

# A Very Modern Spice Merchant

*Published 10 May 2021, with Arun Kapil.*

Midleton, in County Cork in Ireland, is not the kind of place where you would expect to find the headquarters of a growing global spice merchant. The farmers market in nearby Cork is where Arun Kapil and his wife Olive first started selling spices. Since then the company Green Saffron has grown steadily, drawing on Arun's love of spices and family connections in India. But why Green Saffron?

**Arun:** Well, it's actually a name that my mother came up with when I was starting up the company. Saffron is my favourite spice, and it implies a certain premium quality, you might say. And green, because I'm now living in Ireland, and we're all about biodiversity and sustainability and all those things. Green Saffron just seemed to make sense. It's a bit quirky because just like you've asked the question, Jeremy, why Green Saffron? It picks up people's attention as well. Do you know what I mean? So Green Saffron.

**Jeremy:** Yes. Sure. Okay. That makes sense. How did it all start then?

**Arun:** Gosh, all started from a farmers' market stall in Mahon Point in County Cork. I came to Ireland and did a cookery course here in Ballymaloe. I went up to work at the House under the most fantastic woman in the world, Myrtle Allen, Mrs. Allen. I had a fantastic relationship with her. I was so blessed to get to know her like I did. We got on like a house on fire. Anyway, I was working as a cook up at Ballymaloe House. Then, in January-February, they tend to let, or used to let, the chefs go because the work was not there, but because I had just moved all my chattels et cetera over from the UK to Ireland, she took pity on me and said, "Well, Arun, you can come and help me with my book." I began to help her with her local good food producers of Cork. That got me into the whole artisan food culture, you might say. That was a fantastic thing. Then a friend started up a farmers' market.

Initially, I didn't really have any thought about doing anything. I go, "I'm not Irish. I don't have a ... " Anyway, the long and the short of it is I called my cousin, or called my father. My father put me in touch with

my cousin, and I received a little 15-kilo package of spices from India. Then that's how it all kicked off, really.

**Jeremy:** I think we should perhaps explain because, of course, you sound completely English even though you're in Ireland. Your family is from India?

**Arun:** Yes, correct, exactly that. My dad was Indian. He was a doctor. We were based in Scunthorpe. I grew up in Scunthorpe. My mom was Yorkshire, not English, but Yorkshire. She was a nurse, an SRN in Leicester. She met up with dad in the '60s when dad came over as a doctor. They were doctors and nurses, and I am one of three boys. I'm the middle son. Yes.

**Jeremy:** Right. You had cousins who could send you spices direct from India?

**Arun:** Yes. That was a beautiful thing, Jeremy, because having just done this course at Ballymaloe, which is teaching you all about how to source the best produce and to think about biodiversity and bioculture and all these sort of things, this is buzzing in my mind. Then to find out that one of your family is actually linked with the spice trade was just a phenomenal thing.

**Jeremy:** Okay. Your cousin was already in the spice trade?

**Arun:** Yes. No. On the periphery, because everyone's got a cousin that can do something in India if you have Indian heritage. But yes, he was on the periphery. What we managed to do, we started off with this small package. We started by buying in the local stores in Uttar Pradesh. Within a year, we were back to mandis. Now, mandis are the farmers' markets, whereby the farmers come with the *rabi* or the *khari* crops, so either the winter or the spring crops, to a certain location in their district. That's when they buy and sell and trade their spices.

Within three years, we're actually back to farm, and only thanks to my cultural heritage, because I know I'm very fortunate, the family over there, because the introductions that we got made.

**Jeremy:** We're going to come on to Green Saffron today, but from your early days in the farmers' market, how did you see things

changing among the people you were selling to? Were they completely familiar with what you were offering?

**Arun:** There I was, like this Del Boy, essentially, in an Irish farmers' market. The lot of them would just stand there with their arms folded and looking almost a bit, "God, what am I doing here?" I was quite the opposite. I was wearing a pink sarong. We had these beautiful smells. We had music playing. It attracted people. I think we attracted an Irish audience because they were, "Well, what's that chap over there doing? Let's go and have a look at him."

I think the reason that it kicked off in the way that it did is there was an appreciation here in Ireland of someone having a go and someone trying. There's a real Irish spirit to nurture something. I think that gave us certainly the head start. What I noticed that the stall, to come to your point, which was fantastic, is — more and more families would start to come. In Ireland, it works. The brother, the sister, the uncle, the mother, the aunt, they all start to chat. We got more and more families coming to our stall.

To me, possibly, more importantly, is the mothers that would be returning, the parents that would be returning, or the fathers that would be returning, would say, "Oh, crikey, my children, I could never get them to eat anything, but now with your Karnataka spice blend, for example, a mild curry blend, they're eating everything off the plate. We love it."

To hear that was just fantastic because here I am selling spices, which were clearly quite foreign to the local market back 15 years ago. To hear that the children are experimenting and the parents are seeing the joy on the children's faces, it was just phenomenal. That's how it started.

Then what happened, when I was at the stall, I didn't understand the phrase because some people would be coming to me cautiously and say, "Well, is it strong?"

"How do you mean strong?"

Strong they meant, is it hot? There was always this reticence about spices equal heat. I was all about, "No. Spices are all about beautiful, vibrant, fresh flavour." Now, there seems to be, as spices are becoming more ingrained in Irish society, people are starting to

understand that actually a bit of heat is quite nice too. I'm surprised to see the switch from this 15 years ago, "Oh gosh, what is this thing?" To now, "Oh, yes. Can I have the jalfrezi? Can I have the this? Can I have the that?"

There's a lot more knowledge, number one, and certainly a lot more willingness to experiment with different flavours.

**Jeremy:** This idea that spicy equals strong equals heat, you've had to work to dispel that idea, I guess?

**Arun:** Why would anyone ... ? Look, as I keep saying, I'm very fortunate. I grew up with spices, but in Ireland, in the UK, in wherever, you don't necessarily grow up with spices. To me, when I saw my father with all his little dubbah tins making the chana masala or whatever, he'll be making, all these little teaspoons of these coloured powders popping into the pan. That's how I grew up. To me, spices were about these really beautiful flavours and layering up flavours.

I was already very fortunate. Again, I'm 51, 52 now. To understand, to layer up the flavours through spicing is a whole different way of cooking. It's how I grew up. Spices to me are all about beautiful natural flavour. To me, they're the essence of gorgeous natural flavour. The plumper, the fatter, the more volatile oils, the better they're going to be. Yes, about flavour and not heat. Debunking that myth is an ongoing mission, but it's certainly something that I realised at an early start in the business that would be our journey.

**Jeremy:** It's interesting that you talk about your personal history with spices and also because you're sourcing direct from the farms and everything, you've got the history of the individual spices. I've seen a few places in the United States that make a point about where they get their spices from, but by and large, for most people, spices are just a thing. They don't have a history. They're just there on the shelf.

**Arun:** This was a bizarre thing, indeed. It wasn't actually until 2014, my book was published Pavilion, maybe look at how I create spices and maybe look at how I see spices. It wasn't really until then that I started to understand that, like you're saying, the different ways that people look at things. My thoughts, as indeed as I wrote it down, is that, Well, hang on. Why do people put so much emphasis onto cacao

and onto coffee beans and onto chicken and onto carrots and potatoes?

As indeed there should be, I believe. I absolutely believe you should understand the provenance of your ingredients and the husbandry of the meat and that matters, and the pastures that the animals are grazing on. To me, that's so important just personally. I was thinking, "Well, why isn't it with spice? If spice is the fundament of flavours I believe it is, why do we just cast it aside?"

Then you jump forward into 2016. It wasn't until the very unfortunate cumin incident whereby finally the fraudulent activity in the spice trade was becoming known, the anaphylactic shock caused through peanut shells being crushed and put into ground cumin. It wasn't then until 2016 that BRC, British Retail Consortium, had to start putting down various regulations. Perception of spice is so very varied. To me, that's why, number one, I find it such an exciting industry to be in. It's never going to be staid.

**Jeremy:** Does that mean that your spices are more expensive?

**Arun:** We've worked very hard for that. Initially, I would have to say, yes. Because clearly, I'm not one of the big players, Kerry, McCormick, all these big companies, British Pepper and Spice. I wasn't buying the volume until very recently. If you speak to my financial controller, they might have a different opinion of what I'm about to say, but I wanted to take the journey less trodden so that I understood it from the ground up. It's like with everything I've done in business, I believe if you don't get your hands dirty, how can you possibly understand how it works and therefore run your business efficiently?

It's exactly the same with sourcing the spices. As I've mentioned, having just done a course here in Ireland, it was all about ingredients and finding the best. Yes, we were more expensive initially. Indeed, don't get me wrong, there is a certain premium now for the sustainability, for the IPM because to prove these things is driven by accreditation, certification, paperwork, et cetera, and that has a certain cost to it. We are commodity based price now for seven of our core spices.

That's my journey, to be able to offer what I consider to be the most beautiful ingredient, food commodity, to everybody, to make that — which I see to be such a bright and beautiful and vibrant thing —

available to everybody. I'm not here to be elitist, or to say you can have that and you can't have this and dah, dah, dah. I want our gorgeous spices to be available to everybody because when I eat our spices, I go, "Wow, they're just amazing." It's a commodity trade, so I have to build up volume.

**Jeremy:** Also, to be perfectly honest, if you're putting three teaspoonfuls of cumin into a dish, what does it matter if it costs a little bit more? That's my attitude.

**Arun:** Absolutely, you're correct. You know yourself, I would always with respect say to the chefs that I talk to, for example, with mace and black pepper, a friend, Fingal Ferguson Gubbeen Meat, he was using 60% less mace and 40% less black pepper when he was using our spices because they are full of these vibrant terpenes and polyphenols, the volatile oils. Cost in use worked out to be roughly the same. Do you know what I mean?

**Jeremy:** That's interesting because my next question was going to be about freshness because, again, a lot of people, they buy their spices and they use their spices, sure, but how long has it been sitting at the back of a shelf, either in the store or indeed in your pantry?

**Arun:** I remember the first, the first-ever interview I did with a friend and met Sheila Dillon, and it was on her Food Programme.

**Jeremy:** Oh, yes.

**Arun:** That's when I first said, "fresh spice." She asked me the question, "What do you mean by fresh spice, Arun?" I explained what I mean. People don't understand. But, hang on. Isn't it a spice? It's winnowed, it's dried, it's cured. How do you get the sugars or the volatile oils? It's not like you pick a spice off a plant or a bush or a tree or whatever, and then eat it. No. What we've done as Green Saffron is to describe a list of protocols, which to us, equals fresh spice, so including the provenance, the new season's crop.

In essence, a fresh spice means more than just grinding it. Yet, look, I totally believe you should grind fresh because at least that way as you have a bigger surface area, it's going to ... it's more volatile oil, so it'll smell fresher. Similarly, it'll also degrade over a quicker period of time, once it's ground.

Grinding a spice is fresh, but to me, fresh spice means sourced with love and care, making sure that it comes from a sustainable background and more importantly, from an absolute freshness point of view, making sure that the cultivation about that spice has been for nothing more than to make that spice the best it can be, i.e, maximising the volatile oils because it's grown in the right way, it's been nurtured the right way with the water, with this, that and the other, to produce something for that year, and eaten within that year, within that season. Next season comes around, it's fresh again.

**Jeremy:** Should I be buying my spices fresh every year?

**Arun:** You see, ideally ... Now again, the conventional practices are such that, it's commodity trading. It could be stored for up to three years in a warehouse, and then two years in a warehouse, and then when the price is right, that spice company will release it into the retail world and all of a sudden ... It could be three years old before you even start. This is again, part of the disruption. The challenge, a position that Green Saffron is trying to take is, how do we disrupt that supply chain? The answer is slowly, slowly, catchy monkey.

I suppose in essence with spices, and rather than sounding so pontificating all this madness, in essence, it's airtight, out of the light, little and often. I would always say you don't need to store your spices in a fridge. They can just go into your press or in your cupboard as long as not above the cooker. Little and often, airtight and out of the light is the best thing, Jeremy.

**Jeremy:** This is partly a personal question, but it's also about business. How much do you sell into Europe?

**Arun:** Cool. We've just started. We've just opened up. We've now split our business into three pillars. Pillars one, two, and three. The third pillar is our commodities piece. We can say on your show here, this is the first time we're announcing it to public, that we've four weeks ago opened up a brand new spice hub, the European Spice Hub in Holland. Whereby we now ship spices direct from India into our Dutch warehouse, and we're going to start trading there. Our journey is to be the European shop front window to Indian fresh spice from a business commodity perspective.

We're forecasting 12 containers this year, 12 containers. You could say, in a container anywhere between 12 to 16 tonnes. We're looking to be doing around 200 tons this year of whole spice.

**Jeremy:** Is that as a commodity trader, or is that going into retail?

**Arun:** That's as a commodity trader. We would then sell that to an onward processor, someone in an ingredients company that might mix it to make a ready meal, they might mix it to make a spice blend. With Green Saffron, we have that commodity trade piece. Then we also have the brand, so whereby with my brand, we sell sauces and sachets. It's 100% natural sauces to make curries or indeed, sachets to make a curry. The brand proposition is that we have linear line of sight right back to farm of where those spices, the essence of an Indian meal, have come from.

It's great to be in the commodity trade business because that can then fuel our brand. Our brand is therefore, I know everything that's going into my spice is my brand, and where it's coming from. We have absolute chain of custody, provenance around our spices.

**Jeremy:** Has Brexit been a problem? I noticed that you're opening this hub in the Netherlands.

**Arun:** Jeremy again, I honestly thought — and I suppose most of us did — I always used to say last year, "The trade will win." In other words, if you want to stay in business, you're going to have to find a way to make it work. I didn't honestly, and I don't think I'm the only person, I did not anticipate the mess that it was going to create. I thought we were going to be relatively ... get away with it, you might say, quite likely, because of the way that we've built our supply chain. I was so wrong. What do I mean by that?

Because we have a place in the UK that makes naan breads and we supply those into Europe. We just did a little trial on two pallets. It took those two pallets six weeks to get going because of all the paperwork. This is back in January. That was disrupted. That's now balancing out a little. Then what we do, we produce our branded sauces in Malta. We had a consolidating partner in the UK. They'll get shipped into Felixstowe. Then from Felixstowe, they would go onward. Clearly, we have to change that. Now they get shipped direct into Ireland.



Yes, is a quick answer. It was extremely disruptive. I was really clinging on with my fingernails to the goodwill of the retailers, that they would keep us on their shelf, even though their shelves are becoming bare because my product wasn't available. It was a flipping nightmare, if I'm honest with you, Jeremy, for a small company particularly.

**Jeremy:** Well, you say small company, but with big ambitions?

**Arun:** Yes. Everyone has ambitions, Jeremy, I'm fortunate that I've got a really good support network. We've got very good backing with our board. I'm plugged into some fantastic companies. What I always say with our business model is that we know how to source the best spices in India, and I believe we make the best products available on retail, and I can hand on my heart say that they are 100% natural. There's nothing like them in the marketplace.

All the stuff in the middle, I don't understand, Jeremy. I don't know how to warehouse or to demand plan or to move containers around the world. There are so many experts out there that do know that. By collaborating together and by working through a collaborative business model, that's the key, certainly to Green Saffron, anyway.

**Jeremy:** What about lifting your eyes beyond India? Clearly, India's a natural for you because you do have family and contacts there. What about ... Oh, I don't know. Thai spicing or Japanese spicing or Chinese spicing?

**Arun:** Exactly. I do create those blends because when I first started, I was like a mad scientist for the first couple of years, two or three years. I've now got 522 blends, so be it for scallops, be it for ...

**Jeremy:** What?

**Arun:** This is what I did. That's why the Americans love what I do, and a lot of chefs. I'm very fortunate. I work with some fantastic Michelin and all sorts of star chefs around the world actually, because I come up with blends that others don't necessarily. I could go on about the whole theory of life but in essence I come up with blends that others don't. Again, it comes down to the freshness of the spice, because the spices that I'm having are probably more like they were back in the 1700s, 1600s when they were originally being traded, because they are so very fresh. So I was coming up with these blends, and I still do for bespoke projects.

And to bring out the nuance of whatever the protein or the vegetable is that I'm working with, I consider base, mid, and high notes. I consider each spice to have a characteristic. For example, I think black cardamon, I always see that as a Gauloise-smoking sort of gravelly-voiced jazz singer in France, in some Parisian bar somewhere, because of its sort of lovely camphor smoky menthol notes. Anyway, I play characteristics and base, mid, high notes, and understand the science a little bit so I create unique blends. That's where I find my fun and that's why I have the real passion for creating blends around spices. But as I've just mentioned, that I do get my kicks coming up with other blends.

I don't see spices as purely Indian. I see Indian spices as beautiful flavour elements, flavour bombs, delicious things. From a business perspective, why India? Because when you get into any business, and how do I say this diplomatically, you soon discover the underbelly and at least with having an Indian heritage, an Indian background and an Indian family, I know that we can be more protective around our product to know that what we're saying we are delivering, we are indeed delivering.

Now, I'm not casting any aspersions but just that's how I tend to work because I understand how India works. Vietnam, Guatemala, Brazil, all these beautiful places, I need to have more scale and become more meaningful so that I can therefore be more sure that whatever we were to source in another country, would be done with the integrity that we would need it to be, I suppose, is what I'm saying.

**Jeremy:** A final question for you, Arun. Tell me, what's one thing that you know, that I probably don't know, that would really improve my use of spices?

**Arun:** When we're first of all learning about spices, Jeremy, we're told that we should roast or toast or fry our spices, why are we told that Jeremy?

**Jeremy:** It brings out the flavour but what that means, I don't know.

**Arun:** Good man yourself, perfect. What does it mean to bring out the flavour of something? I would question that. No. Why are we told to roast, and toast, and fry our spices? Just like you said because it brings out the flavour. Well, hang on a minute, if you've got something

vibrant, fresh and delicious, what do you mean you have to do something to it to bring out its flavour? I disagree with that.

What you're actually doing, you're changing the chemical composition of the spice when you're heating it. In my common parlance, I say you're compressing all those base, mid, and high notes into the middle and therefore you're getting a more toasted, smoky rounded flavour, which is fantastic for various dishes.

It's not necessarily what you want for every dish that you cook. To say the one question, what's the one piece of advice when working with spices is just to be more open to your own senses, as opposed to necessarily following rules. When we're told to roast and toast and fry our spices, I totally agree with that for things like lentil dishes, for taco dishes, for legs of lamb, but sometimes you want to try and capture all those beautiful flavours and aromas you're getting with the raw spice, you want to capture that in your dish. So you don't necessarily need to be roasting, toasting and frying.

Transcripts are possible thanks to the generosity of Eat This Podcast supporters. If you find the transcript useful, please [consider joining them](#).