

Comment

From its Birthplace in Egypt to Marseilles, an Ancient Trade: 'Drugs and Spices'

Francis Laget

The plant trade

Among ancient trades no other could claim to know such a large number of natural products as the 'drugs and spices' business. It can be stated that today no one works at it any longer – at least in its traditional form. I am tempted to think of myself as its living fossil and I shall recall here, happily but not without a certain nostalgia, some memories of its past history.

I entered the business in 1946 in Marseilles; there, 'drugs and spices' was still carried on as a traditional speciality; like the aristocracy, we were somehow aware of being able to date our origins back to the Crusades and probably much earlier. I came into it almost by chance, through various family connections, after studying law and history, which clearly had not prepared me for it. Having entered a profession as one might enter a marriage of convenience, I soon felt happy in it as one might live in a love match. I practised it continuously until I retired in 1982, having spent over 20 years in Marseilles, then in Buis-les-baronnies, where the Ducros Company was expanding, until I took over as chief executive. I would certainly not have planned to retire so early if I had not understood that very soon it would not be possible to carry on doing my job as I wished. There is no doubt that over the centuries Marseilles had been the industry's western centre. And Jews had continued to work in it because of their uninterrupted contact with the Near East. In Paris the trade had been established since the Middle Ages in the area of the present-day 4th *arrondissement*, corresponding to the old and famous 'Domaine du Temple'. As is well known, the Templars had formed inside this vast area a sort of town within a town,

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inhabited by prestigious artisans but also merchants. These took advantage of their patrons' connections with the East . . . and their protection. After the Order was abolished, the 'Domaine du Temple' carried on until the Revolution enjoying the franchises which royal authority had not repealed; so the vestiges of the 'drugs and spices' trade continued there up to the present day.

In 1946 we used to deal mainly (but not exclusively) in plants, several hundreds of plant species, most often dried, from the most varied of origins and in the most different of forms; so we ended up being called 'herbalists', a name that amused us because our job was not to sell our plants to the public, as 'qualified herbalists' did. And we were not botanists; even less chemists or pharmacists, as some people thought. Our status was hard to define. I gained a definite advantage from that: happily growing old in the company of 'Good Herbs' and spices; they have helped give my life a special flavour.

Strangely the trade was carried on only by men trained 'on the job', like all the true trades of old, simply empirically. Only experience and daily contact with the products enabled us to acquire our expertise. The job probably also required a good pinch of intellectual curiosity to become a 'master', and the opportunity to develop a particular form of memory (especially for smells, aromas and tastes) and a good sense of observation. All of them are abilities that helped you recognize the products' organoleptic qualities. This gave us a certain prestige . . . until chemists and their laboratories replaced us in recognizing and measuring them. There was not one day, right up to the day before I retired, when I did not learn something new. It was a blessed occupation where neither routine nor disenchantment were to be feared! We were probably regarded as oddballs or 'primitives' by the professionals we were habitually in contact with, pharmacists or 'qualified' herbalists, but most of all university teachers of 'medical matters'. For instance, those I used to meet in our 'scientific and technical committee'. That august company, which brought together some of the acknowledged figures in our professions, had been formed in the 1970s; I had had the honour of being asked to join it. But it quite often happened that I was able to provide my colleagues on that 'committee' with many pieces of information and knowledge that they lacked and which I had acquired 'on the job' in the course of my long professional experience.

'Drugs and spices'

I think I should begin by giving an idea of the scope of our activities. First we should remember that the word 'drugs' or, better, 'simples' traditionally indicated all the natural substances used in the preparation of medicines. Our work in the 'drugs and spices' business was incredibly wide and varied: apart from the area of the raw materials intended for the chemist's shop, we used to deal with a very large number of plants and miscellaneous material required by other industries (even certain essential oils, though they belonged to a business that was different but very close to ours, which dealt in 'essences').

I can list first of all the 'simples' supplied to pharmaceutical labs, pharmacists and 'genuine' 'qualified' herbalists. We would supply plants (normally dried) and parts

of plants, quite often cut or ground up in our factories. The only thing we were not allowed to do was mix them. Among our customers I could mention most of the big French labs and several European pharmaceutical groups. The best known to the general public were not the biggest; but those that prepared specialities sold for several generations and had made themselves indispensable through intensive advertising. I supplied some of them over several decades with a very wide range of powdered plants for their recipes, which were as jealously guarded as family secrets. Up to the late 1950s the list of plants we dealt in remained the same. It was from the 1960s that a new demand arose for novel, exotic drugs. Some, like the famous Kalahari 'devil's claw' (*harpagophytum*), started to get known and used as they were or simply ground up; for others we had to arrange to have them collected far away at the request of the big German labs. Because of this I made my first trips to central and equatorial Africa and met pygmies. To mention some of those new miracle drugs, there is the skin of rauwolfia root to extract 'reserpine' (the new alkaloid that has revolutionized psychiatric treatment), strophantus seeds for 'ouabain', *voacanga*. I will pass over the others. Soon those big labs, which had started by asking us enthusiastically for raw plant material for extractions, succeeded in synthesizing chemically the key molecule and completely lost interest in the original plant. Thus we can see how fragile are markets that get left behind so quickly.

Associated with 'simples' is the supply of the famous 'five plants' for infusion, which are traditionally freely sold to consumers, though they are still under the pharmacy's control. They were: lime *officinalis* (flowers and bracts), peppermint, fragrant verbena, bitter orange (these last three as dried cleaned leaves) and 'Roman' camomile (flowers). Economically, infusions formed a substantial market. They ended up having a history that was both exemplary and sad. Over the last 30 or 40 years they have been the victim (the word is not too strong) of a long succession of industrial and commercial manipulations.

Next we should mention the plants used by manufacturers of aperitifs and liqueurs. Nowadays it is hard to imagine the past importance of this market in flavoured spirits in all their forms; it has shrunk considerably since alcohol became the target for close inspection. Each province had its recipes and manufacturers, almost as many in France as cheeses. Only a small number survive thanks to the clever way they expanded their clientele into the export market: the best example is the famous Bénédictine.

Then there is the market in aromatic and culinary plants and condiments. We used to deal in:

— Three products grown around Saint-Rémy de Provence: marjoram leaves, basil leaves (the variety 'Grand Vert' required for the famous Provençal *soupe au pistou*), and 'Provence' celery seeds (several hundred tonnes of these three items were exported annually). But these markets eventually disappeared completely. Provence lost them to foreign, initially Egyptian, products; so much so that the three 'typically French' items are no longer grown nowadays in the Saint-Rémy area, whose prosperity was built on them. And they have probably disappeared from local memory too, several decades having elapsed since they were grown.

— Three products picked from Provençal plants: thyme, rosemary and savory (the famous *pebre d'ase* that gives its aroma to the Banon cheeses). These were dried

cleaned leaves only (sorted again later in the well-equipped factories of Marseilles or Carpentras exporters). They were bought as they were from hundreds of local pickers in the majority of the villages in Provence. The most disadvantaged sectors of the rural population made a bit of extra cash from picking. It was in the late 1940s that bit by bit we were left behind and eventually pushed out of the market by our competitors, first the Spaniards (as far as thyme was concerned), then in the main the Yugoslavs and Albanians as regards the two others.

Here we should remember that species used for their aromatic qualities also possess active substances useful in medicine. It is known that thyme is as rich in medicinal properties as it is in culinary uses. It is sought for its bactericidal virtues, which are used topically in some intestinal and bronchial conditions. This multiple use certainly raises an ethno-botanical question, or to put it more simply, one of priority: if we look at sage leaves, for instance, we might wonder whether they began to be used for their pleasant smell when pork was being cooked . . . or with hygiene in mind, after it had been noticed that it prevented discomforts peculiar to eating the meat . . . and then getting accustomed to its particular aroma took over.

To return to a few considerations of taste in relation to the celery seed from Provence, it was without a shadow of a doubt its excellence that justified the size of its export market before the 1950s and 1960s. Its fine flavour could not be compared to the Indian product that was our competitor. The Indian seed was traditionally produced to make an essential oil used by some industries before the Second World War. Between 1939 and 1945 the top user of celery seed in the world, the USA, had lost the taste for the quality of our product when our exports were interrupted. Eventually and sadly we went the same way ourselves over the years. At one and the same time our star crops, thyme, marjoram, basil and celery, more or less dropped out of our Provençal production because of competition from massive exports from third world countries. The low cost of their local labour meant we were shut out of the old traditional markets. *Sic transit gloria mundi*.

But soon unforeseen developments came upon us: in particular, with the introduction of the new 'Herbes de Provence' mix (in the early 1970s), large-scale use of culinary plants was developed on the French market . . . while at the same time, paradoxically, growing herbs for picking was declining to vanishing point, hence the need to replace them by growing systematically, which no one had hitherto imagined.

Returning to the interrupted list of products that were involved in our old work, there were traditionally:

- spices of course, always, whose use eventually saw a great revival;
- an extensive range of products intended to supply the local markets of North Africa and fill the *Souks attarine* from Djerba to Marrakesh. In one of the items alone there was an enormous market, which was then unknown in France: henna leaves from India and Pakistan. There were many others, from varieties of benzoin (the *djaoui* needed by popular cults in North African Islam) to galanga roots, Harmel seeds, orpiment (mineral) . . . and lots of others whose uses in fact lie in the obscure areas of local medicine and magic.

Finally I must mention a large number of items required by various ancient occupations, which I have watched gradually disappearing: vegetable dyes (which came

back for a while in the 1970s), and plants that killed or warded off insects. One of them had an important place: the wood of *quassia amara*. We imported it from Kingston, Jamaica, in enormous tree trunks. The wood is a bit spongy, comparable to our plane trees in the south of France; our factory sawed it up and reduced it down to chips designed to protect fruit trees, especially peach. Huge tonnages of the chips were distributed to the tree-growing cooperatives in the Rhône valley and Roussillon. Their members used to soak them in water filled with soapflakes; they mashed the substance up and put it on the trunks of the fruit trees. It seems that it warded off the 'green peach aphid'. But the quassia went the way of all flesh. I may be the last person who still remembers it. And the plants and flowers of the insecticide Pyrethrum; all of them products that vanished when there came on to the market the indispensable DDT, now of questionable status. But that is another story!

What a lot of other strange products there were in our range! I will just mention the pretty pearl-grey seeds of the 'Job's tears' imported from the Near East for the makers of rosaries . . . And we should not forgo the pleasure of recalling the famous seeds of the *staphis agria* that were responsible for 'the fragrant death of lice'.

I must add to the never-ending list of those plant 'drugs' a few items from the animal kingdom such as Spanish fly and cochineal (I never imported either musk, or the famous *mumie* from Egypt, the dust of ancient mummies used by our medieval ancestors). I have almost forgotten to mention the 'cuttlefish bones' imported from Sfax, and especially the curiosity of a 'Jeweller's quality', used for polishing gold jewellery. Finally, for good measure, we should remember a small number of mineral products (galena, orpiment, certain smectic clays). Clearly a lengthy list.

What has become of the plant trade?

Over my professional lifetime – which was actually a very short period – I witnessed such radical change that it can only be described as a real transformation of the business. I realized this on a visit to Old Cairo organized by one of my Egyptian suppliers: he had had the good idea of taking me to the shop – probably the oldest in the world – belonging to one of our traditional 'colleagues'; there I was able to admire the unimaginable picture of a complete and unchanged range of 'drugs and spices' from the Middle Ages. This was not hundreds but thousands of the most unexpected 'drugs': all the roots, leaves, seeds, all the dried-up creatures, all the stones that China, the Indies, Arabia had been able to supply since Noah to cure humanity's ills. It is true that in fact a large number of them belonged to the domain of popular magic, from crocodile mummy to the medieval *olimeux scarbot*. The full meaning of the anecdote comes home to you when you take into consideration the traditional complementarity of Egypt and Marseilles in our business. That day I was truly presented with the ideal image of our trade in its primitive state. Thinking about it more deeply, I had to admit I did not feel too out of place there; but I had been shown a picture from an old photograph. It was indeed the same business as mine, but at an earlier stage.

It is possible to take full stock of the development of our profession in 'drugs' by studying the successive editions of our bible, *Dorvault*. I have seen a few of the

modern versions of it, from the 1960s for example; they are considerably shorter, having dropped a large number of descriptions of 'drugs' not used in pharmacy. What laboratory was still interested in preparing our ancestors' wondrous *thériaque*? On the other hand those modern editions devoted lengthy, detailed descriptions to techniques arising from atomic energy. The result is that no one uses those 'modern' editions any more, whereas the old editions, full of information on our old 'drugs', are more and more sought after.

In the end what has become of that near-medieval trade over one man's lifetime? The job of the most ordinary 'salesman', controlled by the laboratories and the finance departments of a few multinationals, for whom the spirit of adventure and intellectual curiosity have become suspect.

We were accustomed to doing our job independently: first probably because we were responsible for the quality of the products we dealt in; each of us was the buyer and seller of his products; the trade was an unbroken chain from top to bottom. In the end our effectiveness was judged solely on the year's results. We would decide on our own whether our operations were correct, without referring to anything or anyone but our experience and the knowledge we had acquired. We used to buy and sell 'on samples'; as often as not we would check the identity and quality of shipments from samples taken by our porters on the quayside where the ship docked, most frequently Marseilles. At that time we just had to identify the products as they arrived; it was enough to assess what they were, their appearance, their organoleptic qualities. It was a fairly subjective exercise but one that called for memory, sharp eyes, a good sense of smell and taste. To quote an example, only by tasting can you distinguish Auvergne gentian from Chinese, which no French aperitif manufacturer would use.

Following further refinements to certain products at the production end we were forced to install a monitoring lab. It was in 1973, unless I am mistaken, that we were tricked over the purity of a shipment of saffron from Spain. The deception was so cunning that only a chemist could detect it. Clearly the buyer's knowledge no longer sufficed. It is easy to see how the basis of the profession had been turned upside down when a buyer had to bow to the objective checks of the monitoring lab. In fact the matter needs to be seen in a more general way and at its highest level. At the same time as our business had just lost part of its soul because of the rapid advance of science and technology, the way of life of modern men and women changed. New constraints bore down upon them, bringing a deterioration in their relationship to nature. Whether consciously or not, westerners began to suffer from new deficiencies, which they could counteract only by dreaming of a return to nature.

From the view of plants to a view of nature

The retail trade in medicinal plants and 'drugs' in general was strictly confined to pharmacists from the early 19th century; they kept it under close supervision. By special delegation, items that were known not to be toxic could be distributed by a body of 'qualified herbalists'. The only exceptions to this system were the famous

'five plants for infusions', which we shall come to again later. The regime had remained in force up to the Second World War. Here we should come back to the amazing progress in chemistry over the century and a half that had preceded it and the further advance during the six wartime years. Extremely powerful international-scale laboratories carved out entire empires for themselves by exploiting these discoveries, particularly in synthetic chemistry. It might be thought that they had formed a secret plan to oust plant-based medicine and eventually the actual use of the medicinal plant itself over the short to medium term. Maybe that is why the herbalist qualification was high-handedly withdrawn by the Vichy government in 1941 – a measure probably intended to lay the foundations for the future status of pharmacy.

Although no objective proof has ever been uncovered, it is possible to speculate that powerful influences intervened with the ruling authorities. There is no point in reminding readers that their decisions were made without any need for justification and were final. It was on this basis that pharmacy operated under the Fourth Republic. However, in the course of the 1970s public opinion evolved in an unexpected direction: an attempt had been made to 'throw out everything natural', but it came back, timidly at first but soon with confidence. There appeared publications with names like 'our grandmothers' medicine chest', while healers returned to public favour (witness the fortune Maurice Mességué amassed by singing the praises of natural medicine). At the same time the 'organic' movement was being rolled out, justified by growing concern about the appearance of pesticide residues and the effects of radioactivity.

These new trends were good news for the trade in medicinal plants, which came back in force but almost smuggled in, since the old regulations had not been repealed. Still it was clear that official suppression was being relaxed, given the new public approval. All the same no decision was taken at the top until, almost in a rush, Mme Simone Weil finally signed the last decree of her ministerial term on 13 June 1979. Sale direct to the consumer of 34 plants (reputed to be medicinal but proved to be harmless) was now freely permitted. However, there was still some ambiguity. Discreetly, new unofficial lists widened the scope of the decree. But at the same time it was becoming clear around the turn of the century that in fact the plants themselves had in the end been disregarded just as much as the regulations. Scepticism and anarchy had taken over.

The expansion of the trade in 'plants for infusions' confirmed, to the extremes of the ridiculous and the absurd, the direction of a development that was quite scandalous in the eyes of any thinking observer. We should remember that these plants, which were restricted to five species and strictly defined with regard to their medicinal properties, remained under the control of the pharmaceutical profession. Hospitals still had their *tisanerie*. The food sector had just begun to take an interest in infusions. It rapidly came to have them seen as 'refreshing drinks', thanks to the invention of *infusettes*, those one-person sachets containing plants that new and very sophisticated techniques were managing to chop up finely and rid of dust. The mechanization of infusions came in without a fight. Everybody could prepare their 'ready-made' infusion. But there was a suspicion that now the intrinsic quality of the product, which was invisible inside its filter-paper cover, might be questioned.

However, this was only a first step. The general taste of consumers grew cruder and demanded stronger flavours. Lime *officinalis* with its subtle aroma had already been forced to give up its top spot to fragrant verbena and peppermint; it was not long before Roman camomile and bitter orange slipped out of the range. What was equally serious was that soon a new type of infusion arose that was already much favoured in Germany: various mixtures of fragments of dried apple, rosehip or hibiscus flower (the *karkade* so widespread in Egypt). These mixtures started to become available in the eastern regions of France, which had kept their former German customs in this regard. Strictly speaking, the infusions were sold there only in contravention of the French regulations in force. But they had had their day.

One final denaturing of the initial idea of the infusion eventually became common; it became effective with the appearance on the market of a new type whose plant basis could be reduced almost to nothing. They were prepared by fixing synthetic aromas on a neutral base. Granted they were endowed with attractive names and exotic charms. Our old familiar *tilleul (officinalis) des Baronnies* was definitely no longer in favour. The story needed to be told to show how in the end we 'cut off our noses to spite our faces'.

We still have to discuss the market in spices and flavourings, which by its very nature is also connected with the food business, clearly important economically. To understand the direction of its development it is worthwhile spending a moment on a few sociological considerations. The transition from the old traditional French cuisine, which was lovingly cooked and carefully prepared, to the cuisine we have today is the result of complex factors; these are chiefly the new 'civilization' of leisure and travel, familiarity with exotic cuisine, the arrival of the Algerian French after 1962. And we should not forget the new situation of women, working far from their stoves and forced to use industrially produced preparations.

Now everything conspires to hasten the disappearance of traditional French cooking and create the need for 'food complements'. The new enthusiasm for stronger flavours, even the most brutal spicy tastes, clearly attests to the evolution of present-day tastes and our culinary exoticism. What attracts us now would have been thought an insult to French 'good taste' by our grandparents. For them using chilli was unthinkable, except very occasionally.

Having been a direct witness and even one of the actors, I have personally had a hand in creating the famous mixtures of *herbes de Provence*. They were unknown to my Provençal grandmothers, who used, individually and with discernment, thyme, rosemary and savory gathered in the countryside. The new mixtures did not take long to become the number one product in our range. In terms of quantity they came in second at Ducros after peppers. As the wild plants and the pickers themselves had simultaneously grown few and far between, *herbes de Provence* had to be grown . . . or imported from abroad. So much so that today we have *herbes de Provence* that come from Provence (just as we have a *homo sapiens sapiens*), as opposed to all the ones that no longer do.

We have come to the end of an outline that I intended should be allusive and rapid. There is no doubt that our old idea of the 'drugs and spices' business is nowadays obsolete and anachronistic. The respect that used to be accorded to the products' 'natural' character is no longer the 21st-century's main concern. For a wide

clientele, desire for an 'organic' product and the fear of pesticide residues have become the chief preoccupation. This has probably come about since the majority of our contemporaries have realized what violence our world has done to nature.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

Note

1. We have introduced the phrase 'drugs and spices' to translate the French *drogues et épices*, as it has no direct equivalent in English.