



Laurie

Hi, listeners. Welcome back to Heart to Table. The podcast where we approach food and cooking from a different angle. I'm Laurie March, remodeler, on camera host, avid gardener, and now explorer of the culinary arts.

Laurie

The history of spice is the history of the world, or at least, the history of humanity. Spices and herbs have been used for thousands of years for culinary and health purposes, and have been some of the most expensive and in demand products in human history. Today, I'm so happy to introduce you to Lior Lev Sercarz, chef, spice blender, and owner of La Boite, spice and biscuit shop in New York City. Thanks for joining us Lior.

Lior Lev Sercarz

Thanks for having me.

Laurie

So, Lior, you know a thing or two about spices, having written not one but three books about spices, three. How did you come about-

Lior Lev Sercarz

And a fourth on the way.

Laurie

Oh my gosh, really?

Lior Lev Sercarz

Yeah, just signed three weeks ago, the contract, the book number four.

Laurie

Congratulations.

Lior Lev Sercarz

Thank you.

Laurie

So, the first book, The Art of Blending, is a cookbook with four new one spice blends. Spice Companion is a beautiful illustrated guide with just gorgeous photos and botanical drawings. And Mastering Spice is invaluable techniques to transform everyday cooking, which I feel like all of us could use. So, I mean, I got to ask, what's the fourth one going to be?

Lior Lev Sercarz

The fourth one is me going back to the Middle East, which is where I'm from, and exploring the ingredients that make Middle Eastern cuisine, their stories, the growers, the farmers, but pretty exciting. I mean, the Middle East is a pretty big place. So, all the way, Iraq, Iran, Turkey, Armenia, Egypt, which surprisingly is part of the Middle East, although geographically is Africa. So, yeah. So, lots of fun. We've just started, so lots to do.

Laurie

Lior, is the history behind spices part of what has drawn you to them?

Lior Lev Sercarz

Yeah, for sure. I think my job, I find it super exciting because its history, its trade, its economics, its agriculture, and then there's cooking, it's why I got started to begin, but I like everything involved with it. And history is definitely one of the things that attracts me in what I do.

Laurie

So, tell me a little bit about how you got into cooking and spices. You've had such an interesting journey into getting where you are today.

Lior Lev Sercarz

I think the short answer is that it's my revenge against the food I was fed as a young child. That's how I got into the dairy business. I was born and raised in Israel. I grew up in a kibbutz. I was fed by a bunch of angry Ashkenazi people with Eastern European food, and quite soon discovered that this is better. And I think I'm on a journey for the last 49 years to make it better. Per my mom from an early age of five, six years old, I was melting chocolate on radiators with little pots and pans.

Lior Lev Sercarz

So, I guess that's that. I grew up also in a farming environment. So, I went fishing after school. I went, now what's considered to be foraging. For us, it was just going to collect berries. We weren't like

Scandinavians with three Michelin star restaurants. We just had little ramekins and we went picking up berries. And then, throughout the years, there was always interest. We live in Rome for a year. We lived in Brussels for four years with my parents.

Lior Lev Sercarz

I got a lot of really interesting stuff. I discovered that food doesn't need to be kosher, which was one of the highlights of my career. And then, I started cooking at home. As a teenager, my mom was just working late hours after we left the kibbutz, and I was glad to make lunch and dinner for the family with my younger sister. Then in the military, I got to be a sergeant. So, I had to make sure my soldiers were fed properly so that was a different style.

Lior Lev Sercarz

And then, once that was done, I just decided to start cooking professionally without any experience, then move to France, joined culinary, enrolled into a pretty well-known culinary school. And then, the rest is history. I took five years in France. I moved to New York. I joined Daniel Boulud's kitchen. And after all of that, I decided to put an end to it and change professions once again and become a spice blender trader, whatever you want to call it.

Laurie

That's how it happened.

Lior Lev Sercarz

Yeah.

Laurie

So, I mean, one of the things that amazes me about spices is they're not from any one single place. They are from everywhere. And they're different everywhere. It's not any one culture or cooking style that uses spices, they're just so universal in some ways.

Lior Lev Sercarz

Yeah, for sure. I think that, it's funny when I meet people that say, "I don't use spices." I'm like, "Really? Do you have salt and pepper in your kitchen?" It's like, "Yeah, but that's not spicer." Well, it actually is.

Laurie

Right.

Lior Lev Sercarz

I don't know of one place around the planet that cooks without spices. Now, there's places where you'd find 20, 30, 40, 50. You go to India, you go to Southeast Asia, the Middle East, but that the one connecting thing is that everybody has some form of spice in their kitchen

Lior Lev Sercarz

There's some things that are found everywhere, maybe the salt and pepper. Although you go to certain countries, pepper isn't a part of their diet, they use chilies.

Laurie

Yeah. Right.

Lior Lev Sercarz

Getting what we can see there. And then, salt in certain countries would be delivered through soy sauce or of fish sauce, or other things like that. But seasoning stuff are everywhere around the world.

Laurie

How do you actually define a spice? Because I grow a lot of herbs at my house. And I was thinking my way through the grander definition, how do you define? What is a spice?

Lior Lev Sercarz

So, it took me a little while when I started the business. And people say, "Oh, do you have herbs and spices?" And I'm like, "Yeah." But they're the same. And then, at some point, I think when I was writing with Jamie to Spice Companion, and we had to come up with a definition to what... and I think it's written somewhere that to me, spices are everything that I can season food with. And when I say food, it's beverage foods, sweet savory, as long as it's dry.

Lior Lev Sercarz

So, from the moment it becomes dry to me, it's in the family of spices, which is definitely not the right definition by the dictionary or some online portals. But it's so exciting because then, vinegar powder is a spice and berry powders are. And I don't make a distinction between herbs and spices because again, as long as it's dried, then it's a spice. There's also a big function difference between fresh herbs and dry herbs. They don't fulfill the same function.

Laurie

I love it. It's a universal adapter, isn't it? It's the smallest element in a meal that can have the biggest effect on the flavor.

Lior Lev Sercarz

It's absolutely true. And it's sadly not used enough like this perspective. A lot of times, spices are an afterthought, or something that you just do because every recipe on earth ends with a phrase that says, "Season to salt." To taste, I'm sorry, with salt.

Laurie

Season to taste.

Lior Lev Sercarz

Season to taste with salt and pepper as like, yeah, that's it. But what if you don't need salt or pepper, what if you need just sodium and heat? What if you need sweetness and bitterness and acid and all of the acid is completely forgotten? That's one profile that people ignore completely. But spices could make or break a dish. I don't understand why you'd spend money on great protein and proteus, and then add mediocre spices to them. You're not doing justice to anybody.

Lior Lev Sercarz

And I think, when you look at the cuisines that people are obsessed with and really crave, it's because they're so flavorful. They really got seasoning seasonings in them. And so, I think that there's a lot to be done in changing people's perspective. Spices are crucial to any dish.

Laurie

Yeah. I really like what you said about an afterthought. That was one of my notes that I had from our brief chat before. That here in the US, sometimes spices really are an afterthought, and I find it so interesting. We are all creatures of habit, right? We do get used to certain things, or if it was the win at home, we do it over and over again. When you're busy, you tend to go to the things that worked. But how do you think it is that spices have become so vital to some cultures?

Laurie

You just mentioned, where the things we crave have a lot many more spices in them. And then, how is it that our culture or some parts of our culture here in the US, spices are not quite so vital?

Lior Lev Sercarz

So, I think the reason that spices in the US have not picked up yet or there's less of an understanding, to me, and that's my own personal theory, is just because we don't grow them.

Lior Lev Sercarz:

I think from the last 15 years of doing what I do, every time that I look at a culture, a country or ethnic group that uses a lot of spices, for the most part, they just grow it. It's part of their agricultural portfolio, let's put it that way. So, it's plants that grow in their surroundings, in the same way that they pick potatoes or apples or whatnot. They also have fenugreek and they have fennel. So, it's about using whatever is around them, and also capturing it in a way through drying. So, when it's offseason, they can have it ... that's the reason that spices in a way that we know them came about, it's just the idea of we harvest during season. We use it when we can, but we also want to make sure that during winter time or in offseason, we can start this. That misconception, I think about spices that were made or used to cover up bad flavors. I have a lot of conversation I had with a very smart person, way more smarter than I am.

He's name is Paul Friedman, who teaches at Yale, who wrote some amazing books about spices. And he's claims that it's impossible because they were so expensive. That people who had bad food didn't have money to buy spices.

Laurie

Right, right.

Lior Lev Sercarz

However, they're definitely a source of preserving that I agree and he also thinks the same as that. People throughout the years figure out that definitely sold in some other elements, if you apply them on a piece of protein or fermented or pickling or whatnot. They're just a great natural way to preserve because they were no other methods. So, salted fish, like in Scandinavia or in Spain and things like that, and dry rubs on pieces of meat.

And I think because of global expansion, they became a very sought after things. You got to throw in the mix, the religious aspect of spices and they're sent. In some cultures, they are still to this day, part of a ceremony. So, in Judaism, and nobody asked me, I'm part of Judaism, I was just born Jewish. But on a Saturday night, there's what's called Havdalah, so it's between the end of Shabbat or Sabbath and the new week. And they have Besamim, which are perfumes.

And I said, "Well, where are the perfumes?" And say, "Well, it's the spices." So, spices had this connotation, they'll take a cinnamon stick and a nutmeg, which are usually really often bad quality and as like, at least take some good stuff with you. And in some Yemenite Judaism, as synagogues and whatnot, they'll go to synagogue on a Friday with basil, which is really beautiful and it's really scented. There's the incense. So, there's a lot of stuff that's related to spices and religion and all of that, also across the globe in that way.

Laurie

So interesting. And I feel obviously, there have been so many paths charted. And so much of our history has marched across the continent or sailed across the sea to collect these things. And it's so funny, now, they are in our drawer in a little glass pots. And people fought wars over these things. And now, it's just on the shelf and easy to access and so different.

Lior Lev Sercarz

Yeah, for sure. I think part of what I set to do, and there's others who do a great job, is to bring the glory back to spices. For about 100 years, they lost due to mass produced food, different trends, where the old world was not trendy and cool anymore, and everything had to be new, and mass produce, a process, then different cuisines. And I think, luckily, were back to understanding that you could still be modern and cool and whatnot, but bring spices and revive one of the oldest trades, if not the oldest one of growing trading, and giving them the value and the respect that they deserve.

Lior Lev Sercarz

We're not there yet. There's still a lot of work to be done. And I think it also went side by side with what I call the grandmother era, where a lot of chefs like myself at some point in their career, after we tried to do molecular gastronomy and nouvelle cuisine. And at the end of the day, you would ask most chefs that I know what they like to eat, and it's usually what they ate at home, or what they grew up eating.

And then, I don't know who said that, but somebody, I think at some point said, "Well, if you like it, why don't you cook it?" And I think a lot of chefs just went back and is like, "I want to cook Korean because that's where I'm from. And I want to cook Southern Italian, and I want to cook Cantonese food, and I want to cook Middle Eastern." And the minute you start digging, you're like, "Oh, I need spices." So, with that came this revival of using spices.



Laurie

Lior, you are tying in the thoughts of two of our last episodes, Grace Ramirez. Chef Grace was talking about how a lot of chefs have gone back to their roots in our cooking. What is in our hometown? And instead of the fancy stuff, they grew up culturally, a lot of the Latin chef flavors. They went other places and learned French cuisine, and then came home and were like, "I want to cook what my I'm passionate about, what I grew up on."

Laurie

And also, our episode before that, Jessica Sowards, who was a homesteader, she's talking about that granny stuff where this like, return to what can you grow yourself? What can you do in your backyard? Acknowledging that the preserving and getting back to some of those values that did go away for a little while, and just realizing how cool it really is to be able to put up your own food, and like you're saying.

It's just such a fun calling out of our last two episodes that you just did all in one sentence.

Lior Lev Sercarz

Yeah. I think, technique is important. It's important to go and see. And I don't see anything bad in those 20, 30 years of exploration. I think you got to go there to realize that you are who you are, and there's not a whole lot that you could do about it in a good way. And I think that understanding that you can borrow a thought process, a technique, a vessel, even an ingredient, but I think that if you make it your own, that's the best way.

And I think that as much as there's a lot to say about tradition and heritage, you can write your own. And I think that if you're able to do that, then you're on to something really exciting. Because I don't think my grandmother cooked the same way that her grandmother did. There's some things that remain. There's a concept. There's an ingredient, but it's treated differently. And luckily for us, we have new technologies and we have new vessels and cook wares and appliances and that.

Laurie

Yeah. You mentioned acidity. In some ways when I open up my spice jar, I feel like it's a mishmash of all the past recipes I've ever done. And it's messy but it's very fun. So, I don't mind it that way. But I would love it if you could just tell us a little bit about the organizational structure of the types of spices or categories. How do you categorize this world of flavors?

Lior Lev Sercarz

So, to me, the foundations are salinity and heat, sweetness, acid, bitter, and if you can, oiliness or fat, and they're like herbaceous notes. So, if you have these categories... they don't all have to be used. I think the base, it's the equivalent to the music world. You could have an amazing band with drums, bass, and guitar. And there's been enough evidence to that, that you don't need more band members. So, I think those are to me the foundation.

Now, you cannot really go to a store and buy and say, "I want acid." I mean, you could say but that's the wrong store, and that's illegal. But you can really say, "I want heat, acid, salinity, bitter and sweeter." What? I think in order to understand what they are, and I invite people to do it all the time. I said, "Put the spices that you have on a counter. And spend time smelling them and tasting them, and see what you discover as being bitter or being sweet or being acid, and learn to categorize them."

Obviously, knowing that chilies are hot, sure. That's a given. But some chilies have acid in them or they have a note of acidity. Some chilies have some salinity in them. Celery seeds are salty, although it's not salt. They have sodium in them. So, it's a matter of understanding. It's also to me is crucial. If you want to be a better cook, it's to be able to understand what spices taste and smell like, because you're adding them to your food.

So, if you don't know you are gambling with your food, you're adding an unknown element because somebody told you to do it. What if they said so and you don't care for it maybe? So, it's important to understand how much to put, what is it going to do to your food? And then, you start discovering what could add acidity. So, you're cooking something as like, "Oh, this could use a little bit of brightness."

Unless you tasted dried lemons or sumac or amchur, which is green mango powder, you would never know. But once you know, it's amazing. It's like people who paint and have the ability to add color, because they're looking for that little something or the accessory with your closing that will take one thing to the next place.

Laurie

Yes. Like the perfect hat or earrings or something makes it all better.

Lior Lev Sercarz

Exactly.

Laurie

So, one of the things that we've been exploring with this podcast is really how to be more open minded about different things that we maybe haven't bumped into yet, and how to be a little bit more of an adventurous eater? And I feel like spices are such an incredible way to do that. So, for people who are newly curious about expanding their palette, where do you suggest they enter the world of spice?

Lior Lev Sercarz

So, I think one of a great way to start because spices, it's overwhelming. There's a lot, there's different blends, there's singles. I suggest you cook what you usually cook or what you like to eat. And then, once it's cooked, take a few small portions of it and just start adding spices to that spoonful or fork and taste and say, "Okay. This dish with this spice is great. I love it. This one with this one." So, don't make the whole dish with a new spice that you've never used before.

Lior Lev Sercarz

But use some cooked rice or pasta or some soup and just sprinkle a little bit of spices, different ones and each and get familiar with them. That's one way to go about it. And then, once you get a bit more secure, next time make a whole dish with this either spice or spice blend. You will automatically see a huge difference. And that's part of what mastering spice is all about. The third book is don't change the way you cook. I don't want to be liable for that.

But keep on cooking what you like to eat and what you're good at. You will eventually start exploring because you feel more confident, you feel better with the result. Cooking is the five seconds that you feel that you achieved something amazing. And then, the next few minutes where you serve it to somebody and they give you that recognition. And so, I think that's amazing. And so, the more you do it, you feel comfortable, the technique is there.



And then, you can start playing around with different seasoning saying, "Oh, I've done this chicken a million times. Let me change the seasoning." You will get different color, different textures, different flavors. And so, it takes the everyday and makes it so much more interesting.

Laurie

Lior, I think you mentioned mixes and blends. And I've recently opened my spice store in advance of this conversation to just see what I felt comfortable with and what was completely full that I had clearly only used once or twice. And some of the stuff that I really don't use, that I bought are mixes or blends. They're like a steak seasoning or poultry seasoning blend, and I just didn't use them that way. But I'm wondering if you could tell us...

I mean, you wrote several books about it at this point. Tell us about blending. And are some of these spices naturally just best friends and that they go together? How do you mad scientist, mix spices?

Lior Lev Sercarz

I love blends. I mean, this my whole life, it's blending. I like single spices. But to me, blends, it's easier to use, it's faster, it's the sum of a lot of really good things that somehow together go to a different place. I use single spices also. But it's a bit more complicated to use just single spices. So, if I were to recommend some, I'm like, "Just get blends." The one thing I would say though is, ignore the label on the blend. So, you bought a steak seasoning for your steak, fine, great.

Don't just keep it for steak because you probably don't eat steak seven days a week. I mean, maybe, but good luck with that.

Laurie

No.

Lior Lev Sercarz

Take that same steak seasoning and tomorrow, try it with eggs for breakfast, and maybe added to your salad dressing and then on your vegetables. And some of them will even make it to some cocktails and mixed drinks and other beverages. So, and all of a sudden, what do you, until a month ago, thought was the perfect steak blend, all of a sudden, it's the everything blend that you can put everywhere. And then, you don't have a lot of it left because you put it everywhere

Laurie

Yeah. Do you think it's an art or a science, blending spices?

Lior Lev Sercarz

Both. I think there's a method to the madness. I mean, you got to scale everything. I recorded it in a recipe. It's not that I improvise every time I do it. I know how long to toast things and I'll try to grind them. There is the more artistic way. I have a team member here who also blends. And when she does a blend and I do a blend, it's not the same. It's the same grinder and it's the same oven. There's something about... which is fantastic. I love it.

I think it's like wine makers. It's the same grapes and the same barrels, but that little touch. And the artistic part is about coming up with a concept. I think that's the stuff that's exciting. You come up with a concept and what the flavors will be, but then you got to put it into a scientific process.

Laurie

Neat. So, it is both really.

Lior Lev Sercarz

Yeah.

Laurie

I mean, it sounds like you're testing a lot of things all the time. I feel like this could be super useful to our audience. Do you find that there are certain meals that really lend themselves to being a great testing grounds for a spice blend that you could use?

Lior Lev Sercarz

I think there's things... yeah, pastas and rice and chicken, you could throw anything on a chicken. I mean, a lot of most people or a lot of people, I should say. Yogurt is also really good vehicle for just trying from the cold perspective, because spices aren't made just for cooking. They could just be sprinkled on something. So, raw vegetable yogurt, chicken salmon, those are great. Eggs are also a good testing ground for it.

And then, just dipping them with bread and oil, it's also good indication usually on how to try them. Yeah. So, I'd say those are the ones. And another one is soup. Just a simple chicken soup or beef broth or something, just putting a few spices, leaving it first few seconds, sipping it because of the fat, because of the infusion into the hot liquid. It will also get you a really good idea of what they can taste like.

Laurie

So, I come back to feeling with spices and falling in love with different spices, you could truly travel the world with your dinner plate, right? I mean, I think there's so many regional flavors and spices. Do you organize your spices by region? Or do you have any favorites?

Lior Lev Sercarz

I don't want to show you my spice rack. My spice rack is organized by single and by blends. So, they're separated. So, that's one thing. Although the label isn't exactly related to what's inside the jar, and I know what it is because I just-

Laurie

It's like a story on the label to make sure.

Lior Lev Sercarz

No. I have a jar that's labeled with one blend, but I refilled it with something else. But I know it's that so I don't need to-

Laurie

You're a mad scientist.

Lior Lev Sercarz

Since I'm the only one at home cooking, then there's no risk of somebody confusing anything. No, I think that to organize well, I mean, try to separate single and blends. Have them handy. One of the most important is to have them within reach. If they're in a cabinet that too far, in a drawer that you cannot access, if they're in a pantry, you just won't to use them. I think that if you don't see them, you don't use them.

Laurie

Yeah, that makes sense.

Lior Lev Sercarz

And yeah, label them so that you know what's in them. I really hope that people get on board with the idea of doing a short inventory. Just check what's in your drawer. In the middle of cooking, and you really want to use this, and guess what, the jar is empty. We barely have enough for it. So, most people know when they need milk or paper towel or eggs. They have no idea when they need spices or how long they've been sitting there. So, label them. Check them out every once in a while.

Laurie

Can you settle a household argument for me? Do spices expire? And should you always toss them out as soon as they have hit their date?

Lior Lev Sercarz

No for both. They don't expire in a way that you will get sick. So, that's good to know. It's also really bad to know, because that's why people keep them for so long. At some point, they just start fading out. They have no taste, no scent. So, what I recommend, if you have a container that you don't know when you bought, or even when you buy it, there's no date indication. Just write with a pen or a sharpie somewhere in the label.

Lior Lev Sercarz

Just add one year to the date when you purchase it. So, if it's today, and just add one year and try to make a point to use them by that date. Don't throw them the day after the day off. But if it's still there, if it's still a lot, try to use it up. And I'll do it sometimes as like, okay, I have a lot of one or two blends, and for about a week or two, I'll just use a lot of these blends in everything. And then, I just realized that it's something I don't use enough, then I just don't bring it home anymore, and the same thing.

There are no five to 10 must have spices in any household. It's what you are and who you are. And so, buy what you need and buy enough for about three to six months stop, so that you go back and buy more, buy smaller quantities and buy fresh, so it's constantly rotating your stock of spices.

Laurie

I mean, you got me there my friend. I was literally going to ask you if there were five or 10 things everybody should have.

Lior Lev Sercarz

No. They should have spices. I mean, listen, you got to have a form of salt. I don't see myself cooking without some form of salt, coarse salt, fine salt, whatever you want. I have about three that I use all the time, but one is great. And then, some form of heat. So, if black pepper isn't your thing, but you like Cayenne or other chilies, just get that. And after that, I would say, after that I would do blends versus just single spices.

If you are not ambitious, I would try to buy ground spices. All the whole ones will last longer. But if you're never going to grind them, then what's the point? So, just buy ground, and then maybe you'll use more. And I think that everything you prepare, you can pause for three seconds, like, "Can I add something to it?" If the answer is "no", fine. Don't. But if the answer is "yes", then you should do it.

Laurie

Yeah. That will hit the drawer or the cabinet.

Lior Lev Sercarz

Yep. For the shows.

Laurie

You said something really interesting when we talked briefly before. You mentioned that spices can sometimes help you make a better choice for healthier eating. And I keep coming back to salt and sodium. But also, I feel like this could be reflected with sugar as well. There's all these things that some of us have been trying to pull out of our diet because we feel better when we don't eat them. Can you talk a little bit about that this philosophy about spices?

Lior Lev Sercarz

Yeah. I mean, I don't pretend to be a life coach for health and well-being and nutrition, because I'm not. But I would say that I find that if you use spices in good amounts in your food and beverage, they you'll start eating less of a portion, because the food is-

Laurie

Eating less food?

Lior Lev Sercarz

Yeah. Eating less food. You don't need a pound of meat or a really big bowl of something because it's so flavorful, our palates get satisfied. You're going to take smaller bites. Your portion control is going to become much more interesting. Your intake of sodium is going to be reduced because of other spices that compensate the salinity and the heat and the sweetness. Sugar, which I agree, one of my biggest concern is the amount of sugar that people eat.

In using sugar in cooking or in baking, try to substitute some, I'm not saying remove sugar completely unless you have to from a health perspective, but just try to remove slowly. I think the good example from Mastering Spices, the banana bread that's in the book, originally had about 40% more sugar than what the end recipe is. We've just started lowering and lowering and lowering and seeing when is it going to collapse? When it's going to be a disaster?

Which we did at some point. So, we went back up and found that happy place. We obviously didn't substitute all of that amount with spices, but we've added a little bit more bananas, and we've added some spices. And you could play with flours. So, I think that if you do it, not because of health but because of flavor. It becomes very interesting.

Laurie

What else stands in for salt? I thought you said celery seater. What else does a sodium stand in?

Lior Lev Sercarz

So, some spices have natural sodium themselves. There's the celery and cumin and fennel and caraway. They're also botanically related, and fennel. So, that's one thing. The other thing is things like garlic and onion, even though I don't know they might have some, but there's something about that flavor that to me. Ajwain seeds, some of the herbs like oregano. Chilies also have the ability because of the numbness and the heat to enhance sweetness and salinity.

So, even if you have less salt, I think that it's important to season with salt but just a little. And then, see if you actually need more. I mean, I'm sure people like my grandfather, who passed many... he would add salt before even taking one bite, whatever he ate. It was like a to-do thing. And I was like, "Okay." So, I think, yeah, you got to season along the way and taste because maybe you don't need as much salt as you thought you would.

And there's also something to be said, that spices aside is the cooking technique. So, I think that by searing, charring, grilling, cooking at high heat, like roasting the natural caramelization of the proteins or the protein that you cook allows you to reduce sodium by a lot just because of that crunch and caramelization.

Laurie

Add some interest to it. So, you didn't need to have as much flavoring on top because it's already doing that work.

Lior Lev Sercarz

Yeah. And then, you could obviously use things that have actual salt in them but are not salt, such as capers and olives and pickles and soy sauce and fish sauce, and all of those, which obviously have sold in them.

Laurie

Sure,

Lior Lev Sercarz

But it's less per amount of food that you're going to consume.

Laurie

Yeah. How do you think that spices fell off in popularity here in the US?

Lior Lev Sercarz

I don't think there were ever popular. To begin with, I think that a lot of the immigrants that built this country did bring some spices with them, but they mainly remain within their communities. So, we spoke earlier about the boom of ethnicity and all, it's finally okay to make ethnic food. We can talk about it, we can celebrate it, we can celebrate our indifferences. So, I think they were never part of the landscape from an agriculture point.

And they're definitely not there yet. I think that opening up the doors to ethnic food and different cultures definitely will contribute

I think there's also... my mentor and former boss in France who I consider a very smart man. And when it comes to cooking, obviously, and I remember him coming back from Japan, and he went there many times. And he said, "I understood that I don't understand anything about food." I was like, "How is that possible, master? You are the mighty." And he did a cleanse for about, not the cleanse like diet, but like a palate.

And Japanese food is very refined and very subtle. Without the need of spreading a cup of wasabi on each piece of sashimi we're eating. And I think our palates and I will throw myself in the mix, if it makes feel people feel better. Our palates are burnt. We eat way too hot from hot heat from chilies and peppers, hot from temperature.

It's like having the raw vegetable, raw fruit, and really understanding a beautiful piece of raw fish or just a very plain piece of meat. And I think that it's important to not to lose that ability to identify very refined clean flavors. It's funny if you ever do a water tasting, people like, "What do you mean water tasting?" It's by tasting different-

Laurie

I've done a vodka tasting but I have never done water tasting.

Lior Lev Sercarz

That too. It's fascinating to me. I drink a lot of water and sparkling water, and the ability to identify bubble size and salinity within certain mineral waters. It's fascinating to me. The same way that I do with wine or with other ingredients. But I think a lot of us are just used to choose stronger flavors from mainly heat, either heat or sugar. It's everything that's so sweet and if it's not sweet, then it's not good.

Laurie

Yeah. So, Lior, how do you suggest that parents listening to all of this stuff, and just thinking... so many of my nieces and nephews went through the beige phase, where all they ate was yellow food. How could parents... how do you help a kid develop the palate?

Lior Lev Sercarz

This is where it becomes funny. I mean, I'm a father of two adorable...every father or parents. I have two adorable children. So, I'm a father of two children. Some days they're adorable, some days they're less. And on a side note, I think there is such a thing as the chef's curse, because my kids are really bad eaters. I mean, I shouldn't say they're bad eaters. All I hoped for as, before I became a parent, it's to be able to cook for my kids. They barely eat anything I cook.



Lior Lev Sercarz

What I would say is this, I've learned and I am a parenting blogger specialist, don't make baby food. No. Make food, obviously. Don't serve them certain items. But make them real food that you will eat, maybe it's a little bit more cooked. So, they're able to absorb. And expose them from... I remember asking our pediatrician if I can give them tahina, and she said, "Well, you probably already gave them." I'm like, "Yes." She was like, "So, why are you asking me?"

They're still they're still alive.

Laurie

They called you out.

Lior Lev Sercarz

No. So, she said, "You're doing the right thing." Obviously, there are certain things to know, I think, like honey until the age of one. But aside from that, whether it's shellfish, whether it's peanuts, whether it's what's not. And I think one way is to expose them to spices. So, they will cook with me, which is very interesting, especially the young one here. He'll be the one to season and want to mix. And I was like, "So, do you want some of these?" Like, "No."

But he's really excited about... he says it smells so good. I was like, "Great. So, you want to have some for dinner?" He's like, "No."

Laurie

Interesting.

Lior Lev Sercarz

But we talked about where it's from, the spice, and what he smells like. And I think one of the funniest thing was not too long ago, they hate basil on pizza. I guess it's a kid's thing because, "Remove that green thing from my pizza."

Laurie

Oh, I'm with them. I don't know. I don't like basil in pizza either.

Lior Lev Sercarz

And I served them some pizza. Obviously not the pizza that I made, because they will never... I mean, they'll eat sometimes. And it was like, "Oh, it's the green." I was like, "No, it's actually..." He loves the arugula, my younger son. So, I was like, "Oh, it's arugula." He was like, "Oh. So, then I like it." So, he ate the pizza. And then, three weeks later, we're cooking with one of my blends. I completely forgot about the night open. It's our herb de Provence blend.

And I opened the jar and he was like, "Oh, it has arugula." And I was like, "No, it doesn't." He's like, "It has arugula. It smells like my pizza from three weeks ago."

Laurie

So, funny.

Lior Lev Sercarz

It has basil in it. The blend has dried basil. So, he thought that's what arugula smells like because I told him that's what arugula. So, they are very excited to be part. I think that if you can get them engaged in cooking, or preparing their food and taking ownership. I stopped serving them what I thought they would eat. I was like, "You tell me what you want to eat, and that's what you're eating. I'm not thinking for you."

And so, I think exposing them, taking them out, they'll go out with us, they'll travel with us. They'll at least smell it. They maybe will take a bite. You said "no", fine. We move on. I mean, I'm going back to my dear wife who was vegetarian until we met. She is no longer vegetarian. And at the age of, in her mid-30s, all of a sudden, made a whole change in the way she ate. Just because she was just never exposed to some of these things.

And even with some of my client's chefs, without getting into names. They was like, "I don't like this spice." Then three years later, became avid fans of it. It's about how you made it, who served it to you when you ate it. So, I think kids are great. But from speaking with professionals, our palates develop all the time. I see it on myself. I am a huge fan of bitter flavors, which I wasn't 20 years ago. And I think that it's something to explore all the time.

Laurie

That's so fun. I feel like there's always a trendy spice too. Have you noticed that? There's always something that seems like white hot, and everybody's talking about it. For a while it was a truffle and yeah, so many, right?

Lior Lev Sercarz

Yeah. We had the truffle era where I listened. I like fresh truffles, white and black. And the simpler, the better, on a piece of toast with some salt and olive oil on some scrambled eggs on a freshly cooked pasta. To me, it's the ultimate truffle experience. Our truffle oil and I are not good friends. No. It's like I walk next to a restaurant, I was like, "Oh my God. Truffle fries." It's so-

Laurie

Can't do it. You can't do it?

Lior Lev Sercarz

Nope, no. No truffle popcorn or truffle fries. I have yet to see the light, maybe one day. So, truffle was a thing. We had the salt era where everybody was buying 17 kind of salts. We had the turmeric and fenugreek era, where people are-

Laurie

I think turmeric is happening right now all around us.

Lior Lev Sercarz

It's still happening. And I said, turmeric is great. I love turmeric. But the idea of consuming capsules of turmeric and just adding a tablespoon to it, it's not pleasant. I think if you want to add turmeric to your food in a way that makes sense because it's delicious. And so, that's right. And fenugreek is the same thing. We had the Aleppo era. The Sichuan was a thing. There was a Sichuan moment where... there was Sichuan everywhere. It's okay.

Lior Lev Sercarz

We are all dependent on our screens. I was going to say printed media, but that's not that-

Laurie

Not quite so much.

Lior Lev Sercarz

Not quite so much. But the Instagram and the Facebook, and it's the thing to do because everybody does it. So, it's great. I think that some things are here to stay, and that's great. And all of a sudden, we're back to using sun dried tomatoes. It's okay. It's finally okay to use them after the '80s, '90s era. It's a delicious ingredient. I love sun dried tomatoes.

Laurie

So funny. I mean, is it possible for things to just get completely overhyped and burn people out on them? And then, just like you're saying, if the wait for them to come back around again?

Lior Lev Sercarz

Yeah. Listen, I think that the trend, it comes and goes. I think that's the thing with it. The good news about the trend is about exposing people to things that are not familiar with, and hoping that they will stick around, because they're good, because they're used in the right way. And I think it's also, if you can incorporate them into your life, then it makes sense to me.

Laurie

If you had to cook and eat for the rest of your life with only three spices, what would they be? For you?

Lior Lev Sercarz

Salt, maybe oil fat chili and cumin.

Laurie

Cumin. Really?

Lior Lev Sercarz

Yeah.

Laurie

So, interesting. I'm so surprised.

Lior Lev Sercarz

Cumin to me is meat. It's like meat. It's a meat alternative. So, it's one spice with so many layers of flavor. Crossing from sweet to savory. By the way, we're in the process of working on a new cookie for our line of cookies that we do. And it's cumin-based. My pastry chef, she's like, "Are you sure it's going to work?" I was like, "I don't know but let's try."

Laurie

So funny. Lior, if you could go back in time and pick any moment in spice history to witness with your own eyes, what would it be?

Lior Lev Sercarz

Oh, that's easy actually, I think, for me, at least. I can't remember the date exactly, but I could probably go around the 1600, 1700 to meet a person by name of Pierre Poivre, which was sent as a missionary to Southeast Asia by the French government, and had a garden. In my research, it's a botanical garden with spice plants. And he's one of the people who broke the monopoly, the Dutch and British monopoly of the spice trade by smuggling plants.

So, I think I would be very excited to meet Pierre and hang out with him for a little while.

Laurie

See that moment.

Lior Lev Sercarz

Yeah. I think so, yeah. That would be interesting. Then I have a lot of other historical moments in time. But that's-

Laurie

That sounds like a good one.

Lior Lev Sercarz

Yeah.

Laurie

I mean, I think we probably should wrap up. But I'm just wondering, I continue to think, is it the moment of spices here in the US? Are they finally starting to catch on?

Lior Lev Sercarz

Yeah. I think we're having a moment. It's a bit upsetting sometimes. I see a lot more competitors every day. So, the first reaction is like, "Oh, another one and then another one." And some of them I know personally. Some of them hung out here for a while. I can't see myself now as I saw my former bosses in restaurant. It was like, "Oh, this guy opened a restaurant, and he's going to take my recipes and cook my food." After about three, five minutes, I get over it.

I think it's great for everybody that there is awareness, that we can have a conversation. It wasn't the case when I started 15 years ago. There's obviously a lot of companies back then, but I don't think that they were doing it in a way that things have been done now. There's more awareness, more research, going into details where it's from, who made it, how it's done. So, I think we're definitely there. We started the journey and it's a thing finally.

Laurie

What do you think the future of spice is?

Lior Lev Sercarz

I think the future is about awareness, education, where they're from, who makes them, giving them back the value that they are. They're not a cheap item, like a 99 cent in a jar. And when you grab a jar of spices for maybe a split second, it crosses your mind, what is this thing and where it came from? I think that would be a great moment.

Laurie

I love that. I will do that every time I pick up a spice. Lior, thank you so much. It was so fun to talk to you. And now, I need to go, look at my spice store with totally different eyes.

Lior Lev Sercarz

Start fresh.

Laurie

I will. Thank you so much for your time. And it was just wonderful to hear all your thoughts on spices and flavor. It was just really cool. Thank you.

Lior Lev Sercarz

Thank you for having me. Thank you. This is great.

Laurie

And I also want to say a huge thank you to all our listeners, I'm so happy that so many NEW friends are joining us!

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