



# Ras el Hanout:

## *The Search for Morocco's Secret Spice Blend*

BY ANDREA LYNN & KATE MULCRONE

**While many tourists are baffled by the labyrinthine streets of Marrakech and Fès, the true mysteries of Morocco are found in its pantries. Right next to jars of cinnamon, cumin and dried ginger root, you'll find ras el hanout, a blend of anywhere from 10 to 100 spices that is the carefully guarded secret behind any Moroccan cook's reputation. Ask as politely as you want, but Morocco's famous hospitality does not extend to revealing the spices or proportions contained in this legendary spice blend.**

Ras el hanout became an obsession of ours on a recent trip through Morocco. Translated as "top of the shop," each store makes its own secret blend of ingredients. The seasoning, also referred to as the lazy wife's spice, is used for practically everything—to flavor meat in stewlike tagines, to add piquancy to couscous or even to perk up

fruit-filled desserts. There's simply nothing comparable to it in the United States, and for that reason a bag of ras el hanout struck us as the perfect souvenir of Morocco as well as a real challenge for any spice hound. "What the heck is in this stuff?" we wondered.

Determined to crack the case of this mystery spice, we bought a bag of it in Marrakech from a market stall

near Jemaa el Fna, the largest square in Africa. Its 35 spices were ground to a pleasing but ultimately baffling terra-cotta colored powder. There was no hope of naming more than the top notes of cinnamon, cumin and allspice. This was a rookie mistake. How can you determine the blend after it's all ground? Not to be deterred, the next day we bought a



Photos courtesy of La Maison Arabe



*At dusk, Marrakech's marketplace Jemaa el Fna, the largest square in Africa, is a spice lover's paradise.*



### **Buying Ras el Hanout:**

Buy it ground or purchase it whole and grind it yourself for fresher results.

*kalustyans.com  
seasonedpioneers.co.uk  
thespicehouse.com  
wholespice.com  
store.zamourispices.com*

bag of unground ras el hanout at a stall in the Jewish Quarter of Marrakech and packed it away in the suitcase.

### **Unpacking Ras El Hanout**

Some of the spices were a cinch to identify just by sight: star anise, cinnamon bark, long pepper and bright orange mace. Encouraged by these easy victories, we poured the entire bag of ras el hanout into a large white bowl and began prospecting. There were two slightly different varieties of white and black peppercorns as well as allspice, nutmeg, cloves, cumin, cardamom, galangal and dried and flaked ginger. But what was this caramel-colored seed the size of a popcorn kernel housed in a fragrant pod, the gorgeous bright purple petals or the bitter bark that turned white after chewing it?





Cooked salads are a popular and delicious appetizer in Morocco (top); Morocco's hospitality extends itself to a constant offering of mint tea everywhere you go, including Jnane Tamsna (below).

## Desert Oasis: Where to Stay in Morocco

### La Maison Arabe, Marrakech

First launched as a restaurant in 1946, it was quickly established as one of the leading food destinations in the country. Current owner Fabrizio Ruspoli purchased the property in 1995 and spent the next three years renovating and restoring it. The result is a charming hotel with a friendly staff, gorgeous rooms and fabulous food. Also, authentic Moroccan cooking workshops are held at the hotel's Country Club. [laimaisonarabe.com](http://laimaisonarabe.com)

### Jnane Tamsna, Marrakech

Developed by Meryanne Loum-Martin over two decades, this countryside collection of individual houses is nestled among nine acres of lush gardens, providing a home-like atmosphere and all the comforts of a hotel. Hands-on cooking workshops available. [jnaneamsna.com](http://jnaneamsna.com)

### Amanjena, Marrakech

This resort provides the same superior luxury and service that sets the entire Aman hotel chain apart from all others. Vast circular rooms open up to private patios with reflection pools, and guests are treated to classical Spanish cuisine in the restaurant. [amanresorts.com/amanjena](http://amanresorts.com/amanjena)

### Terres d'Amanar

An outdoor wonderland where you can get away from the stress of the city to enjoy star-gazing, hiking, zip lines and mountain biking. [terresdamanar.com](http://terresdamanar.com)

### Sofitel Palais Jamais, Fès

Built in 1879 in the finest Moorish style, this luxury hotel with charming, quaint rooms has anything you could ask for, from restaurants and a spa to a piano bar. Surrounded by superb gardens, the Palais Jamais sits high above the Fès medina. [sofitel.com](http://sofitel.com)

We turned to the experts for answers. We're not the first ones to smuggle the spice into our suitcases to hunt through the ingredients. Thirty-five years ago, food writer Paula Wolfert came home from Morocco with a stash of ras el hanout and a similar yen to know just what she was packing. "There's something so engaging about ras el hanout. It can have anywhere from 15 to 100 spices each," she said. "A spice master has their own version—blending spices is really an art." Wolfert was so intrigued that she had a spice importer help her analyze the exact spices in her souvenir blend. It was composed of 26 spices, including ash berries and belladonna. One spice listed as *gouza el asnab* later turned out to be nothing more than mustard seeds adhered together with dirt. It was after living in Morocco for

seven years that Wolfert had the idea to introduce the United States to the wonders of Moroccan cooking and ras el hanout with her book *Couscous and Other Good Food From Morocco*, first published in 1973. Currently, she is revising the edition for a 2011 publication date.

Culinary adventurer Peggy Markel leads food tours throughout the world, including in Morocco. On her tour, students carefully study ras el hanout. "The ingredients alone distinguish it from other cuisines. We pick apart the whole ingredients to have a look at what's really in there and to see if we can identify them all," Markel says. "Not to mention that the blend changes as it goes up and down the coast. Further north it may contain lavender, ginger, galangal, orris root and rose buds."

Ras el hanout is somewhat of a wonder spice. Not only does a pinch of it add an extra element to dishes both savory and sweet, it is also known to have a “warming effect on the blood,” but that’s with the addition of a former ingredient, cantharides, also known as Spanish Fly, which is now banned from being sold in Moroccan spice markets. The powder made from the desiccated remains of an emerald green beetle is a known aphrodisiac that has been used by humans for centuries. Wolfert theorizes that the reason shopkeepers are so tight-lipped about the exact ingredients in ras el hanout is not only because they don’t want to give up the secrets of their own blend but because the mystique behind aphrodisiacs like Spanish Fly—which might not be in it anymore—and bird’s tongue, another aphrodisiac

in Morocco, are the true selling points. Some versions are even recommended to help women conceive.

At Jnane Tamsna, a beautiful villa in Marrakech where tourists can take cooking classes, we poached pears in honey and a careful sanding of ras el hanout. The pears become infused with the aromatic, woody blend that marries well with the fruit of the dish and the caramel’s sweetness. Markel enjoys it ground with coffee beans, and Wolfert also recommends putting a pinch into tagines that incorporate sweetness: “It’s delicious when mixed with honey because it mellows out the sweetness and gives a contrast.”

Wolfert adds that it’s a hard sell to get Americans onto the homemade ras el hanout bandwagon because of the sheer number of ingredients required. “In this economy, you can’t ask people

## Couscous 101

What? You say you’ve been making couscous by throwing it into boiling water? Apparently, that’s not the way the Moroccans do it. According to translator/guide Mohammed Nahir, couscous is best when it’s steamed in a double boiler, preferably over flavorful stock. Medium grain couscous is the best, since fine grain can get clumpy and large grain takes much longer to cook.

Moroccans serve couscous with two bowls of the steaming liquid on the side: one is the broth straight out of the double boiler, and the other is mixed with harissa. “Never follow the directions on the back of the couscous,” urges Paula Wolfert. That package will only yield 6 cups, whereas if you steam it, you can get 18 cups of the lightest, fluffiest couscous to hit your taste buds.

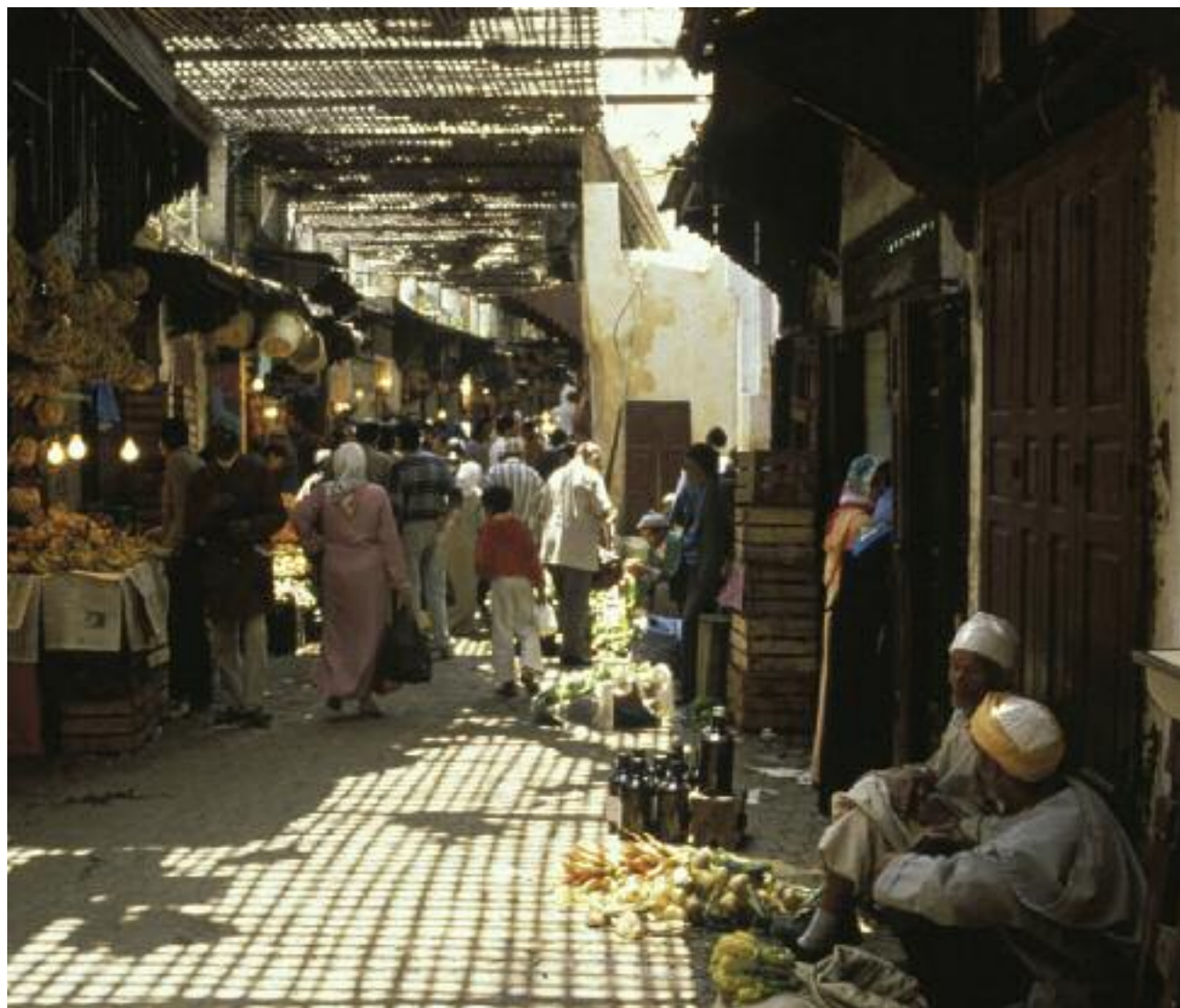


Photo courtesy of the Moroccan Tourism Board



Cooking instructor/chef Baijah Lafridi roasts chiles for a Moroccan gazpacho recipe at Inana Tamsna; (right) Just a few of the bounty of spices and chiles found at Terres d'Amanar, right on the hills of the Atlas Mountains



Photography by Kate Mulcrone and Andrea Lynn

to buy 24 spices and put in a pinch of each,” Wolfert said. Instead, she recommends buying the blend at Kalustyan’s or Seasoned Pioneers out of England, which sells both traditional

and organic blends of ras el hanout.

Okay, so we’ve succumbed to the fact that we’ll never conquer the mystery of the exact ingredients in the mix. But in the end, does it really matter?

Sometimes, you’ve got to let these things go and just enjoy how a variety of spices can come together as an ingredient and create something that is greater than its individual components.

## Only some like it hot

Although Moroccans are spice addicts, they haven’t always been partial to adding a dose of heat to their food. Markel points out that, like in any culture, the use of spices is personal. “Moroccans prefer spice as opposed to heat. They like it as an accent. They don’t seem to use it to ‘thin the blood’ as they do in other cultures; it is used more for taste. I see it used more traditionally, in olive mixes and soups as well as in the broth for couscous.”

Peggy Markel says that Moroccans believe it’s important to keep the system warm. “They are not at all interested in digesting cold food. They drink hot tea in the summer-time, and they eat meat with spices and cooked fruit. They have chosen only spices to slightly lift the palate and keep their bloodstreams warm. A cold system breeds disease.”

Harissa, a thick, hot paste of red chiles, cumin and olive oil that is a staple in neighboring Algeria and Tunisia, is making inroads in Morocco. “When I first walked on Moroccan soil, harissa didn’t even exist,” says Paula Wolfert. “At that time, it wasn’t in the tradition of Moroccans to use harissa. Moroccan food is more sweet and savory, not sweet and spicy. It was foreigners, like us, who would find the food a little bland.”

Harissa can be found all over North Africa, but some Moroccans aren’t afraid to import their heat from further afield. It was Mohammed Nahir, our tour guide and a translator at La Maison Arabe’s cooking workshop in Marrakech, who admitted that an American favorite is just as popular in Morocco as harissa—Tabasco sauce. “For the last 20 to 30 years, Tabasco has been available in big markets. I use it in salads with tomatoes and peppers to make things a little spicy,” he said.

## Chicken Tagine with Preserved Lemon and Olives

Yield: 4 servings • Zest Factor: Mild

Recipe adapted from La Maison Arabe.

“Tagine” refers to a stewlike entrée that’s cooked in a clay pot, as well as to the vessel itself. Tagines (the clay pot) can be set on the stovetop or soaked in water and used on the grill. Don’t have a tagine? Never fear; just use a Dutch oven.

- 2 preserved lemons (recipe, page 58)
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 bunch parsley, minced
- 1 bunch cilantro, minced
- 1 teaspoon freshly ground pepper
- 2 teaspoons turmeric
- 2 teaspoons ras el hanout

Chicken Tagine with  
Preserved Lemon and Olives  
Tagine courtesy of Emile Henry,  
[emilehenry.com](http://emilehenry.com)



pinch saffron, optional  
 1 whole chicken, cut into pieces  
 1 red onion, finely chopped  
 3 tablespoons olive oil  
 15 to 20 kalamata olives

Cut the preserved lemons in half, and separate the flesh from the peel. Reserve the peel, and chop the flesh. In a large bowl combine lemon, garlic, parsley, cilantro, pepper, turmeric, ras el hanout and saffron. Coat the chicken in this marinade, and add in onion.

In a large tagine or Dutch oven, warm the olive oil over medium heat, and sear the chicken on all sides for about 20 minutes. After the chicken has been seared, add 3 cups of water, and simmer for 45 minutes. After the sauce has thickened, add the lemon peel and the olives. Cook for another 5 minutes and serve.

### Moroccan Preserved Lemons

*Yield: 1½ cups • Zest Factor: Mild*

*Recipe adapted from Paula Wolfert's book, Couscous and Other Good Food From Morocco. If you want to add extra zing, add a few chiles to the mix.*

#### For the lemons:

5 lemons  
 ¼ cup salt, divided, plus extra if needed

#### For safi mixture (optional):

1 cinnamon stick  
 3 cloves  
 5 to 6 coriander seeds  
 3 to 4 black peppercorns  
 1 bay leaf  
 freshly squeezed lemon juice,  
 if necessary

Partially quarter the lemons by slicing them from the top, stopping ½ inch from the bottom, sprinkle salt on the exposed flesh, then reshape the fruit.

Place 1 tablespoon salt on the bottom of a Mason jar. Pack in the lemons, and push them down, adding more salt, and the safi spices, if using, between the layers. Press the lemons down to release their juices and to make room for the remaining lemons.

If the juice released from the squashed fruit does not cover them, add freshly squeezed lemon juice. Leave ¼ inch of air space at the top of jar, and seal.

Let the lemons ripen in a warm place, shaking the jar each day to distribute the salt and juice, for 30 days. To use, rinse the lemons, as needed, under running water. There is no need to refrigerate after opening. Preserved lemons will keep up to a year, and the pickling juice remaining in the jar can be reused to make a new batch of preserved lemons two or three times over the course of a year.

### Ras el Hanout Spiced Poached Pears

*Yield: 4 Servings • Zest Factor: Mild*

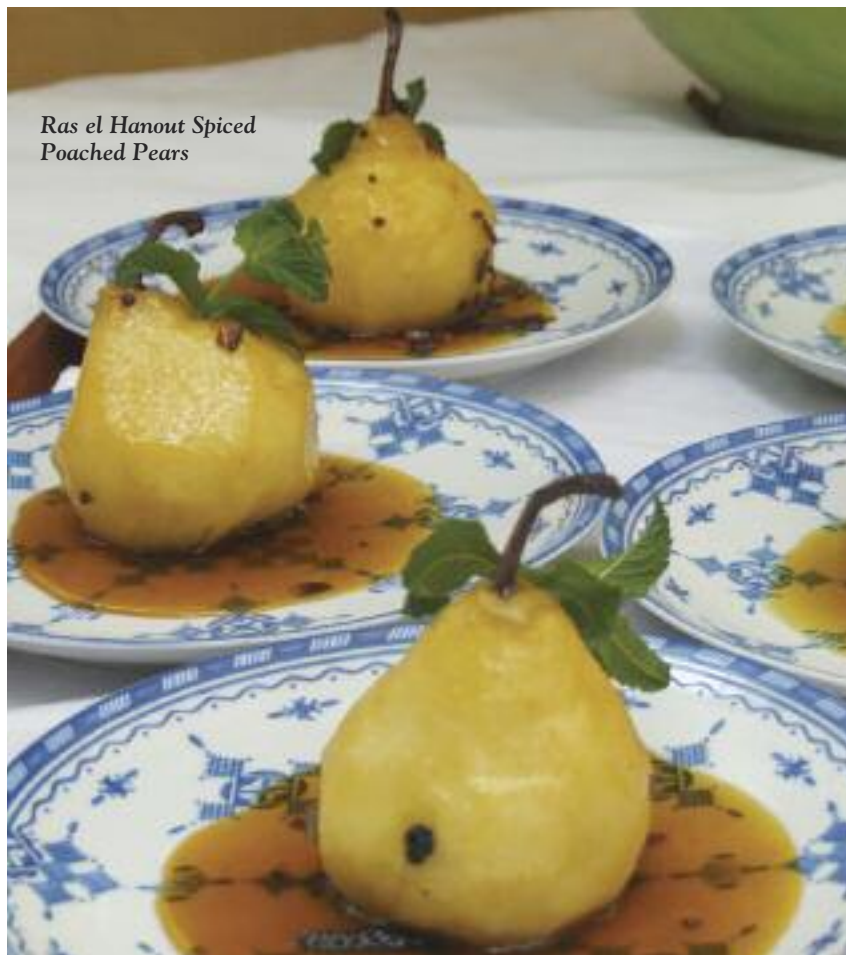
*Recipe adapted from Inane Tamsna's cooking workshop.*

4 large Anjou pears  
 ¾ cup sugar

¼ cup (½ stick) unsalted butter  
 1½ cups orange juice  
 1 teaspoon cinnamon  
 1 teaspoon ground ras-el-hanout

Peel and core the pears, then trim the bottoms slightly so they sit flat. In a large, heavy saucepan over medium heat, stir the sugar with ¼ cup water until it dissolves. Raise the heat to high, and cook until the syrup comes to a boil and turns golden brown, about 5 minutes. Remove the pan from the heat, whisk in the butter and 2 tablespoons of water. Slowly, whisk in orange juice to combine.

Add the pears to the sauce, positioning them well apart from each other. Sprinkle with cinnamon, and cook over low heat for 10 minutes, pushing the pears around occasionally with a spatula, so they won't stick. Sprinkle ras el hanout over the pears, and cook until softened, about 15 minutes longer. Serve drizzled with sauce.



*Ras el Hanout Spiced Poached Pears*



## Chermoula

**Yield:** 1 cup • **Zest Factor:** Hot

*Recipe by Andrea Lynn. Do you need to rev up a meal in a hurry? This fabulous multipurpose blend can be used as a hot sauce, paste or marinade. It's an easy go-to blend for any food that needs a spicy pick-me-up. Marinate tilapia in chermoula for 30 minutes, and then broil, stir it into rice, or spread it under the skin of chicken thighs before sautéing. The options are endless. Remove the seeds from the serrano chiles if you want to tame the fire of this sauce.*

- 1 small yellow onion, peeled and chopped, or 3 whole scallions, chopped
- 4 cloves garlic, chopped
- 2 serrano chiles, diced
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- 1 teaspoon cumin
- salt and black pepper
- ½ teaspoon lemon juice
- ¼ to ½ cup canola oil

In a food processor or blender, add onion or scallions, garlic, chiles, paprika, cumin, salt, pepper, lemon juice and 2 tablespoons water. Purée the ingredients, adding a thin stream of canola oil while blending to emulsify and thicken the mixture (Note: All of the oil may not be needed.). Adjust salt, pepper and lemon juice to taste.



## Harissa

**Yield:** about ½ cup • **Zest Factor:** Hot

*Recipe by Andrea Lynn. The traditional authentic way to make harissa is to grind the ingredients in a mortar and pestle. But who can argue with the ease of a blender or food processor? Harissa is nothing more than a Moroccan hot sauce, so use it the same way. We like to mix it, Moroccan-style with olives, dollop it into soup or spread it onto a sandwich.*

- 2 whole roasted red peppers, seeds removed
- 1 garlic clove
- ½ tablespoon cayenne powder
- ½ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- ½ teaspoon cumin



- juice of half a lemon
- salt, to taste
- 4 to 5 tablespoons olive oil

In a food processor or blender, add all ingredients except salt. Purée, slowly pouring in the olive oil to emulsify and thicken mixture (Note: All of the oil may not be needed.). Season to taste with salt and extra lemon juice.



## Zaalouk

**Yield:** 2 cups • **Zest Factor:** Medium

*Recipe by Andrea Lynn. Chopped salads came to Morocco courtesy of the French who moved there. Moroccans put their own spin on it, using mainly cooked ingredients and serving them warm or at room temperature. Fès has glorious cooked salads with grilled chiles, marinated carrots, puréed cauliflower and fried eggplant. Zaalouk is a traditional Moroccan cooked salad made from eggplant and tomato, that works well as a side to any meal.*

- 1 large eggplant, peeled and chopped to a medium size

- 1 pint cherry tomatoes
- 4 garlic cloves, whole
- 3 tablespoons olive oil, divided
- salt and freshly ground pepper
- 2 tablespoon chopped parsley
- 1 tablespoon freshly squeezed lemon juice
- 1 teaspoon cumin
- ½ teaspoon sweet paprika
- ½ teaspoon harissa or hot sauce

In an oven-safe pan or foil-lined baking sheet, combine eggplant, tomatoes, garlic, 1 tablespoon olive oil, salt and pepper. Place in a 400° oven, and roast about 30 minutes. Keep an eye on the garlic cloves and remove them if they start to burn.

Transfer the roasted garlic to a medium bowl, mash it to a paste, and whisk in the remaining 2 tablespoons olive oil, salt, pepper, parsley, lemon juice, cumin, paprika and harissa or hot sauce. Add roasted tomatoes and eggplant to the dressing. Stir to combine, and refrigerate until cool, about 2 hours. **CP**

Kate Mulcrone is a writer and editor living in Brooklyn, NY. Kate and Senior Editor Andrea Lynn both united in their love for this unique spice blend for this feature.