



Spice, the Final Frontier

By Abby Luby

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Nirmala Narine's global perspective



PHOTOGRAPHS BY PHIL MANSFIELD

Sniffing the golden turmeric from the large elliptical glass bottle makes your pores tingle. And it's not the only spice in Nirmala's Kitchen Spice Shop, a one-room, well-appointed spice emporium on her Highland farm property, that elicits a physiological response. There is the subtle sweetness from a furred cinnamon bark, the blissful scent from dried lavender—all bringing on a heady moment, exactly what spice is all about.

Tasting deepens that moment, and to Nirmala Narine, an astute and worldly epicurean, taste can be a multidimensional experience measured not just on the palate but in our bodies as a curative force, in our minds

referencing a geographical point or stirring the sediment of memory. Each exotic spice in the Spice Shop has age-old healing properties still used in the far reaches of the globe, countries Narine travels to in her passionate wanderlust to trace indigenous foods to the very essence of their cultivation. She has visited over 156 countries, and these journeys often include a visit to her childhood home in Guyana, a small South American nation with strong Caribbean roots. This is where she grew up with her extended family, whose grandparents emigrated from India in the 19th century as British indentured servants. It was a childhood that taught her the bare basics of how to survive on what you could grow and how to make food more flavorful. She expands on those fundamentals in her cookbooks *In Nirmala's Kitchen: Everyday World Cuisine* (Lake Isle Press; 2006) and *Nirmala's Edible Diaries* (Chronicle Books; 2009), both of which read like travelogues. She has been in the food enthusiast spotlight featured in *The New York Times*, *Bon Appétit*, *O: The Oprah Magazine*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Food & Wine* and making appearances on *Martha Stewart*, *The Today Show*, *CNN* and *The CBS Early Show*. Her recently published YA novel for children is *Ellishiva Cinnamon and the Sixth Element*.

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Nirmala Narine in her kitchen, which serves as a staging ground for entertaining as well as instruction.

Narine speaks with a spirited energy when weaving memorable tales of her childhood into her *raison d'être*. Growing up in the basic, small family cottage on stilts in Guyana to becoming a known expert on global foods and spices has patterned Narine's life in a steady stream of contrasts. "There was no electricity and the tiny kitchen had no running water," she recalls, comparing it to her present home, a remodeled farmhouse with a spacious, sleek, state-of-the-art kitchen that doubles as a cooking classroom. The adjoining dining room is where she serves her exclusive spice suppers on a long hewn table. She bought the farmhouse eight years ago; the 15-acre former dairy and rodeo farm now serves as her base for cooking classes, spice suppers and the recently opened spice shop housed in a two-story outbuilding. The farm is replete with goats, chickens (who Narine calls "my girls") and horses, which are boarded there a few times a year. The road sign says "Nirmala's Kitchen" and, beyond the split rail fence, the grounds are pleasantly anchored by a large horse barn at the far end and the farmhouse in the front. Framed beehive boxes sit near rows of lavender and large, elongated, raised beds, which were constructed to replace a dilapidated garage, now growing various lettuces, including callaloo, a type of Caribbean spinach. The grounds are deceptively informal for someone with such an erudite history.

"People expect to see a state-of-the-art garden, but it doesn't work that way," she explains. "When I was a child, we knew exactly what to grow. If we had tons and tons of rain in the previous season, we knew at a certain time of year we couldn't start planting rice because it would oversaturate the field. Same with sugarcane, watermelon, coconuts." In Guyana, Narine's mother and grandmother grew rice and vegetables. "They never wanted their children to become farmers, but here I am. Farming is in my blood."

Seeding Her Future

Newly purposed visions and ideas often tap into old childhood memories, which play like a background pedal point. When the young Narine was hungry, she knew how to grow plants like shallots to flavor her food, which took only a week or two with the proper soil and watering. Knowing that plants grew fast in the tropical climate actually helped steer the young, eight-year-old Narine toward her entrepreneurial future.

"I used to walk barefoot to school and the other girls would make fun of me, but I would never ask my parents to buy me shoes." She knew pepper seeds sprouted quickly and the fruit would soon follow, so she planted a bunch of seeds, nurtured them, and a few weeks later she filled a large, cracked white bowl with chili peppers and walked to several villages and sold them all. With her earnings she bought a pair of flip-flops for herself and for her younger brother.

The girl had moxie, she ran with it and is running with it still.

Today, she teaches that same lesson of self-reliance to impoverished children all over the world, a goal of her nonprofit group, Nirmala Global Village Foundation. Because her regular excursions take her anywhere from India to Southeast Asia to Africa, she connects with numerous disadvantaged youngsters and teaches them how to survive. Narine went to a Nepal compound that housed girls rescued from sex trafficking and who, because of their past, were shunned by the rest of Nepalese society. "I showed these young girls how to grow marigolds in just a few weeks," Narine explains. "They laid out a growing plan, learned when to water and kept diaries of how to do everything. They had responsibilities." When the flowers bloomed, Narine taught the girls how to wrap the marigolds in burlap because, as she told them, "We are going to sell them." She had the girls dress as businesswomen and took them to one of Nepal's more famous hotels, introduced them to the manager and told him she was teaching the girls how to start a business. A deal was struck. "All of a sudden, when I looked at these girls who have been terribly abused, here they were and their faces were lit up; it was their moment to shine. They now knew how to negotiate and felt proud and empowered." That

night, brightly colored marigolds appeared on hotel guests' pillows with notes that read: "Grown by Sita, age 10."

Helping those less fortunate is compassion Narine learned as a youngster helping her grandfather, a sought-after Ayurvedic healer in Guyana. "We used to have sick villagers from all over coming to my grandfather, and he would prepare poultices and tonics using spices from ancient India. I would pound up the barks, leaves and roots on the masala brick. I tasted everything." He was, as she called him, her "Payo," and he took her under his wing, teaching her yoga when she was three and how to speak and read Sanskrit and learn the Vedic Sanskrit hymns in the Rig Veda, one of the four sacred Hindu texts or Vedas. "My great-great-grandparents were Ayurveda scholars, educators, as was my grandfather. They always felt their purpose in this life was to give. Compassion was their thing."



Narine's spice shop feels like a culinary apothecary

Taste Memory

Along with her genuine and frequent melodious laughter, Narine's eyes often dance as she recalls pivotal moments in her life. When she was 11, her life changed radically. Her uncle had signed up to serve in the U.S. military in exchange for citizenship. He fought in Vietnam for two tours, became an American citizen and sponsored Narine's grandmother, who promptly moved the entire family to Queens, New York City. Narine experienced a whole new culture with utter fascination. "When we came to the U.S., I had never known electricity—we were used to reading and writing with oil lamps. We never had running water, and here it was right in your house!" When she spotted the spiky TV antennas in Guyana, she asked her father what they were for. "I didn't even know what television was." Fast forward some 30 years later to the 2013 debut of Narine's TV series *Nirmala's Spice World*, which can be seen on the Z Living Network.

As an adult, her knowledge of various cultures and cuisines led to success in the marketing world. But years of corporate commerce weren't as fulfilling as she expected. She tells of a transformative experience she had in Zanzibar in 2002 when perched atop a clove tree, chewing some spicy-sweet cloves. She envisioned the endless possibilities of having her own gourmet business and, days later, quit her corporate job and started *Nirmala's Kitchen*. Since then, the

offerings of her go-to global spice pantry—specialty spices, grains, spiced salts and elixirs—are purchased by renowned chefs worldwide and sold to the general public.

Food and spices with distinct and different flavors can elicit memories and conjure a sense of place, all of which can change our relationship with food. Narine teaches the act of tasting as a springboard from which to expand and elaborate on, gauging subtle changes with our palates, honing in on what's sweet or savory, bitter or hot, like taking apart a puzzle to study each piece. "We break it down and take a single spice and build on it, enhance it to be more sweet or savory," she says. "I offer a spice like turmeric then add nutmeg, clove or cinnamon, which makes it more pungent. By the time you get to the dry spices, it's a little more intense. You really feel it in your mouth."

Her farm-based cooking school uses fresh seasonal produce from both her gardens and those purchased from local farmers. She also teaches about the Ayurvedic properties of spices. "Spices weren't used just for the flavor and scent but how it would mask and preserve rotten food. We used spices and food for all sorts of things. Take honey. My mother used to rub a poultice with honey to draw out the toxins from a bee sting. Where we came from, spices weren't just used for cooking, they healed your body inside and out."



Narine prepares and holds her exclusive Spice Suppers just a few times a year, and they attract world leaders, diplomats and celebrities, who learn about the suppers by word of mouth and are willing to pay a few hundred dollars per person. “All of these people are who I interact with through my work as a global entrepreneur and my foundation. The fact that I am also a farmer who cooks rustic meals reminds many of their grandmothers’ cooking.” Preparing for these exclusive spice suppers is second nature. “I plant just what I will need because I know what the menu will be.” A throwback from her childhood.

Narine describes her farm as an agroecology destination, an Ayurvedic holistic wellness center where she can offer essential practices that are part of her “whole-living” philosophy. The farm’s spacious horse barn and attached building have the potential for multiple uses; tucked behind her house is an unassuming tree house where Narine practices yoga. She sees her farm as a place for contemplation, practicing yoga and eating nutritious, organic, homegrown food and learning about healing. As she surveys the fields of her farm, Narine actively envisions numerous future endeavors. On one side of the property is wetlands, perfect for growing rice in the tradition of her mother and her ancestors from India. She likens herself to a universal plant. “I have my Indian background, I am cultivated from India, my seeds are in Guyana, South America, and I am blooming here in North America.”

Nirmala’s Kitchen

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