

## PEPPER

Having talked about salt a couple of weeks ago, I thought it only fair that pepper should get its chance. Did you know that pepper has been cultivated for over 2000 years, and today accounts for about one quarter of the world's spice trade? During the Middle Ages, pepper was so valuable, literally worth its weight in gold, that the fortunes of cities and countries like Venice and Portugal were won and lost in the pepper trade. And early English judges, seeking to identify something of value to define a contract, used a single peppercorn.

Peppercorns are the fruit of *Piper nigrum*, an evergreen climbing vine native to the jungles of India's Malabar Coast. While India is still a source of much of the world's pepper, Indonesia and Malaysia also are major producers. Black, white and green peppercorns are all products of the same plant, but each is harvested and handled differently. The peppercorns grow on clustered spikes of perhaps 50 berries and are hand-picked at just the right time for the desired black, white or green peppercorns.

For black pepper, the clusters are plucked when not quite ripe, then left in piles to ferment. After a few days the individual berries are spread out and left to dry in the sun for two or three more days, until they are shriveled and nearly black. The finest black peppercorns are said to be Tellicherry from India because they are larger and the most flavorful.

White pepper is derived from the fully ripened berries that are just about to turn red. After harvest the clusters are packed in bags and soaked in water for more than a week. This softens the outer coating which is removed to reveal a gray center. The gray peppercorns are then spread out in the sun to dry, where they are naturally bleached to almost white. Malaysian Sarawak and Indonesian Muntok are said to be the finest of the white peppercorns.

Green peppercorns are harvested when the berry is immature, like black pepper, but the berries aren't allowed to dry. Green peppercorns are either packed in brine or freeze-dried and dehydrated. They have a fresher flavor and less pungency than black or white pepper. Pink peppercorns aren't a member of the pepper family at all, but rather a faintly sweet and pungent berry off the *baies rose* plant from Madagascar. They used to be banned by the Food and Drug Administration, but now they're considered safe to eat. (By whom, I wonder?) Other so-called pink peppercorns are the seeds of the Christmas berry and can cause allergic reactions in children and are toxic in large quantities. (Oh great.)

Pepper is available ground, coarsely ground, cracked and as whole peppercorns. I like to buy whole peppercorns and grind or crush my own, as whole peppercorns hold their freshness, flavor and essential oils longer. Ground pepper deteriorates in about four months and can take on a bitter taste. Freshly ground pepper is incredibly more flavorful than the pre-ground stuff, and is very easy to achieve. I have an old brass hand-cranked coffee grinder that I use for my ground pepper. It holds a lot and with a hand crank, it's easier to get a lot of ground pepper quickly than using the kind of grinder where you have to twist the top back and forth. Cracked pepper can be made by putting some whole peppercorns in a plastic bag and either crushing them with a rolling pin or with a heavy saucepan or skillet.

In cooking with pepper, I add ground pepper towards the end of the cooking time, so the flavor doesn't get dulled. When cooking a dish like a pepper steak, that uses a lot of fresh pepper over high heat, make sure you have good ventilation as the cooking pepper can cause irritation.

For pepper steak, I like to crush some whole peppercorns, including black, white and green, with a heavy skillet or saucepan. Then I press the crushed pepper into each side of a good steak and sprinkle on a little salt. I pan-fry the steak in a heavy skillet in a tablespoon of oil and a tablespoon of butter. When the steak are cooked the way I like them, I sauté some chopped shallots in the left-over steak drippings, then add some red wine and boil it down to a syrupy consistency. Then I turn off the heat and stir in a pat of unsalted butter and spoon the mixture over my steak.. A green salad and some excellent cheese for dessert, plus the rest of the red wine to drink, and you have an elegant dinner. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Cook.