

FOOD & WINE[®]

THE INNOVATORS ISSUE



**SUPER-FLAKY APPLE
HAND PIES (p. 89)
and MORE BRILLIANT
RECIPES from the
BIGGEST NAMES in FOOD**

FEBRUARY 2020

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CAN LEAD TO
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IN AMERICA**

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TO DRINK ROSÉ
THIS WINTER**

OBSESSIONS

THE OBSESSIVE

The Spice Sommelier
Burlap & Barrel
cofounder Ethan Frisch
breathes transparency
into the spice trade.

By Sarah Khan

Cinnamon tree
leaves sourced
from Zanzibar

FOOD STYLING: EMILY NABORS HALL; PROP STYLING: CLAIRE SPOLLEN

IT'S A RARE SUNNY DAY during Zanzibar's rainy season, and the island is luminous with emerald forests and sodden, spongy ocher paths. The air is thick with the fragrance of cinnamon. Welcome to Ethan Frisch's office for the day.

"There's this perception that I'm machete-ing my way through a jungle," says Frisch, cofounder of single-origin spice purveyor Burlap & Barrel. Apart from the machete, everything checks out: As he follows farmers deep into the woods to inspect nutmeg, peppercorns, and cinnamon, his palms evoke a Pollockian tableau, blotched yellow and red from turmeric and teak saplings.

Frisch has, in past lives, been a pastry chef in New York and a humanitarian aid worker in Jordan and Afghanistan, which is when he had the initial idea for the company. Burlap & Barrel officially took shape in 2016 during a holiday in Zanzibar. For centuries, the country was the nexus of the global spice trade, but upon visiting, Frisch found that spices sold in local markets were mostly imported: "I went on a spice tour and would ask: 'Were they grown here?' 'Yes.' 'Can we see where?' 'No.'"

Frisch now often travels to meet directly with farmers to source cardamom in Guatemala, star anise in Vietnam, and wild cummin in Afghanistan. Scrapping middlemen means farmers keep more of their profits, and his customers (which include Chez Panisse and Blue Hill) can access higher-quality spices.

Though chefs increasingly take care when sourcing meat and produce, spices are still often overlooked. Batches from different regions are mixed together haphazardly, with cooks none the wiser that the flavors in their kitchens are feeble wisps of what they could be. Frisch himself imparts the wisdom of a spice sommelier, pointing out hints of orange rind in fresh cinnamon bark or the dry, tannic quality of nutmeg.

He and his business partner, Ori Zohar, are committed to helping both chefs and home cooks unleash the power of fresh, unadulterated spices. But they're also operating ethically in an industry rife with colonialism. "As a white guy, I have a responsibility to work toward a better food system," Frisch says. "Even if my ancestors weren't involved with the violent nature of the spice trade, I've still benefited. I'm trying to balance that in a small way."

Using Skype and WhatsApp, Frisch sends pictures of restaurant dishes to farmers. "A farmer and a chef at Eleven Madison Park both value a high-quality ingredient," he says. "They don't know they're working on it together, but they are."





SPICE SMARTS

from left to right

CURED SUMAC

This is sumac on steroids; it's chopped and preserved in salt rather than being dried and ground like the regular stuff. The result is a tart, frisky sprinkle that punches up everything from avocado toast to roasted potatoes.

CLOUD FOREST YELLOW CARDAMOM

These fragrant cardamom pods are sourced from Guatemala, but you can use them to give a sweet punch to South Asian dishes like well-seasoned biryani or a steaming pot of masala chai.

WILD ICELANDIC KELP

Briny, salty ground kelp is the perfect upgrade to jasmine rice, and it also works well in a soy-based salmon marinade. If you're feeling fancy at breakfast, just sprinkle some on a buttered slice of crusty bread.

CINNAMON VERUM SHAVINGS

These bits of cinnamon bark can seem intimidating, but they add a toasty, fragrant twist to mulled wine, and the flavor also shines through in a snow-day beef stew.

CINNAMON TREE LEAVES (p. 19)

At Blackberry Mountain, Three Sisters executive chef Josh Feathers uses cinnamon leaves for pickling and in sauces, like a shrimp dish that features peaches with house-fermented serrano pepper sauce.

Order these spices and much more at burlapandbarrel.com.