



THE SPICE TRADE



Founder and director of Arabica Food & Spice, James Walters has built his business on our increasing love of unusual ethnic ingredients.

With a passion for travel and adventurous tastes in food, James Walters says he has always been creative in the kitchen and enjoyed *Ready Steady Cook*-style experiments at home, while also working in some of his father's franchised restaurants. But it was later, on his travels in Borneo, that a chance conversation with a stranger on Mount Kinabalu about a new food market in London that would prove to be a turning point in his life. On his return to the UK in 2000, he visited Borough Market and was immediately captivated. 'It just appealed to me. It evoked a nostalgia for traditional shopping, and I loved the energy and vibrancy of a bustling market full of wonderful produce from around the world.'

It was at Borough Market that he met Jordanian-born Jad, who eventually became his partner in Arabica. The pair started selling their products at a number of London markets and even opened Café Arabica – which sadly didn't survive – before expanding their specialist product range from their new production kitchen in Camberwell and securing a concession in Selfridges six years ago.

In 2008, Jad made the decision to retire to

Crete, while James continued to develop the business, giving the branding an overhaul, and more recently opening the new Arabica Bar & Kitchen in Borough Market.

The original product range included key ingredients like za'atar and sumac, preserved lemons and a few classic mezze such as hummus, smoked aubergine and tabouleh, but it now incorporates everything from pomegranate molasses and orange blossom water to pickles, preserves and sweet treats. 'All of our early classics are still our best sellers,' says James. 'But I like to think of myself as more of a trendsetter than a follower. The range has expanded naturally, to ensure we covered the Levantine larder essentials, but I added more as I came across amazing producers on our travels.'

James says that high-profile chefs working with more exotic global flavours have certainly fuelled demand for his products. 'It has definitely helped put these ingredients into the mainstream. When we started it was impossible to find these outside of the ethnic neighbourhoods of London.'

James says Arabica spices are special because they are handmade by small producers who go the extra mile. 'Our

sumac is produced by hand with a giant pestle and mortar and the inner seeds are removed so it's only the bright, full-flavoured outer part of the berries that are used, whereas commercial manufacturers grind the whole berries by machine.' The quality of his products has attracted top-end retailers too, which has given credibility to the brand.

Looking ahead, James has big plans and has just recruited an operations director to run the day-to-day business while he focuses on future ideas. But he still finds time to get creative in the kitchen and says his favourite spices are two of Arabica's most popular products. 'I always have za'atar and sumac to hand. They are the ultimate all-round salad seasonings.'

● Stockists include Marks & Spencer and Selfridges and other UK boutique retailers, or go to www.arabicafoodandspice.com.

TASTE TEST...

3 specialist oils

With so much choice on the market now, why just stick to predictable olive oil? Here we try three very different oils that will enhance your storecupboard and your cooking.

1 Udo's Choice Ultimate Oil Blend

An easy way to top up your levels of omega-3, -6 and -9, this premium organic seed oil can be drizzled over salads, added to juices or whizzed into a fruit smoothie for a nutritional boost.

● £21.99 from www.udoschoice.co.uk



2 Coconoil

Coconut oil is hugely fashionable for all kinds of cooking and baking at the moment, but it's important to choose an ethical brand. Coconoil is picked, pressed and packed at origin, producing fine quality pure organic virgin oil with top-notch social responsibility credentials.

● £9.99 from www.coconoil.co.uk



TURN TO PAGE 88 FOR RECIPES USING COCONUT OIL

3 Kentish cobnut oil

For something a little special for dressing your salads or tossing your stir-fries, try virgin cold-pressed Kentish cobnut oil, a beautifully nutty, UK-produced oil that will appeal to foodies who love to buy local.

● £15.95 for 250ml from www.kentishcobnuts.com

