

PEPPER

Pepper is indigenous to the Malabar coast of India. The plant is a woody vine with swollen nodes and large oval leaves climbing to about 5m high. The flowers are borne on spikes about 10cm long and the fruits are small berries which become red when ripe.



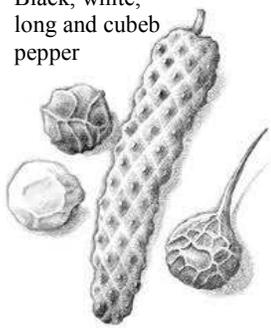
Pepper is one of the oldest and most popular spices in the world. The Romans were the first to guarantee supply of this precious spice, they built large warehouses in Alexandria and made it the principal port for trade between Europe and Asia. One entrance to the city was named Pepper Gate. By the Middle ages, pepper was considered desirable currency and dowries, taxes, rents etc. were frequently paid in peppercorns.

The name pepper comes from the Sanskrit word 'pippali' meaning berry. There are known to be 3 genera in the pepper family: *Piper nigrum*, *Piper longum* and *Piper cubeba*.

Piper nigrum produces the black, white, green and red peppercorns. Black pepper is made from the unripe berries which are allowed to ferment, encouraging the growth of a fungus, which provides the black colour and develops latent flavours in the berries. The whole spikes of berries are cut and dried under the sun until they turn black and wrinkly, then they are removed from the spikes and sold commercially as black pepper. White pepper is produced from berries that are fully ripe and have turned red. They are soaked in water or lime water for several days. This process rots the outer skin (the pericarp) of the berries so that it can be rubbed off. The washed, husked berries are dried under the sun to yield the greyish-white product called white pepper.

White pepper has the heat of black pepper, but the aromatic properties that distinguish black pepper from other sources of culinary heat seem to reside in the pericarp. Green pepper and red pepper are produced, respectively, from berries that are young green or fully mature red. The berries are dried artificially on very high heat to ensure the colour is preserved. Green and red peppers are occasionally available fresh, still on long spikes, but more often they are sold pickled in brine or vinegar, or freeze dried.

Black, white, long and cubeb pepper



Piper longum produces the long peppercorn which looks rather like a catkin, this pepper was popular in Greek and Roman times, it is difficult to find it now, even in its indigenous home in Malabar, India.

Piper cubeba grows mostly in the wild and produces the Cubeb pepper. The fruits are similar in size to a peppercorn, with a distinctive 'tail'. Cubeb can be used as a pepper substitute and can be bought in some special food stores.

Pink peppercorn (Schinus molle) is not true peppercorn but it has a pungency associated with peppercorns and is similar in size. The small plant has numerous compound leaves with slender, symmetrical, leaflets on each side of the leaf. The crushed, dried berries are sweet and slightly scented with a peppery aftertaste. They are valued for their beautiful dark pink colour, when mixed with other peppercorns in a clear mill, they make a very attractive and 'in vogue' table condiment.

Pink peppercorn



Szechuan pepper (Zanthoxylum piperitum) - also known as *Anise pepper*, *Japanese pepper* - is the husk of the red berry of the prickly ash tree. The berries contain bitter black seeds which are not used. The ripe seed pods open out in a similar way to the star anise, that is why the spice is also called anise pepper. This pepper has a sweet peppery taste with a hint of citrus flavour, it is used mostly in Chinese cooking and is one of the spices in Chinese 'five spices' powder. The leaves can be dried and ground to make the Japanese spice shansho.



Szechuan pepper

Pepper is used worldwide in virtually all savoury cooking and at all stages of the cooking process including the preserving and flavouring of tasteless and insipid food (quite likely in the first stage of decay!!!). Apart from its own special seasoning, pepper also enhances other flavours. In sweet cooking, pepper is sometimes added to fruit cakes and gingerbreads. A few whole black peppercorns (together with the 'usuals' like cinnamon, clove, nutmeg) add an unexpected note to the classic dessert 'pears in mulled wine'.

Medicinally, pepper is said to possess cooling, fever reducing properties. It is being used as an aid in the relief of nausea, vertigo and arthritic disorders. In Asia and Africa, it has been used since the year 'dot' for the treatment of anything from toothache to paralysis! Some natives believe that body odour produced after eating a substantial amount of black pepper repels mosquitoes!