

frozen,” along with the rivers that fed it, wrote Massachusetts governor John Winthrop. In Egypt, people began to wear furs. Previously warm and humid Fujian Province in southeastern China got snow. In the Alps, whole villages disappeared under the advance of glaciers.

The horrible weather triggered both drought and flooding. The Philippines got no rain for eight months. Northern China experienced its driest year in five centuries. In Mecca, where little rain normally falls, floods destroyed two walls of the sacred Kaaba. The Tigris and Euphrates rose from their banks to cover the entire Baghdad plateau.

But how could weather cause kings to be beheaded and wars to be fought? Parker says that climate change killed crops, caused famine, and raised prices in locations as divergent as Osaka and Catalonia. Unprecedented urban rioting occurred in 1642 when bad weather conditions caused rice to run short in Japan. Much of southern Portugal rose up against local rulers when drought forced the price of bread to unprecedented heights. Climate change caused hardship, and hardship triggered political revolt.

Parker acknowledges that the coincidence of climate change and political upheaval doesn't mean that the former caused the latter: “We must not paint bull's eyes around bullet holes.” Still, he says, with scientists predicting catastrophic global warming, it's worth rewinding the tape of history to see how governments dealt with the only previous global cataclysm that left enough records for historical study—the General Crisis.

## HISTORY

## Spice and Status

**THE SOURCE:** “The Medieval Taste for Spices” by Paul Freedman, in *Historically Speaking*, Sept.–Oct. 2008.

THE CUISINE OF THE MIDDLE Ages, with its tincture of ambergris and malaguetta, may not inspire many start-up restaurants, but the long-held explanation for the powerful flavors of the age turns out to be a historical myth. Meat during the period was not so rancid that its taste had to be masked with spices, writes Paul Freedman, a Yale historian. Any medieval lord rich enough to afford spices could

easily have bought fresh meat.

Spices were both the status symbols and high-yield investments of their day. Expensive and coveted, they were the mark of a wealthy household. Outrageously profitable, spices drove Europeans to their first overseas adventures. Pepper purchased in India for three Venetian ducats could fetch 80 ducats in Europe. Christopher Columbus was on the trail not only of gold and silk but also spices when he set off for what became America. The purpose of procuring spices, however, was not to mask the taste of bad meat, but rather to infuse good meat with the sweet-sour flavor that was the epitome of the fashionable cooking of the era.



Harvesting nutmeg is somewhat fancifully depicted in a 15th-century German wellness handbook.

Cinnamon, nutmeg, and sugar, now most commonly used in desserts, seasoned the main courses at medieval banquets. They were paired with a selection of peppers, including African malaguetta, Indian long pepper, and galangal—the strong spice now known mainly through Thai cooking, to flavor thin sauces often based on almond milk. Fashionable food was prepared with an eye toward achieving a pleasant color as well as taste. Rich hues could be achieved with such spices as cinnamon and saffron. Contrary to the conceit of movies set in medieval times, meat was not served in large haunches on racks, but was ground up and cooked, often several times, so coloring was useful.

Rarity bred prestige. When pepper became so common in the early 14th century that it was used in meals

## EXCERPT

## On the Dime

*In 1946, the Mercury [dime] was replaced. Franklin D. Roosevelt, who died the previous year, took his place on the head of the dime that's still in circulation today. The congressional decision to memorialize the creator of the New Deal in this manner was a testament to his search for a cure for polio (resulting in the charity March of Dimes) and carried an implicit reference to "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?"—the song of the Great Depression that he had helped resolve. The dime, as luck would have it, was also the only denomination not "taken" by another president. For FDR, it was right on the money.*

—PHIL PATTON, author of *Dreamland: Travels Inside the Secret World of Roswell and Area 51* (1998), in *AIGA* (Oct. 29, 2008)

served to peasants working in the fields, it began to disappear from recipes for fine cooking. Still, cooks used spices frugally. They were occasionally used to flavor wine, then

reused in sauces.

By the 17th century, European cooks had moved away from heavily spiced sauces to more intense preparations based on butter, herbs, and meat reductions. Traffic in slaves, sugar, and tobacco would eventually outstrip the spice-carrying business. Ambergris, a substance created by digestion in the hindgut of the sperm whale and considered the height of exotic taste in the 14th century, slowly fell out of favor. But spices remained important. New Amsterdam, eventually to become New York, was relinquished by the Dutch to the English in return for

Run, the most remote of the Molucca islands. No wonder the Dutch wanted Run instead of Manhattan: The tiny spice island was the original home of nutmeg.

## RELIGION &amp; PHILOSOPHY

## What's the Buzz?

**THE SOURCE:** "Religion, 'Westernization,' and Youth in the 'Closed City' of Soviet Ukraine, 1964–84" by Sergei I. Zhuk, in *The Russian Review*, Oct. 2008.

HIP-HOP HAS BEEN HOT IN THE Hezbollah-run suburbs of Beirut, and rock remains popular in Rio, but as scholars sift through the history of the Soviet Union, one of the

unexpected cultural influences to emerge from diaries and police and customs records is the popular force of a Christian rock opera. During the 1970s, young people in the nation's secret rocket-making capital were captivated by *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1970).

Dnepropetrovsk, a vast industrial

metropolis in eastern Ukraine, was off limits to outsiders. But its residents were occasionally able to travel to "free" cities such as Lviv in western Ukraine, where they could meet tourists from Poland and Yugoslavia hawking tapes and records of Western music. *Jesus Christ Superstar*, shocking in conservative communities in the United States and banned in South Africa as irreligious, was appealing to Dnepropetrovsk residents, not only for its music but also for its religious content. In the 1970s, the rock opera topped the list of pop-