

## taste buds

**chef Larry Janes**



## Spices get a new life, clean rack

Battles were fought, ships sunk, the New World discovered, history and fortunes made — all in the quest of spices. I decided to set out on a quest for spices when I finally realized that my rotating spice rack was dirty and could benefit from a good cleaning.

The origin of spices and their uses goes back thousands of years. Marco Polo can be credited with bringing them out of the Orient and into the West. During the cleaning, I noticed a few of my spice containers appeared to be direct descendants of the original Marco Polo carryovers. It was evident that it was time for Chef Larry to throw away the old and "bring in the new."

It was only after I had paid my last respects to the encrusted canisters of paprika and cinnamon, at least as old as my '81 Toyota, that I thought about how spices used to be considered as rare as gold. Christopher Columbus brought many spices and only the rich could afford the tropical "jewels of the tongue."

When I found I didn't have enough cash and had to write a check at the cash register, I knew how they felt. While whole spices last almost indefinitely (they have been found still fragrant in Egyptian tombs), ground spices will retain good aroma and flavor for only up to six months, and that is only if they are properly stored.

**MAJOR PRECAUTIONS** that should be adhered to while trying to keep your spices fresh include protection from heat, moisture and from strong light. That one little sentence has just wiped out 7/8 of the nation's spice racks hanging just above or slightly to the left of the old stove.

How come spice-rack manufacturers don't warn us to keep our racks away from heat, moisture and light? Ever visit a model home? Furthermore, who's going to pay \$40 or \$50 for a teak oak spice rack and then hang it in the cupboard? That's what you've truly invested in one of those cheap plastic tiered turntables (available in all houseware departments). Total outlay for a handy spice rack that rotates, cleans easily and can keep my spices in a dark, cool area? About \$5.

Spice manufacturers never say, but the spice should be removed from those cheap tinny containers and placed in opaque containers with, preferably, a light-fitting lid that will help keep air out and freshness in. Can't imagine going out and buying 30 airtight spice jars. For that kind of an investment, I could probably redo my kitchen cupboard, so I keep small amounts of spices in baby food jars, old medicine bottles and in those cute little Tupperware containers. (Mamma's a Tupperware lady.)

Most spice manufacturers, when pressed for an answer, will suggest that spices should be checked once a month for freshness. It is evident that these same manufacturers are the ones who have domestic help. I can't find the time to dust the spice containers, let alone smell each one every month to check for freshness.

The best way to check for freshness is simply to trust your nose. Upon removing the lid, the distinctive aroma should be noticeable. Immediately tell you all is well. If there is a musty, rancid or "off" odor, or only a faint aroma, the spice should be replaced.

**IN DOING** an all-over check of your spice shelves, test only three or four items at a time. Inspect the more delicate ones first (like cinnamon) and leave the more hearty ones (like pepper) till last.

When using ground spices in any recipe, remember that ground spices impart their flavors to food immediately. They should, in general, be added 10-15 minutes before the end of the cooking period. Whole spices are best in slow-cooking dishes because they require long simmering periods to release their full flavors and aromas.

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# Hamming it up



## Hams come in variety of guises

By Larry Janes  
staff writer

Anyone who thinks the traditional ham Momma prepared, studded in glory with cloves and dripping with a glaze of brown sugar and molasses, was something "thrown together," hasn't visited a good butcher shop or deli lately. Nowadays, consumers are faced with the choice of purchasing a ham either fresh or smoked, canned or country, sliced or boned, glazed or grazed, steak or butt and God only knows what else.

Barring game, pork is North America's oldest meat. Pigs came with the earliest settlers and were set loose to fatten in the woods. Most pork comes from pigs less than a year old, so the meat is naturally tender.

Ham is a processed pork product. Smoked hams can be fully cooked, ready-to-cook or country style. The fully cooked ham can be simply heated and served — cube it and throw a handful into the scalloped potatoes or enjoy a paper-thin slice slathered with mustard on a fresh slice of rye.

Ready-to-cook ham can be glazed, covered with pineapple and cloves and then slowly baked. These less costly varieties are generally cured by injecting brine into the blood vessels and then are lightly smoked over sawdust.

Country hams hail from the hills of Pennsylvania, Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee and come complete with a strong smoky taste. It's been said that beef is beef and pork is pork wherever they hail from, but a Virginia ham is about as different from most other hams as sharp cheddar is from other cheese.

**UNLIKE THE** pinkish soft meat of ordinary hams, the truly aged Virginia ham has a rich mahogany color, is firm and highly flavored. To get even more technical, a Smithfield Virginia ham is one of the most praised hams in the world.

Seems that a fellow by the name of Arthur Smith owned a big farm, and because the soil was too poor for raising tobacco, he farmed peanuts. The early settlers let their hogs roam wild and it didn't take them long to discover the richness and intense flavor that came from hogs raised on peanuts. If that wasn't enough,

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# Bread ties in with tradition

By Larry Janes  
staff writer

This is a story about Easter breads and the Greek background of how they came about.

John Liogas, proprietor of the Hellenic Bakery and Grocery in Livonia, and Toula Patsalis, owner of the Detroit area's Kitchen Glamour shops, are two seemingly ordinary people who have more than a basic understanding of their religion and heritage.

They expound the virtues of not just their religious beliefs, but also of their traditions that date back thousands of years and are still

**The bread is braided and then baked with red colored eggs.**

handed down today.

The Greek Orthodox rite celebrates Easter the week following the traditional date. This religion looks at Easter as the most important of all holidays. As with the traditional Christian rite, the Greek Orthodox begin the Easter season 40 days before the great holiday.

The first Sunday of the Great Lent

is Orthodox Sunday, commemorating the victory of Orthodoxy. It officially begins the Great Fast.

On Catheri Thetiera, or Clean Monday, a church service is offered, one of the first of many during the lenten season.

This meaningful service is followed by a typical lenten luncheon consisting of fish eggs (tarma), unleavened bread (lagana) and a sweet made of sesame and honey called halvah. Fresh fruit and black tea or coffee end the meal. This begins the fasting every Wednesday and Friday when the faithful should abstain from all meat products.

**EACH SUNDAY** during the lenten period signifies historical periods of the Orthodox religion. The final week, Holy Week, features accentuated prayer and dedicated fasting.

By the time Holy Week comes along, the thought of roast lamb, spinach and cheese pie and sweet breads keeps coming to mind, knowing that the final week of fasting and reflections of the soul are at hand.

Greek services are held every morning and evening, with every day of "Passion Week" having its own ritual.

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STEVE FECHT/staff photographer

At Hellenic Bakery in Livonia, John Liogas makes Easter bread for the Greek Orthodox celebration of the religious holiday.