Reviews

Grain Reserves and the Food Price Crisis: Selected Writings from 2008–2012
Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP)
2012, Minneapolis, 84 pages
Available for download from: www.iatp.org/documents/grain-reserves-and-the-food-price-crisis-selected-writings-from-2008-2012

This is a timely collection of papers that addresses a topic which causes much dispute

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As once again we witness rising food prices and the danger of food shortages, this timely collection of papers addresses a topic that causes much dispute. Observers tend to be split between those who are very enthusiastic about food reserves and those who see relatively little need for them. The publishers, IATP, fall firmly into the former school of thought: it is fair to point out that this reviewer tends to the latter.

These Selected Writings consist of 15 brief papers, all of which have been published previously in various forms, together with four letters on the topic. The first four writings are by IATP staffers, Kristin Sampson and Sophia Murphy. These appear to be based on fairly limited literature reviews and tend to assert the need for reserves without providing much evidence of their utility. Both writers have a fairly negative view of the private sector, which is blamed for 'hoarding and speculation' and having 'inherent weaknesses'. While past difficulties associated with governance and operation of food reserves are acknowledged, Sampson firmly believes that these can be overcome in the future. Murphy considers the position of reserves within the context of the WTO and also argues that climate change provides an additional reason for a renewed look at the topic.

While it is clear which side of the argument IATP supports, it has been far from biased in its selection of papers for the collection. However, this makes IATP's own fairly uncritical assertions of the utility of reserves more difficult to understand. For example, the papers by IATP staff are immediately followed by Steve Wiggins and Sharada Keats of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), who conclude that 'it is far from clear that internationally coordinated public grain reserves could be made to work and would not deter private storage'; that regional and national stocks may be justified in some circumstances but otherwise seem costly; and that proposals for a virtual reserve may mean addressing a problem that

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does not exist. Christopher Gilbert, of the University of Trento, then takes issue with one of the basic premises of many food reserve advocates: that food markets function poorly, particularly in Africa, and that 'crisis management' is therefore the responsibility of governments. He believes that these concerns are excessive and that the private sector can play a substantial role in both crisis avoidance and response, noting that initiatives in this area pay scant attention to the role of the private sector. David McKee reminds us that reserves do not increase total availability but only transfer grain from storage by farmers or the private sector to storage by government: 'Larger reserves … could make volatile markets even thinner.' He describes national reserves around the world, noting that those in India are excessive, poorly stored, and have high losses.

The collection reproduces an IFPRI paper, by Joachim von Braun and Maximo Torero. This advocates a large 'virtual' reserve to limit price fluctuations within a specified band based on 'market fundamentals', in order to increase risk for potential 'speculators'. The idea of a virtual reserve is questioned by several other writers in the collection, and seems to be making little headway.

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National food reserves tend to be used for political purposes, particularly close to elections. In a study of Ethiopia, Shahidur Rashid and Solomon Lemma of IFPRI identify possible ways to address such problems. They argue that the Ethiopian reserve has been successful because it has strong participation of key stakeholders and clear rules of procurement and distribution. They consider it positive that the reserve does not engage in buying and selling but, instead, lends grain to relevant agencies. Finally, they believe that the reserve has been successful because of its relatively small size, and caution against government plans to increase the size.

Articles by ActionAid and Oxfam, like those by the IATP authors, tend to assert the potential value of food reserves without really justifying their assertions. Like Rashid and Lemma, Jean-Denis Crola for Oxfam believes that a multi-stakeholder approach could address some of the acknowledged governance problems. He quotes the success of Indonesia's public rice procurement in the 1970s and 1980s as a model for maintaining price stability. What he does not say is that Indonesia also experienced little volatility in 2007–08, but that this was achieved at the cost of domestic prices averaging $232 a ton greater than the international price prior to 2008. ActionAid's article, relying on published sources, for which the references are missing from the book, looks in particular

at regional food reserves. It describes the various reserves but provides little justification for its argument that the G20 should devote more attention to the subject. Progress on regional reserves has been generally slow.

Ian McCreary of the Canadian Foodgrains Bank makes some excellent points. He clearly highlights the role of subsidized biofuel production in causing price volatility. However, whether biofuel companies would sign up to his proposal to pull biofuel capacity out of production when stocks are tight seems unlikely. McCreary argues that there is a need for an international plan to address volatility, not least because he sees the alternative as being inefficient national reserves and increasing trade barriers.

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Willem Würdemann, Gerdien Meijerink and Marianne van Dorp of the Centre for Development Innovation provide a good summary of the main issues. They share the view of other writers of a need for an international emergency reserve run by, for example, WFP, but note that reaching agreement on and finding funding for this may be difficult. In general their message is cautionary, arguing that public stocks are costly and can be disruptive, and that interventions should be largely limited to targeting vulnerable groups. In common with other authors, they stress that reserves should be autonomous, with a 'Central Bank' autonomy.

The complexities of food reserves at international, regional, and national levels, combined with the fact that many authors discuss reserves for overcoming emergencies and for controlling price volatility at the same time, are perhaps not well suited to being covered in just 84 pages. The papers tend to raise more questions than they answer. Nevertheless, IATP is to be congratulated for bringing together these writings, which offer a broad range of views and approaches. It is unfortunate, however, that the volume was prepared too early to include more recent books on the topic from FAO and the World Bank, both of which are less enthusiastic about the benefits of reserves than are IATP's writers.

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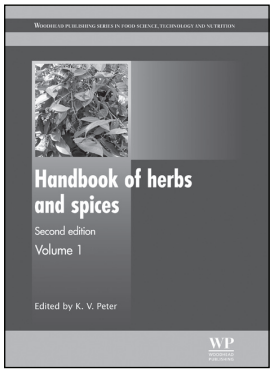

Handbook of Herbs and Spices, Volume 1, 2nd edn
640 pages, ISBN 9780857090393, £175

Handbook of Herbs and Spices, Volume 2, 2nd edn
624 pages, ISBN 9780857090409, £170

Edited by K.V. Peter, 2012, Woodhead Publishing

Herbs and spices can be defined as vegetable products – normally seeds or leaves – used for flavouring, seasoning, and imparting aroma in foods. Many spice and culinary herb plants are widely regarded as having medicinal, antioxidant, and/or antimicrobial activity. Current trade in herbs and spices (0.7 million tonnes) is valued at around US$3.5 bn per annum. There is much scope for producers to enter this market and the quality of produce is paramount. This is the second edition of the two volumes of this reference work, each containing around 600 pages. The first edition of Volume 1 was published in 2001 while Volume 2 was published in 2004.

The current edition of Volume 1 is arranged into 29 chapters. Each chapter is preceded by an abstract and is written by specialists in that herb or spice. The chapters are written according to a specified common format in the style of scientific papers. The first three chapters provide an introduction to herbs and spices with definitions, market statistics, applications, and quality specifications (including standards for spice essential oils). The remaining chapters concentrate on specific herbs and spices arranged in alphabetical order as follows: Basil, Bay Leaves, Black Pepper, Capsicum Cultivars, Cardamom, Chives, Cinnamon, Cloves, Coriander, Cumin, Curry Leaf, Dill, Fenugreek, Garlic, Ginger, Marjoram, Mint, Mustard, Nutmeg and Mace, Onion, Parsley, Rosemary, Saffron, Thyme, Turmeric, and Vanilla.

The chapters follow a common format consisting of the following headings:

- Definition and classification.
- Chemical structure: assessing such issues as quality, potential applications, and processing functionality.
- Production: principal methods of cultivation and post-harvest processing impact on quality and functionality.
- Uses in food processing: review of current and potential applications.
- Functional properties: Contributors summarize the current state of research on the nutritional and functional benefits of individual spices and herbs.

Toxicity and allergy issues are also discussed where appropriate.

- Quality and regulatory issues of each herb or spice including quality standards and indices.

Volume 2 contains introductory chapters on the importance of medicinal, antimicrobial, and antioxidant properties, health benefits, and analysis of particular herbs and spices. The subsequent chapters cover Ajowan, Aniseed, Asafoetida, Allspice, Capers and Caperberries, Caraway, Celery, Chervil, Fennel and Fennel Seed, Galangal, Kaffir Lime Leaf, Lavender, Lemongrass, Lovage, Nigella, Oregano, Poppy, Sesame, Star Anise, Tarragon, Tamarind, and Other herbs and spices (including annatto, chamomile, Galanga, horseradish, hyssop, juniper, Kokum and Malabar tamarind, large cardamom, lemon balm, long pepper, Szechuan pepper, mango ginger, fragrant pandan, pink peppercorn, rue, sumac, summer and winter savory, wasabi, as well as those even less well-known). These chapters follow the same format as those described in Volume 1.

This reviewer makes no apology for listing the specific herbs and spices contained in these two volumes. These two volumes each contain a wealth of information on the production, pests and diseases, harvesting, chemistry, quality standards, relevance, and uses of a variety of herbs and spices. The range of information concerning each commodity is incredibly wide and the chapters can be viewed as the primary source for information and for leads to gain further detailed information on specific topics if required. The chapters contain comprehensive references and direct the reader to other relevant sources for each area of interest. As such they are suitable as reference works for students, researchers, development workers, and those who want to gain background information on any aspect of a particular spice or herb. Being easily readable, it will also intrigue the non-specialist reader and those interested in medicine, cookery, and natural remedies.

Much of the information was available in the first edition of these volumes although it has been updated comprehensively. Purchasers should seriously consider purchasing the two volumes as a package as they are complementary. The two books cost around £170 each but purchasers – surely universities or specialist libraries – should be content that the information will not date and will be relevant for many years to come, thereby providing a sound investment.

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