

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE VOC'S TRADE IN SPICES

Background information

During the Middle Ages spices - nutmeg, cloves, pepper and cinnamon - were very expensive. Spices were transported overland from Asia to Constantinople and from there bought by Venetian merchants and sold in Europe. This all changed once the Portuguese found a sea route to the East; but it was the Dutch who later dominated the spice trade in Europe through the VOC (1602-1795) - the first, and one of the world's most successful multinational companies even in today's terms.

The VOC's *retourschepen* had to keep to a very strict schedule: leave Batavia before the end of December to arrive in the Netherlands by late summer or early autumn before the winter weather made it too difficult to distribute the goods. That left the merchants with between two and four months to off-load, clean, repair and re-equip the ships for the next voyage to Batavia.

A staggering number of ships rounded the Cape during these annual round-trips: between 1650 and 1660 about 205 VOC ships passed the Cape, or an estimated 53,000 sailors, soldiers and passengers; between 1720 and 1730 the total number of ships had increased to 701. By 1720 the VOC had also increased the size of these long-distance ships by 125%. The numbers are staggering considering that in 1679 - the year Simon van der Stel became the governor of the Cape - the total population of the Cape maritime station was barely 500.

During the VOC's Gold Age (1630-1670) the company's profit margin was estimated at around 18%. This fell to about 10% between 1680 and 1720 as it started to face increased competition from other trading companies from Europe. The company was eventually disbanded in 1795.

Different trading activities

The VOC *retourschepen*'s cargo consisted mostly of pepper (70%), followed by other spices (cloves, nutmeg, mace, cinnamon) and private orders. Nutmeg in particular was extremely valuable and relatively rare because at the time it could only be sourced from the Banda Islands. Merchants made enormous profits selling nutmeg. In the late 17th century 4.5kg of nutmeg could be bought off a trader on one of the Banda Islands for a few English pennies and sold in London with a mark-up of 60,000%.

Secondary trading activities were also conducted in the east, with VOC ships trading goods between Persia, India, Indonesia, China and Japan. They bought Japanese silver and copper, gold and porcelain from the Chinese; traded in sugar, tea, coffee, pewter, rice and wood; bought Persian and Chinese silk and carpets; printed cloth from India, horses from Arabia, and even shipped elephants between Ceylon and India. Small quantities of opium were also bought and sold. Sometimes sugar or Japanese copper were used as ballast in the ships, or saltpetre (used to make gunpowder), also logs of exotic timber.

In 1665 Pieter de Bitter, a VOC officer returning to the Netherlands with a fleet of eleven ships, kept an inventory of the cargo. The inventory included 200,000 carpets, numerous bales of material and items of clothing, more than 100t each of nutmeg, cloves, cinnamon, pepper and large quantities of ebony, Chinese silk, uncut diamonds, rubies, pearls and porcelain.

Two of the ships in that same fleet were captured in the North Sea by the British and the English diarist and then administrator of the British Navy, Samuel Pepys, boarded one of the captured ships and described the scene as follows: [I then] *carried me down into the hold of the India ship, and there did show me the greatest wealth lie in confusion that a man can see in the world. Pepper scattered through every chink, you trod upon it; and in cloves and nutmegs, I walked above my knees; whole rooms full. And silk in bales, and boxes of copper-plate, one of which I opened. Having seen this, which was a noble sight as ever I saw in my life.*

The Cape's exposure to the spice trade

The following spices are listed in most VOC sources:

allspice
cardamon
cinnamon
cloves
coriander
cumin
currie
ginger
mace
masala
nutmeg
pepper
turmeric

However, the Cape residents' exposure to the spice trade extended much further than just the commercial quantities of pepper, nutmeg, mace and cloves traded by the VOC. They would also have been exposed to the smaller more clandestine quantities of spices traded by individual soldiers, sailors and VOC employees. VOC personnel returning from a tour of duty in Batavia would likewise have been exposed to a number of different food cultures, each with its own use of spices and herbs.

Further reading

Claassens, H W - Die Geskiedenis van Boerekos
De VOC site - www.vocsite.nl
Duyfken 1606 - www.duyfken.com
Milton, Giles - Nathaniel's Nutmeg
Parthesius, Robert - Dutch Ships in Tropical Waters