



Farmers Embrace the Growing Domestic Spice Trade

Most spices are imported and have long been overlooked in the local food movement. Now, some U.S. farmers are investing in turmeric, chili, saffron, and more.

BY BRIDGET SHIRVELL JANUARY 9, 2023



Krissy Scommegna moves pepper starts in the greenhouse. (Photo courtesy of Boonville Barn Collective)

When Krissy Scommegna took a job at the Boonville Hotel & Restaurant in Anderson Valley, California, she spent a few months helping the innkeepers, bartending and waiting tables, basically doing whatever was needed, before working her way into the kitchen. There, she learned how to cook, paying special attention to how the chefs sourced their ingredients.

“We sourced as much local food as possible. Along with the garden we had at the hotel, we bought from farmers in the valley,” Scommegna says. “I thought—if we’re doing this for the produce, why doesn’t it extend to our spices?”

Spices have long been in an overlooked corner of the local food movement. In some cases, that’s because customers don’t know to look for local spices. In others, it’s because many spices thrive in more tropical, subtropical, or generally more specific ecosystems, which are uncommon in most of the United States.

“There are many common spices for which the climate in the U.S. is not conducive to commercial production, as tropical conditions are required, including black pepper, cinnamon, ginger, turmeric, cloves, et cetera,” said Laura Shumow, executive director of the American Spice Trade Association. “Although it may be possible to grow small quantities of these crops with a lot of care, the environment is simply not suited to growing sufficient quantities to meet the U.S. commercial demand.”

Yet, growers like Scommegna, and others across the U.S. see promise in producing even small amounts of spices. Some do it to help diversify their income streams, while others believe that as consumers become increasingly aware of how their food is grown and produced, they will seek out local spices they can trace back to their origins.





Photo courtesy of Boonville Barn Collective.

Most of the world's spices are grown on smallholder farms, where farmers sell their entire harvest to a middleman who sells the spices to another middleman and so on, until eventually, they make it a large spice brand. Along the way, traceability is often lost. (This is something that companies like Diaspora Co. and Burlap & Barrel are trying to combat with their single sourcing, which also benefits small farmers.)

“When you’re buying directly from a farm in California, it will most likely be more fresh than something you’ve gotten somewhere else, because it hasn’t had to sit in a shipping container to get to the U.S.,” said Scommegna.

At the time Scommegna started working at the Boonville Hotel, they were sourcing much of their chili powders, like Piment d’Espelette, from the Basque region of France. Knowing that they have a similar climate, Scommegna figured she might as well try growing and producing chili powder.

Over the past decade, Scommegna has turned that experiment into the thriving spice company, Boonville Barn Collective, which produces Piment d’Ville (their version of Piment d’Espelette) on a seven-acre farm in a Northern California valley. Boonville Barn Collective has become one of the biggest sources of Piment d’Espelette-style chili powder outside the Basque region.

It’s one of a number of farms in the U.S., including Old Friends Farm in Massachusetts, Peace and Plenty Farm in California, Calabash Gardens in Vermont, Anjali’s Cup in Hawaii, and Southern Escape Vanilla in Florida, showing that the spice trade isn’t just international.

A Small-Scale Specialty Crop

According to the American Spice Trade Association, most dried herbs and spices used

in the commercial spice industry are imported, with only a minor fraction sold directly to consumers cooking at home.

“It is important to recognize that the vast majority of spices are used as ingredients in either restaurant or food-service dishes or in packaged food products. The spices used in these dishes are instrumental to flavor, the overall percentage of spices used in a finished food product is typically very small,” said Shumow. “As such, I suspect that companies wishing to market that their spices are derived from the U.S. may find the greatest demand in the direct-to-consumer market.”

Small farms like Boonville—or even the 30-acre Old Friends Farm in Amherst, Massachusetts—are generally not a part of the spice conversation, as it tends to revolve around bigger brands that import. Yet spices can be an important crop for the right type of farmer.

Casey Steinberg, co-owner of Old Friends Farm, started growing turmeric in her house as an experiment more than 10 years ago and has since turned it into a small, mainstay crop.

“Most of it is sold fresh, but we process some of it into a flavored honey, and some gets dried for spice blends,” Steinberg said. “It’s a very specialty crop, but our goal isn’t exponential growth; it’s doing a small amount really well.”





Turmeric harvest at Old Friends Farm. (Photo courtesy of Old Friends Farm)

Old Friends Farm sells its products primarily wholesale, including to grocery stores throughout the Berkshires, although they do some direct-to-consumer sales through an online marketplace. The income from their spice production is less than 1 percent of the farm's overall income. Still, it has helped them to diversify their offerings on what started as an operation that mainly grew flowers, salad greens, and shiitake mushrooms.

Helping farms pursue diversification is one of the reasons why the North American Center for Saffron Research and Development has held annual saffron workshops since 2017, teaching farmers about developing a market for U.S.-grown saffron.

“Saffron is a viable crop for growers but is particularly suitable for small, diversified farmers,” said Margaret Skinner, a research professor at the University of Vermont, where the North American Center for Saffron Research & Development is based. “Growers in North America are selling their saffron retail for between \$30-75 per gram.”

Saffron is the world's most expensive spice, with high quality saffron going for as much as \$5,000 a pound. In contrast, vanilla, another pricey spice, can sell for up to \$600 per pound. And while it may seem like a New England climate isn't well-suited for spice growing, it was a surprise for Skinner and her research partners when the first saffron they planted in a high

tunnel in 2015 did well, thriving in the cooler climate.

Every week, the center receives inquiries from two or three growers interested in cultivating saffron; most are part-time farmers.

Building the Market for a Local, Traceable Spice

Developing a local market for saffron is a work in progress, Skinner says. “It involves increasing the amount of locally grown saffron available for sale and educating the public” about how to use the spice, she says.

Education has been a big part of building a market for local spices at Boonville Barn Collection and Maryland-based Moon Valley Farm, which grows turmeric and ginger.

“Our society is, unfortunately or not, disconnected from agriculture, so we have to do education around seasonality, what different weather events mean on the farm, what varieties are available, and what different weather years mean for our crop yield and availability,” said Emma Jagoz, owner of Moon Valley.

Boonville has also focused on explaining to people how they can replace the chili powder in their spice drawer with their less common varieties.

“It’s a lot of saying, like, ‘All right, you’re used to using cayenne pepper. Why don’t you try our comapeño chile powder? It has a lot of heat to it, but it has a lot more flavor,’” said Scommegna.

In South Florida, where several farms have begun growing vanilla, they’ve quickly found interest from small food brands and chefs interested in buying local vanilla. Alan Chambers, an assistant professor at the Tropical Research and Education Center in the horticultural sciences department of the University of Florida, is among the area’s vanilla growers, of which he estimates there are about 75.

In 2016, Chambers and the University, which works to help growers stay profitable and efficient while protecting natural resources, started building up a collection of vanilla research for diversity, yield, flavor, and disease resistance. Florida’s climate is already conducive to growing spices, and as they’ve seen fewer cold snaps in recent years, it means as long as there are not major weather events, vanilla is well-suited to grow there.

“Vanilla is a high-value crop in high demand,” he said. “Florida growers can specialize in niche opportunities of higher quality, higher food safety, or leveraging organic CSAs.”

In 2020, Chambers planted 2,000 vanilla plants in partnership with Abraham Smith, a lawyer and part-time farmer who lives in the Redlands area of South Florida, where hobby farms are common. “We want to prove that you can commercially produce vanilla in South Florida,” said Smith.

The vanilla plants in their operation are the furthest along in the region, but they’re not expecting to harvest until 2023. “We have people who have said they’ll buy as much we can produce, but we’re also exploring selling both wholesale and retail,” Smith said.

While they will likely not become part of the global spice trade, Chambers believes that many growers could see value in selling to high-end food service companies and other local buyers such as breweries, bakeries, and chocolatiers.

“An ice cream shop in Miami can say they are using local vanilla, [and] they get the benefit of local sourcing—it resonates with consumers, and it’s a lower volume,” said Chambers.

While Scommegna admits that U.S. farms can’t replace all the ingredients in Americans’ spice racks, she believes that domestic farms can create some flavorful substitutions while teaching people about the importance of supporting local farmers.

“People interested in spending more money at the farmer’s market and having a connection to the farmer that grew the pumpkin outside their house on Halloween, or the tomatoes they’re using in their BLTs—that can extend to spices,” she said.



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