



O'Meara, whose husband is Lebanese, says she is obsessed with the herbaceous spice mix, and self-serves a few scoops to take home with her.

"Za'atar is such an intriguing spice. I love to sprinkle it on my poached eggs or add it to a bit of olive oil and dip bread into it. To me,

it sums up the exotic flavours of the Middle East," O'Meara says.

"Understanding spices and how they work together is not brain surgery, but it does require a bit of handholding. I have learnt so much from foraging around in the city's various food villages and talking to the

Essential: (Left to right) Abhi's Indian Restaurant; Ali Ahmad of Valley View Spices with *Gourmet Safaris'* Maeve O'Meara.
Photos: Jennifer Soo

shopkeepers about how to get the best from certain spices. What I would advise is that home cooks start out by perfecting recipes that give precise, exacting measures as that will give them the confidence to experiment," she says.

Abhi's Indian Restaurant in north Strathfield is another authentic hub on O'Meara's Spice Safari itinerary. Here, executive chef Kumar Mahadevan treats guests to a cooking demonstration using spices that are integral to Indian cuisine. In his cookbook *From India: Food, Family and Tradition* the award-winning chef writes: "Spices are India's gift to the world".

"The most important thing about using spices is ensuring they're fresh. Whole spices keep longer than ground spices, you should try to use them up within 12 months and always keep them in airtight containers, away from heat and light," Mahadevan says.

"My grandmother loved cloves, cardamom, cinnamon, nutmeg and pepper. These spices create a lighter, simpler flavour that influences my cooking to this day. If you're not used to using spices, you may be nervous at first but the instant you taste [one of my] dishes, you will wonder how you have lived your life without spice," he says.

Watching the chef as he adds a spoonful of coriander or a pinch of rich red chilli powder to the pan, is like watching an artist at work and the alchemy is evident in a dish of Kaali dhal (black lentils).

The *Gourmet Safaris'* magic carpet ride continues to Ryde and the Aladdin's Cave that is **Bahar Persian Food & Art**, where proprietor Russoul Sajadi, who hails from Iran and identifies as Persian, talks about

saffron as if it were a beloved family member.

Russoul says saffron is one of the key elements of Persian cuisine and he and his wife Nadia are reverential about its properties. After Russoul grinds the saffron, he steeps it in hot water, before Nadia forks it through a delicate dish of baghali polow (broadbean rice) and entices everyone to taste.

Team *Gourmet Safari* is also treated to a glass of fragrant Persian tea, which has been infused with saffron.

"Spice gives flavour to the food. The way Persians play with spices is very subtle; it's very different from Indian cuisine and from Arabic cuisine. It draws on our memory banks and is the taste of our childhood," Russoul says.

"Saffron is good for the nervous system. It's also very good for flavour and we use it for its colour as well. It's the most popular spice in Persian cuisine and is used in everything from savoury to sweet and even to garnish our food. Sumac is also popular because it helps to break down fats in food," Russoul says.

He says the Persian connection gives the food a cultural context. "A lot of world history has revolved around the spice trade. Every culture has spices that suit their cuisine. The way Persians use spices is, we focus on the culinary uses, as well as the medicinal attributes," Russoul says.

There is also plenty of ground to cover at **Gima Market**, in Auburn, where the faint hint of cinnamon, pistachios, rosewater and sumac, unveils much about this pocket of Sydney, which is part of the rich fabric of the
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