



A SPICE

JOURNEY



Naturally's own Danny Seo treks halfway around the world to learn why Fair Trade spices should matter to all of us. This epic trip to India and Sri Lanka takes the farm-to-table concept to a whole new level.

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I THINK

the question people ask me most often is: "Where do you get story ideas?" The truth is, for all the exotic locations we've traveled for this magazine, sometimes ideas are found in the most mundane places. For example, this feature story started in (drum roll, please)...Anaheim, California.

What Fashion Week in NYC is to *Vogue*, the Natural Products Expo is to *Naturally*. It's my front row look at the newest in nut milks, vitamins and all things healthy and green. And it was here, in a windowless convention center, where an idea turned into a spark that ignited into a journey.

At the Simply Organic booth, where bottles of spices and dried herbs lined the shelves, I chatted with a personable publicist about why certified organic spices matter. (In a nutshell: Simply Organic does not irradiate their product the way conventional spice manufacturers do.) The more questions I asked, the more I learned that Simply Organic's commitment goes beyond organic herbs and spices. It's a mission that supports farmers and communities all over the world. Their efforts wholeheartedly embrace Fair Trade. I concluded that this is a company that's obsessive about two things—their product and their growers. These are people who actually *care*.

It occurred to me that most people don't think twice about spices, me included. We casually sprinkle fresh ground pepper on our salads without really knowing where it's from, how it's grown, or even what it really is. Is pepper from a flower? A mineral? So before the next grind of a pepper mill, it's decided: I'll use my magazine as a platform for discovery about Fair Trade and organic spices. And in a few short months, off we went on a spice journey!



The open-fire woks heat up whole herbs and spices before they are ground into custom spice blends.

DAY 1

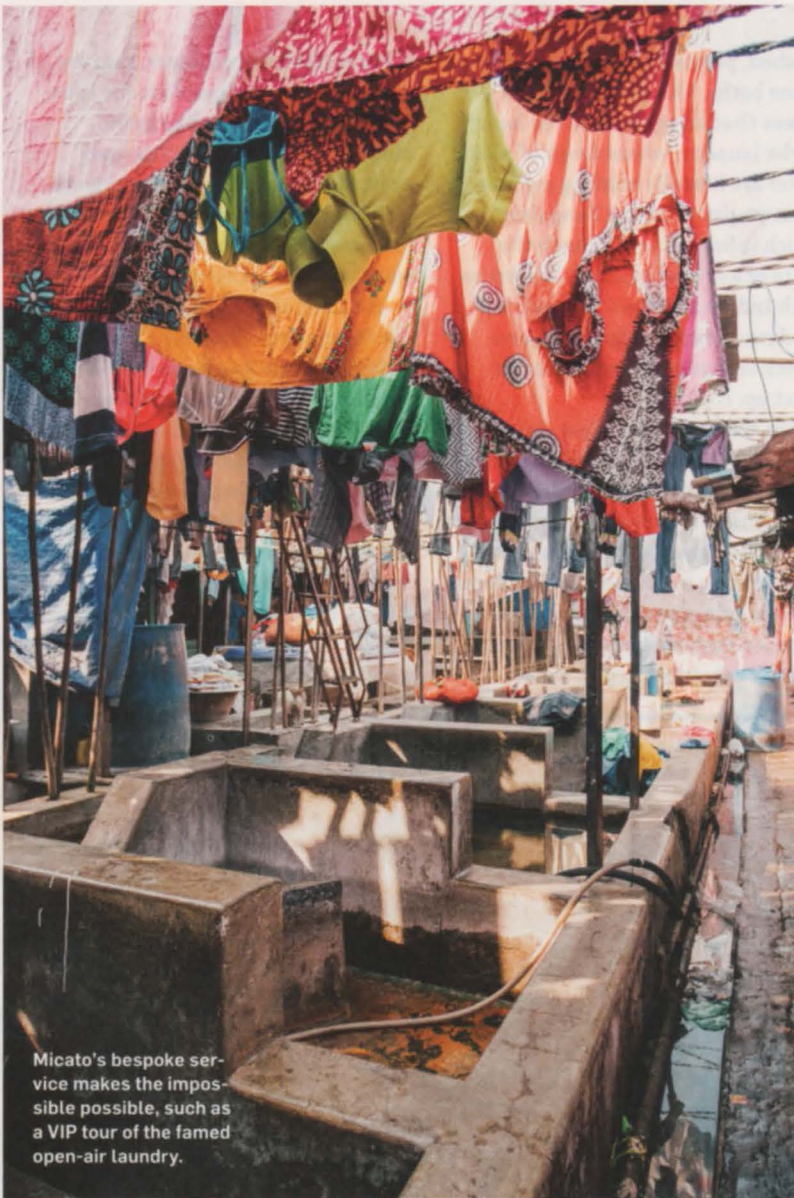
MUMBAI

I'm not going to lie: Flying business class on Emirates Airlines is absolute luxury. If you saw the movie *Sex and the City: 2*, it's that type of plane. There is a *shower* on the plane. Cozy seats magically convert to luxurious beds as LED lights overhead mimic sparkling stars. There is even a bar in the back of the plane to shake up a martini or pour a glass of Veuve Clicquot bubbly whenever you want it. Flying to India this way is like a mini vacation. I honestly get the best nine-hour snooze of my life.

When I arrive in Mumbai, a bustling, buzzing city of 12 million people in Southern India, it is crowded. *Packed*. And Hot. All I want to do is shower, change and eat.

I'm met at the airport by Micato India, which has the ranking and reputation as the world's best safari outfitter. I think they are much more than that: they're more like exceptional custom tour operators. I'm not here to stalk big game, but spices. We're here to see, smell, touch, taste...heck, harvest!... them. And Micato totally gets that.

As we make it into the heart of Mumbai, we check into the ultra-luxe and modern Oberoi hotel. After a quick dinner we're off to kick the last remnants of jetlag away. Tomorrow, we're going to do some serious cooking and if you like spice, there is no cuisine like Indian to pleasure your palette.



Micato's bespoke service makes the impossible possible, such as a VIP tour of the famed open-air laundry.



DAY 2

BACK TO SCHOOL

Today, it's a morning of sightseeing through the streets of Mumbai. My usually jam-packed Filofax (yes, I still organize my days by paper!) has just two words scrawled on today's entry: shopping and cooking.

The morning kicks off with a train ride through town, where we visit the famous Dhobi Ghat, an open-air laundry where textiles are still

washed, pressed and cleaned in large stone baths. **Micato gives us the VIP access that brings us into the heart of the laundry, where drops of soapy water are literally misting my face.**

Then we pay a visit to Bungalow 8, which is housed underneath the seats of a cricket stadium and brims with Indian antiques, artwork and modern Indian-designed apparel. Check shopping off my to-do list. Next up: cooking!

On the way to our class, we pause to see a man elegantly tossing dried chilies and spices up into the air from a cast iron wok. The air is pungently perfumed and it's loud: there are grinding machines turning these roasted mixes into fine powders. Here, customers bring the instructions for their own spice blends,

often scribbled onto paper, that are fire-roasted and ground on the spot. Think of it like an Italian grandmother's secret marinara recipe; everyone uses the same ingredients, but there's no way of really knowing the exact proportions. A few more whiffs and it's off to the Oberoi!

We meet up with Nayna Nanjee, the Senior Sous Chef and Chef de Cuisine at Ziya Restaurant inside the Oberoi. If you want to experience Indian food from a modern perspective, this is the place to try it.

Nayna is cooking up a storm, sharing tips and techniques for using spices in liberal amounts. This is more like a magic show than a master class. These mouth-watering curries and stews will become a dinner that I will never forget.



Chef Nayna
Najee prepares
fresh curries
at Mumbai's
luxurious
Oberoi hotel.



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DAY 3

OFF TO COCHIN

It's time to leave the hustle and explore the rural countryside. A short flight to Cochin finds us in paradise. Our base camp is the luxurious Kumarakom Lake Resort. When you enter, you have what Oprah calls a JDM: Jaw. Dropping. Moment. It's Heaven on Earth.

Yes, the individual bungalows are luxuriously nice. But we opt for boat living aboard ornate floating houseboats called kettuvallams, which will serve as our mode of transport for meals, for sightseeing and for the occasional napping. A stressed-out magazine editor can get used to this.

Tonight, we acclimate by floating through the lake and down channels to see how the locals live. Then we savor freshly cooked seafood made right on the boat's kitchen. J.D.M.

DAY 4

SPICE FARM

It's a three-hour drive each way, but today's journey is why we came this far. **Our Micato guide Muneer Suri, who has taken celebrities and royalty on bespoke tours, admits that even he is curious about today.** We're going to see where peppercorns and other spices are grown and harvested.

Simply Organic works with non-profit organizations all over the world to help them fulfill their mission of implementing Fair Trade wherever they do business. One of their partners here is the Peermade Development Society, a nonprofit organization founded in 1980 that aims for "the sustainable development of the tribals, rural poor, marginal farmers, women and children" through development activities centered around organic farming.

For a guy who never really thought about black pepper, I'm fascinated by what the day will hold.

Twisting and turning up mountain roads, we end up at a small farm, one of the many that produce everything from spices for Simply Organic to sap from rubber trees that becomes latex mattresses. The peppercorn farm is in the heart of a forest. Come to find out, peppercorns are vines that twist and turn up the trunks of trees.

And here's where I have my a-ha moment: Simply Organic buys organic peppercorns. These vines need trees, which prevents deforestation. The higher price paid for a better product gives growers a financial incentive to grow responsibly and organically. It's all about connecting the dots. Yes, buying organic means paying about a dollar more at the store, but when you see what your extra buck provides for people, communities and the environment halfway around the world, you realize what you are really paying for.

From farm to factory, we get a rare

look into how Simply Organic processes their spices. Seth Petchers is Simply Organic's Sustainable Supply Chain Manager and he's the go-between guy for everyone. Spice grinding isn't anything too complicated to watch, but it's hyper clean. We are scrubbed down and covered up as if we were entering a pharma factory. Cleanliness is next to Godliness, right? Raw spices and herbs are sorted by hand and then ground into a beautiful fine powder. Today, turmeric is being processed, creating a deliciously pungent orange dust that floats through the air. To me this VIP access feels like being backstage at a rock show. I'm loving it.

Meet Seth Petchers of Simply Organic.

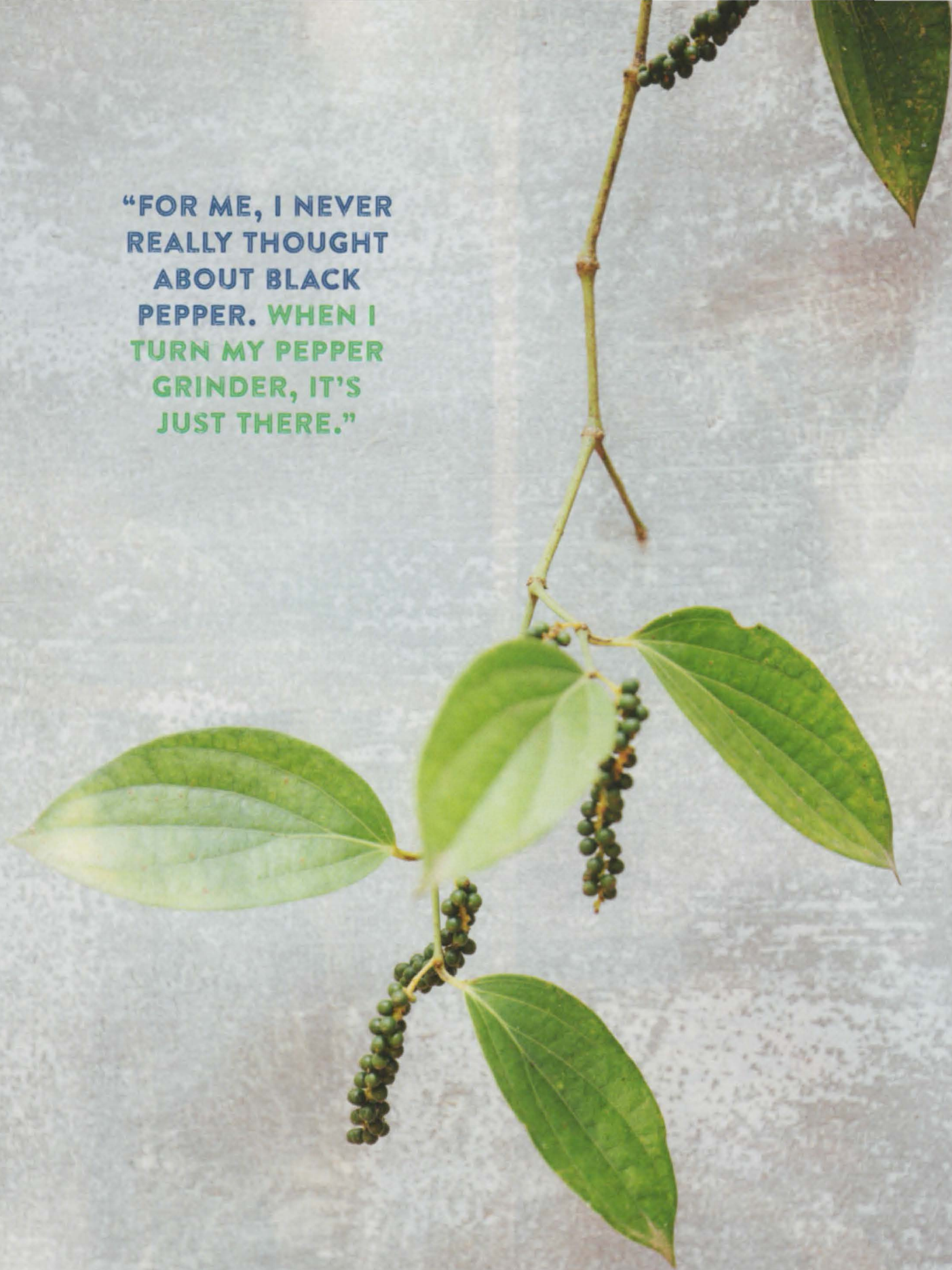


Simply Organic's factory is nearly pharmaceutical grade in how they treat raw herbs and spices.





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DAY 5-7

SRI LANKA

To conclude our journey, we take a quick flight to the small island country of Sri Lanka to savor more flavors, sights and sounds.

It's even hotter here, but tropical temperatures are more than tolerable at the Anantara Peace Haven Resort. Gorgeous is an understatement. The details and level of service here is indescribable. I'll give you one example: There's hotel soap and then *there's hotel soap*. Here, scrubby bar soaps in the bathroom come in your choice of Cedarwood or Vetiver. They feel so good when you use them you it's as if your skin is having a reawakening. I literally stash unused bars in my bag every night before dinner in the hope they replenish them at turndown. They do!

In Tangalle, we head to the local farmer's market to pick up ingredients for lunch. Freshly caught fish line wooden tables. Stalls carry exotic (and colorful) fruits and veggies that leave me clueless on what they are, not to mention what to do with them! It's like living inside an Instagram filter. But fortunately the hotel's Spice Spoons class will show us how to cook with the items that are now flowing over our grocery bags, and teach us why they are important to Sri Lankan cuisine.

At the end of my journey, I pack up my spice-filled suitcase and think about the quote "variety is the spice of life." After meeting the growers, the workers and the people who care enough to bring Fair Trade practices halfway around the world, I think a more fitting phrase would be: Spice... is....life.

Sri Lanka's famous stilt fishers waiting for a fresh catch.



Enjoy a breathtaking view from Anantara's Peace Haven Resort.

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