his favourites), as have many of Sydney's other top chefs. "They buy a blend and tweak it a bit to give it their own identity," he says. "Luke Mangan adds nutmeg to our vegetable curry powder. Chris Manfield made our *ras el hanout* famous when she mentioned it in an article

and it's still our biggest seller. We also collaborate on specific projects. A caterer asked us for a sweet mixed spice suitable for an orange cake. That kind of thing takes time to develop. We ended up with something fragrant that includes poppy seeds and rose petals, and works well in meringues, biscuits and is even good in banana porridge."

Today, Herbie's emporium stocks 130 herbs and spices, and makes 100 blends, ranging from classics such as *garam masala* to its own invented combinations such as the Balmain & Rozelle mix (which contains a dozen ingredients in an unlikely combination including galangal, cayenne, caraway and lemon myrtle). He has also rejected every approach from supermarket chains, preferring to keep his operation small and personal.

Unlike other suppliers, Ian never pads out a spice mix with inferior ingredients, boosts a flavour with citric acid or adds salt for bulk.

"I always cost our product last of all, which means I'm not tempted to compromise on quality. People fail to recognise that there is a huge difference in grades of products – at the moment, the best cardamom comes from Guatemala and the best vanilla from Madagascar, but the weather also plays a crucial role – cyclones affect crops for years. You have to keep up with all the seasonal variations and market fluctuations," Ian explains.

It's a business where secrecy still plays a large role and trust makes all the difference.



“I call the spice trade the world’s second oldest profession,” he laughs, “there’s a lot of sub-standard flogging-off going on,” citing the common practice of passing off cassia as cinnamon.

“Saffron is the monumental scandal right now,” he says, adding that the latest version is made from an extruded gelatine substance. “It’s everywhere, I’ve seen it in India, Turkey and Morocco. You can recognise it by the way it infuses too quickly in water, with a brownish red tinge and how it dissolves if you rub it.

“I suspect it is coming from Iran, mixed in with the real thing. True saffron is golden with a woody aroma and has a street value of \$10-15,000 a kilo,” he says, sounding for a moment like a different kind of dealer altogether.

Crossing paths with disreputable merchants can be dangerous, as Ian discovered when he received death threats after being overheard warning tourists in a Luxor market that a stallholder’s pink and green peppercorns were in fact dyed white ones and that the saffron was not genuine.

He sources ingredients directly from growers or purchases from reputable traders, many of whom he has known for 30 to 40 years. “You have to adjust to different cultural protocols and rhythms,” he says. “You sit on the verandah overlooking a clove plantation and you hear all about their children or talk about the cricket, which I know nothing about. It’s part of how business is done, you can’t rush it. You have to overcome a fair amount of initial suspicion in a closed world that has not changed its practices for centuries. Farmers don’t always want you to see the harvest and traders don’t want you to cut them out of the deal. It requires delicacy, discretion and diplomacy.”

India is Ian’s main source, and a place for which he feels such a passion that he occasionally shares it with a small group of travellers, escorting them on a tailored spice route. (The next trip is planned for 2013 as the 2012 is already sold out.) “We go to cardamom and pepper farms; see villagers picking, drying and grading; visit traders; watch cinnamon quills being rolled; and have cooking classes in private homes,” says Ian, who is currently developing what he describes as his lifetime dream itinerary: a cruise through the Indonesian spice islands. In the meantime, he runs 30 courses a year, teaching people how to create their own curry blends and use herbs and spices more imaginatively. “Many people still think that spicy means hot,” says Ian, who lost the taste for fiery food after

leaving the job he held briefly for a food manufacturer in Singapore before starting Herbie’s.

Not everything he stocks is international, though. “At the moment, Hunter Valley oregano is better than the Greek stuff, it’s like the very best Mexican,” he enthuses, “but it costs seven times as much as the cheap stuff from Egypt.” Local growers also supply kaffir lime and curry leaves, together with coriander, mustard and fenugreek seeds.

Ian also responds to fashion. “Fennel pollen is having a moment, thanks to being seen on TV cooking shows,” he says. He sources his in France and says it is delicate, but versatile enough to be used in chicken and fish dishes, as well as in biscuits and *panna cotta*. Tonka beans from Venezuela are another novelty. “You can infuse them in milk or grate it like nutmeg for its marzipan flavour,” suggests Ian.

Some ingredients outlive trends: “When we first stocked sumac, no one knew what it was, but it is so easy to use with such a likeable citrus flavour that it has since become mainstream and a popular seller.”

Being so involved in spices means Ian is able to spot trends before they come to the fore. “We are going to see a merging of the key spices from the New World: chilli, chocolate and vanilla, which were given to Cortez by Montezuma, and these will be used to renew interest in Mexican cuisine and steer us away from the clichés of Tex Mex,” he says.

Though he’s yet to become a fan of horseradish, cardamom remains his favourite spice, citing its versatility in both sweet and savoury dishes as the reason.

And although the leading thinker on all things spice-related, Ian still seeks inspiration from others in the industry. “We’ve done a roast veggie herb mix after seeing Jamie Oliver put a tray of roast vegies in the oven, but we’ve added sumac and native wattleseed,” he says.

Having trained as an actor at NIDA (National Institute of Dramatic Art), which is where he met his wife, a fellow student who cast him in her graduation project, Ian is comfortable in front of the camera and is currently cooking up a series with his good friend Lyndey Milan (with whom he co-authored the user-friendly *Just Add Spice* after the more scholarly *Spice Notes*). But he doesn’t need television to feed his ego. For Ian, what really matters is that his ingredients get star billing. *Herbie’s Spices*, 745 Darling St, Rozelle, NSW, (02) 9555 6035, herbies.com.au.



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