



Spice World(ly)

Exotic Flavors, Culture and Travel Inspire Lior Lev Sercarz's Famous Spice Blends

Striking tastes. Unexpected ingredients. Unheard of pairings. Gastronomy's most creative spice master **Lior Lev Sercarz** has brought an age-old tradition to a whole new level of artistry. The celebrated chef and proprietor of New York's La Boîte biscuits and spice boutique draws on his global travels, childhood memories and worldly curiosity to create spice blends that are whimsical, intriguing, and intense.

Smoked paprika, fenugreek and urfa biber, anyone? They bring life to chicken legs or pork ribs. And who knew green chiles, cilantro and garlic could make a roasted potato dance on your tongue? These are just two examples of Lior Lev Sercarz's collection of artisanal spice blends that have discerning chefs and aspiring gourmards lining up to get their hands on these journeys-in-a-jar. La Boîte, French for 'the box,' is a spice laboratory, featuring over 80 unique blends, some made with up to 23 ingredients. The boutique's serene, minimalist décor – the cleanest kitchen in New York! – belies the exotic complexity of each blend.

A classically trained culinarian who has worked at the side of the greatest chefs, Lev Sercarz has the ability to evoke memories, feelings and sensations with a mere speck on a tablespoon, making him one of the most rarefied talents in gastronomy. At the heart of his spices are taste, sight, smell and texture. His ideas are deeply personal, intuitive and surprising. Pierre Poivre, the 18th century French horticulturist, provides the inspiration for N.7, an eight-peppercorn blend; while his Israeli childhood heritage is at the root of Zuta, a wild mint indigenous to the Galilean countryside. "It's one of my first 'scene' memories. It has a captivating smell – like a white flower meets a pine tree or lemon balm with pine and resin notes," he says. That particular blend works in sweet and savory dishes, as well as cocktails. Kibbeh N.15, combining parsley, garlic and fragrant cumin from Armenia, is a great enhancer of hamburgers and French fries.

Walking into La Boîte can be a profound thrill. Open to the public just five days a week, the tranquil interior is where the magic materializes. Near the entrance, small tins contain French-style savory spice biscuits [pronounced *bis-KWEE*]. Beyond, displays of small jars containing the spices are presented with the aesthetic sensibility of a modern gallery. The name 'La Boîte' speaks volumes to the concept. "In French, 'la boîte' goes beyond its literal translation to the object 'the box.' It also means home, company, structure," explains Lev Sercarz. "It was meaningful to me as I collect food-related boxes and have more than 1,500 vintage pieces dating back to 1930. Contrary to fashion, I have no qualms admitting that I like to think *inside* the box in terms of structure, rules and regulations. As I expand my knowledge and continue to hone my craft, I like to say that I 'expand' this metaphoric box."

This discipline of constantly expanding, sharing and refining knowledge is a calling to Lior as he has penned two acclaimed books – *The Art of Blending* [2012] and his latest *The Spice Companion* [2016], a distillation of his 30 years of experience, brought to life through illustrations, recipe ideas, blends and a guide to 102 spices.

The versatile collection of blends at La Boîte can be found in kitchens of such celebrated chefs as Marc Forgione, David Chang, José Andrés, Daniel Boulud and Eric Ripert. Delving into his extensive and in-depth knowledge of spice history and global cuisine, his blends each come together in thoughtful combinations and titles, like his Shabazi N.38 spice—made with cilantro, green chili and lemon juice, and inspired by the Yemenite condiment Zhoog and named after the 17th century Yemeni Jewish poet Shalom Shabazi.

While La Boîte features all Lev Sercarz’s aromatic offerings on its shelves, foodies can also find them online at www.laboiteny.com. Included alongside the blends is a collection of nine flavors he created with Michelin-starred chef Eric Ripert of New York’s Le Bernardin. Their “Voyager” collection, inspired by their own journeys, includes Riviera Herbs [rosemary, basil and mint], Sel D’Antibes, honoring Ripert’s birthplace [grey salt crystals bergamot and herbs] and Amahari [inspired by the berbere spice essential to Ethiopian cuisine].

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