

Every now and then as I consider the week's duties in my house, I catch myself walking past the hundreds of cookbooks, textbooks, magazines, Harlequin romance novels (they're not mine, I swear) and fictions about life in the kitchen asking myself, "Now, what in the heck am I going to write about this week?" At times like this, I feel that my brain is tapped, that there could be nothing else into which I can delve, or that I really can't exercise the ole noggin like I used to.

Yet, every week, excepting a few of which most of you know I had fair reason to bow out, I manage to come up with some quip or blurb that makes the column at the very least a tad more interesting than reading a NASDAQ ticker, of course only hoping that I actually pulled it off. All mumbling aside, at present I plan to regain my stature as one of the areas more unpredictable columnists, and I would be remiss of my duties if I let you down in not sharing some industry secrets as I have in the past.

As I have recently regained my footing in terms of beating the fabled writer's block, I can say that I am once again free to smite the culinary world in my betraying the tenets by which I have survived professionally for twenty-three years, second only to my debunking the necessity of using certain salts in general cooking (March 24, 2005).

And one of those great secrets has to do with the world of herbs, spices and flavorings. For many years, it has bothered me that a 32-ounce bottle of pure vanilla extract, in commercial dollars, would only buy about 2 to 3 fluid-ounces in the grocery store. And saffron? Forget about it. What I could buy for \$33.00 at a local grab-n-go would pale in comparison to my 'score' as a commercial purchaser, the guilt of which would only allow myself to look in the mirror every morning concerned that I was more of a drug dealer than a chef. To put anything on a menu that has the word 'saffron' in it is to guarantee a sale, since the fabled pistils are so hard to come by, and revered in sheer street value.

As it was explained to me many moons ago by a highly qualified spice agent, the spice racket is a racket. As the containers are shipped from overseas, dust, twigs and debris settle to the bottom, leaving the herbs to be graded on the levels of purity, lack of junk, and terms of usage. Needless to say, the top layer, contaminant-free and beautiful, goes to the restaurants, TV chefs and Food TV execs, while the lower section, i.e. "The crud", goes to the different bidders who will then bottle the product for consumer usage.

One of the many commercial companies I use also specializes in online retail sales, and I highly recommend them. Go to www.rlschreiber.com, and you can buy the same ingredients we professional chefs use in our own kitchens. Yes, you might pay more than the average restaurant will for spices, but you will pay a great deal less than typical retail, and if you are a serious cook or baker, this can definitely come in handy. Of course, the local grocery stores might get mad at me, but I guess I'll just have to add them to my list.