



## 5 Tips for Buying Spices

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**A rich world of high-quality spices and seasonings abound in specialty foods. Knowing how to find them—and avoid missteps—will be a boon for your business.**

**By Anneliese Klainbaum**

For retailers and chefs, sourcing the right products can mean the difference between boom and bust when it comes to meeting customer expectations. Sourcing spices is no exception. Stylish branding and smart packaging aside, it's important to remember that spices—like meat and produce—are a commodity that should be purchased with great care.

Here, chefs, retailers, and other industry experts share their insights for buying high-quality spices.

### **1. Reputation Matters**

The spice industry is a complex business that can be daunting even for a knowledgeable buyer. That's why word of mouth is paramount when selecting a supplier or distributor.

"Sourcing a spice vendor is about creating a collaborative partnership," says chef Rob Corliss, founder of [ATE](#), a culinary consultancy. "Selecting one vendor over another comes down to relationships. If quality, pricing, or products between vendors is equal, then whom you choose comes down to how their company values connect with your values."

Corliss looks for a range of qualities when selecting companies, including a longstanding reputation, established expertise, sustainable sourcing practices, and staff responsiveness.

## 2. Safety and Handling First

Imported spices were under fire last fall when the Food and Drug Administration found they were a potent source of [salmonella poisoning](#), with 7 percent of lots examined showing contamination—a higher incidence than any other imported food category.

Cheryl Deem, executive director of the [American Spice Trade Association](#) says it's important to remember that spices are agricultural products with potential risk for pathogenic contamination.

"Many spices are grown in developing countries where sanitation and food handling practices may not be adequate," she explains. "In addition, all agricultural products, such as spices, are commonly exposed to dust, dirt, insects, and animal waste before harvest, and there are other opportunities for the introduction of pathogens throughout the supply chain."

To avoid inadvertently offering shoppers a substandard product, buyers should ask suppliers how the spices have been treated for microbial reduction and how they've been handled and stored—from farm to bottle.

## 3. Know Your Source

Chris Breijak, grocery manager at [Arbor Farms Market](#) in Ann Arbor, Mich., carries a combination of bulk and bottled spices to meet customer demands. Organic offerings are a must at this market, and he says that customers now pay close attention to product origin, as well. Breijak buys primarily from [Frontier Co-op](#), a supplier that provides specification sheets for each spice and herb.

Frontier's procurement team visits nearly 50 suppliers from around the world to ensure high quality for buyers like Arbor Farms. "That sourcing strategy translates into a unique opportunity to influence agriculture, sustainability, and human rights in positive way," says Anne Rierison, Frontier's public relations manager. "Being close to the source gives us intimate knowledge; this is extremely important, especially in terms of quality of the spices we procure."

While there's no "right" answer, inquiring about where and how the spices are sourced—brokers, importers, or directly from farmers—and whether they are kosher or organic certified helps to determine overall quality and authenticity.

## 4. Taste and Test

"Freshness is important to start, but it won't matter if you're not going to use the spices the right way, says chef Jehangir Mehta. He uses loads of spices like turmeric and coriander seed in his Indian-accented menu at Graffiti restaurant in New York City, and insists on buying them whole, toasting them briefly, and grinding them as needed for the freshest flavor.

For restaurant chefs like Mehta, asking for samples to taste and cook with is crucial to making a final vendor selection. "Spices are like wine," he says. "You can judge them just by smelling them."

## 5. Shop Around, then Build Relationships

Rack displays, informative catalogs, and knowledgeable vendors who are willing to train your staff can go a long way when choosing a spice purveyor for your restaurant or store. Still, it's unlikely one vendor will fill all of your spice needs.

ATE's Corliss relies on Frontier Co-op for everyday needs, and also purchases from several specialty companies like Vanns Spices, SaltWorks, and Red Monkey Foods. Mehta uses New York City-based La Boîte for high-end spices and blends, visits spice houses in India when he travels, and also buys locally from Kalustyan's, an ethnic market.

For A-list restaurant chefs like David Kinch of Manresa, developing a relationship with a boutique spice blender such as Jing Tio of Le Sanctuaire can give you access to unique blends and unusual spices that will appeal to discerning audiences. Your own brand and customer will dictate what specialty vendors you may want to consider for rounding out your collection.