Spice Profile: Peppercorns

by Dave DeWitt

History

"Pepper," wrote Plato, "is small in quantity and great in virtue." First mentioned in Indian writings more than 3,000 years ago, it was beloved by the Greeks and was the spice favorite of ancient Rome. In fact, Roman officials saved the city from Visogoth attack in A.D. 408 by paying a tribute which included 3,000 pounds of peppercorns.

Ripening Malaysian Pepper

Courtesy of the Malaysia Pepper Marketing Board.

Peppercorns are believed to be indigenous to the Malabar Coast of India. They were grown extensively in Indonesia, where it was seen by Marco Polo in the late thirteenth century, and for the last 500 years in Africa. Peppercorns were the first Oriental spice to reach Europe and were in so much demand that they were used as currency for about 2,000 years. In the Middle Ages, pepper became an expression of a man's fortune, and the wealthy kept large stores of pepper in their houses as proof of solvency. Saying that a man "lacked pepper" meant that he was poor.

The first European monopoly on pepper was held by the Venetians, who imported it (and other spices) from Alexandria. Soon Europe was consuming 6.6 million pounds of the spice every year. After the Portuguese reached India and the Spice Islands, the monopoly passed to them. Since peppercorns were literally worth their weight in gold, explorers such as Columbus, Magellan, and Vasco de Gama searched for them like they would for any treasure. Thus pepper stimulated the exploration of the world by Europeans. Of course, Columbus did not find black pepper, but rather chile peppers, which he misnamed.

Soon after the introduction of the spice to what is now the United States, Salem, Massachusetts became the pepper capital of the New World. That small town was the focal point of a re-exporting business in pepper that saw about eight million pounds of the spice pass through New England to other countries aboard clipper ships. Hundreds of fast schooners were built exclusively for the pepper trade, which greatly helped the economy of the colonies.

Pepper, both white and black, is the second most imported spice to the U.S., behind vanilla, in terms of dollar value. In fact, according to the USDA, the United States imports more pepper than any other country, and accounts for one fourth of annual world imports. Major sources for pepper include Indonesia, India, Brazil, Malysia, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Mexico, in addition to re-exports from Singapore. Pepper import values between 1990 and 1994 divided out as follows: black pepper $52.9 million; white pepper $10.9 million; ground $1.4 million, which totals $65.2 million dollars, representing 19 percent of the total U.S. spice imports.

Botanical Description

At least five species of the genus *Piper* are cultivated to produce what is generically called "pepper." The most common is *Piper nigrum* (black pepper); others include *P. longum (long pepper), P. cubeba* (cubeb pepper), and *P. guineense* (West African or bush pepper). All are relatives of *Piper betle,* the familiar betel nut of India, and *Piper methysticum* , the ingredient of kava, the "national beverage" of Polynesia. The pepper plants are either vines or climbing shrubs which can grow up to fifty feet in length. The leaves are glossy, about six inches long. The small flowers are borne on hanging spikes with about fifty blossoms, and are followed by spherical fruits about 5 millimeters in diameter which turn from green to yellow to red to black in the nine months it takes them to mature.

Cultivation

Peppercorns are grown in hot, wet tropical climates, primarily in Brazil, India, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Madagascar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand produce lesser amounts. The plant has aerial roots, so it is usually grown on trees or poles, where it is propagated from stem cuttings. Harvesting begins between the third and fourth years of growth and can continue until the fifteenth year. The berries are usually picked by hand in their green or red stages.

Medicinal Uses, Nutrition, and Pungency

Peppercorns have limited usage in medicine as a stimulant of gastric juices and a carminative.

There is no known nutritional value to this spice. The pungent principles of pepper are contained in the oleoresin and include the alkaloids piperine, chavicine, and piperidine. The taste is hot and biting.

Different Types of Pepper and Their Culinary Usage

In addition to its principal use for increasing the flavor of bland meals, pepper in the past covered up the rancid odors and tastes of spoiled foods. Today pepper comes in several forms.

Green peppercorns are the unripened fruits which are pickled or preserved in brine. A favorite of French chefs, they are less pungent than other forms, and are used in various ways including: as a garnish, as a spice in meat and poultry dishes, and in salad dressings. Once a jar is opened, the green peppercorns will remain in good condition for about two weeks if kept refrigerated.

Black peppercorns are the most common form. The fruits are harvested in their unripened or green stage, boiled for about 10 minutes, and then are allowed to dry until they become wrinkled and black. They are sold in this form or are ground (sometimes along with white pepper) into a powder. Although they keep for up to a year when sealed in glass jars, black peppercorns quickly lose their aroma, taste, and pungency after they are ground. For that reason, cooks are advised not to use pre-ground powder, but rather to keep a peppermill for custom grinding.

When used whole in soups, stews, sauces, and marinades, peppercorns can be placed in a spice bag for easy removal. Black peppercorns are used extensively in the manufacture of food items such as pickles, soups, meats, sausages, dressings, and baked goods. The world's finest peppercorns are reputedly *tellicherry*--perhaps the original form, since this variety is still grown on the Malibar Coast of India. Another favorite variety is *la mpong* from Sumatra.

White pepper is simply black pepper without the dark outer part of its pericarp (skin). Black peppercorns are soaked in water, and then are washed and mechanically rubbed to remove the dark skin, then crushed. The mash is dried and then powdered. White pepper is less pungent than black and is used to flavor white sauces, soups, potatoes, spreads, or fish where black specks would be aesthetically objectionable. In food manufacture it is used in beverages. One of the most flavorful white peppers is *muntok* from the island of Bangka in the East Indies.

Pink peppercorns are not pepper at all but rather a dried berry of the *Baies* rose plant from Madagascar. Imported from France, they are freeze-dried or packed in brine or water and used primarily in *nouvea*

u cuisine
dishes.

Red peppercorns resemble the wild chile pepper, chiltepin, and are the dried form of peppercorns in their red stage. They are usually found in mixtures of variously colored peppercorns.

Red pepper is the ground version of Cayenne and other red chiles.

Brown peppercorns, known as *fagara* or prickly-ash, are not of the *Piper* genus but rather are the fruit of shrubs of the various species of
Zanthoxylum
. The brown or black seeds are also marketed under the name "Sichuan pepper" or "Chinese pepper" and are highly aromatic with hints of citrus. They were the only heat in Sichuan cooking before the arrival of chile peppers in the late 1500s.

Recipe:

Steak aux Trois Poivres

This intriguing dish violates at least two laws Americans have concerning steak: never season it heavily and never fry it in a pan. But since the taste of this steak is so remarkable, we'll forget the rules. Three varieties of pepper are recommended, but it works just fine using only coarsely crushed black peppercorns. Varying the hot sauce used can produce peppered steaks with intriguingly different flavors. Also, experiment by using brown, red, or rose peppercorns.

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4 sirloin or New York strip steaks, at least 1 inch thick

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2 tablespoons black peppercorns, coarsely crushed*

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1 tablespoon white pepper powder

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1 tablespoon green peppercorns, crushed*

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1 teaspoon salt

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4 tablespoons butter

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1/4 cup Worcestershire sauce

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1 teaspoon hot pepper sauce

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1/4 cup brandy

* Wrap the peppercorns in a cloth and crush them with a pestle. Grinding them in a peppermill makes the pepper too fine.

Coat both sides of the steaks with the crushed peppercorns and the white pepper. Press the pepper into the steak with a blunt instrument and leave the steaks out, uncovered, at room temperature, for at least one hour.

Sprinkle the salt in a large skillet and heat until the salt begins to turn brown. Sear the steaks on each side quickly. Add the butter and cook the steaks for one minute on each side. Add the Worcestershire sauce and the hot sauce and cook another 1 to 3 minutes per side, depending on the thickness of the steaks and the doneness desired. Pour the brandy over the steaks, wait 10 seconds, and then set aflame. When the flame goes out, remove the steaks to a serving platter. Reduce the remaining liquid in the skillet and serve it over the steaks. The steaks should be served rare.

Variation: For a heavier sauce, add 1/4 cup cream after removing the steaks from the skillet.

Serving suggestion: This main dish is excellent when served with a fresh spinach salad and twice-baked potatoes.

Serves: 4

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