

# spices of sydney

## special report

# Hot spots of flavour

If you are not cooking with spices, your food will taste of nothing our experts tell **Carla Grossetti** who goes on a gourmet safari with Maeve O'Meara.

**A**foray into one of Sydney's strip malls with TV presenter and author Maeve O'Meara is like entering a portal into an enchanting new world.

O'Meara, who has been curating "taste-buds-led" Gourmet Safaris adventures for 16 years, avoids the obvious food tourist attractions and hipster havens in favour of little-known eateries, quirky spice emporiums and bustling supermarkets packed with exotic ingredients.

Valley View Spices is one of many stop-offs that O'Meara aims to put on the map, with plans under way to include the shop on one of her themed itineraries, which thread together cultures that once connected on centuries-old spice routes.

The host of SBS's *Food Safari* says she is passionate about this particular spice temple because she believes it shows our multicultural city at its best.

"Australians have a lot to learn about spice and about finding beauty in the balance of blending different spices. Entering a shop such as this and knowing what spices to buy may be quite intimidating for some people, but I would urge home cooks to learn what these various spices are and how to use them



because they make food so much more interesting and exciting," O'Meara says.

"In the Western world, we look at spices solely as something to flavour our food. But spices have so many stories to tell, about history, about the preservation of food and about connecting food to people and the

past. It's so wonderful to realise that many of these mixes have been handed down, like gifts, through the generations," she says.

**Valley View Spices** is located behind a non-descript strip of shops in the southwestern Sydney suburb of Bankstown, which is home to a good slice of Sydney's Lebanese community.

The shop's main draw is a vast, vibrant display of heaped spices that include turmeric, chilli powder, paprika, coriander, cardamom pods and cumin, all of which are used to flavour cuisines influenced by ancient spice routes.

Here, owner Ali Ahmad's signature baharat (mixed spice) is hugely popular, a heady mix of pimiento, white pepper, black pepper, coriander, cumin, cloves and nutmeg that is custom-roasted and blended in small batches each day.

"If you are cooking without spices, you are not cooking and all your food will taste like ... like zucchini ... like nothing," laughs Ahmad, who runs the business along with his wife Ferial and sons Aimen and Ehab.

"Spice is everything but what a lot of people don't know is that many of these spices are very good for you, too. Turmeric is very good as an anti-inflammatory and chilli



can reduce high blood pressure too," says Ahmad, who featured on an episode of SBS's *Food Lover's Guide to Australia* series.

There is a herb-heavy aroma in the air as Ahmad swishes a barrel of za'atar about, bringing the fragrance of thyme, sesame seeds, sumac and oregano to life.