

Black gold

By Regina Schrambling, Special to The Times

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FORGET arugula. The true symbol of how far American cooking has come in the last few decades is black pepper.

When I went to restaurant school in 1983, our bible of ingredients, "Wenzel's Menu Maker," listed only two varieties, Malabar and Tellicherry, but neither from the southwestern coast of India where those particular peppercorns are actually grown. It insisted that "the only use of black pepper is as a condiment." And its recipes never specified freshly ground pepper in an era when big tins of pallid powder were stored near the stove and every table held a pepper shaker, not a mill. Generally, you can use them all interchangeably at the table. For cooking, however, some take more kindly to sugar than others and are better suited to dessert. Overall, you can never go wrong reaching for Tellicherry for a recipe.

Right now I have black peppercorns in my kitchen from Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam and Ecuador, in addition to bags of Tellicherry and Malabar. And I'm as likely to use any of them in a dessert or as a crust on meat as I am to relegate them to a mere finishing touch for food. Pepper has come into its own as an ingredient, not least because of the renaissance of salumi, for which it is crucial to the flavor and curing, and to the point that Santa Monica entrepreneur Jing Tio of Le Sanctuaire has invested in six Indonesian farms to produce artisanal pepper for chefs and other caring cooks.

The whole spice rack has undergone an upgrade as cooks have gotten more discerning and the world has shrunk, thanks to frequent fliers searching out new sources of the usual allspice-to-turmeric lineup on most shelves. But black pepper -- the world's most popular spice for millennia -- has benefited most from the new awareness that terroir matters, as much with food as with wine. No spice-respecting cook ever settles for the gray stuff in a tin anymore than he or she would choose Nestle's semi-sweet when single-source choices are available from Venezuela and myriad other countries. The all-purpose berries sold as "black pepper" may add heat. If you want nuance and resonance, you need a "varietal." Maybe two or three.

Pepper connoisseurs have always known that Tellicherry is the surest sign of quality on a label. Black pepper is native to India, and the peppercorns produced there have the fullest flavor, aroma and pungency of any in the world. The volatile oils are what distinguish black peppercorns, and Tellicherry's are most redolent.

Taste the differences

BUT size is also a consideration -- bigger is better. Some of the peppercorns imported from other tropical countries can be nearly as good as those from India, with subtly different flavor. Floral is not a word you would think of first with peppercorns, but Sarawak, from the island of Borneo, is just that.

All true peppercorns in the *Piper nigrum* family are berries from a vine that grows anywhere around the equator. Those from the mountainous southwestern coast of India are allowed to mature but not ripen before they are picked, ideally by hand. Malabar peppercorns are harvested at the same time as Tellicherry but grow lower on the same vines. Both types are blanched, then air-dried in the sun until they turn dark and aromatic.

Color is not an indicator of quality, according to Tio. As he notes, all-black peppercorns are not found in nature; the peppercorns should be deep brown to almost purple-black. What is more important is the taste and smell: Piperine gives peppercorns pungency, while volatile oils make them aromatic, Tio says.

Crush a few Tellicherry peppercorns with a mortar and pestle and you immediately smell why the name has such mystique. The aroma is beyond robust and almost sweet, while the flavor is acutely well-balanced. Taste it and you feel the heat immediately. Malabar peppercorns are smaller and less potent, both to the nose and on the palate. But they can be hotter; you feel the pungency all the way across your tongue.

Sarawak peppercorns, which are air-dried indoors and retain more flavor, are also exceptional. Crush even a couple and you can sense why pastry chefs such as Pierre Herme are so taken with them for desserts made with berries, pineapple and apricots. The fragrance is not strong but it is peppery and sweet, almost like allspice, and the heat finishes strongly. These go particularly well with cream and butter and sugar, and would even work in a cheesecake, as Marcus Samuelsson makes with black peppercorns.

Another contender for the black ribbon is Lampong, the kind Tio produces organically in Indonesia, which contains more piperine. The peppercorns are relatively small and the aroma is subtle, almost hinting of cinnamon, but the heat and flavor are extremely well-balanced. Tio, however, says they are most valuable for pure pungency. Though Tellicherry has a "cucumber finish," he says, Lampong has no finish; it is just extremely strong. (Most of his chef clients buy top-of-the-line Tellicherry for cooking and Lampong for preparations such as stock, in which great peppercorns would be wasted.)

Vietnam produces exceptional white pepper and now is becoming a leading exporter of black peppercorns. (It already outdistances Brazil with coffee and may do the same with spices; most of what is sold as generic black pepper in the United States has traditionally come from Brazil.) Its peppercorns have an aroma that is more complex than strong; you can almost whiff incense. The heat and flavor are just as rounded.

Peppercorns from Ecuador, which are very high in piperine, have a sweet, searing fragrance and intense heat; to me it seems as if you feel them more than taste them.

Cook with it, bake with it

LE SANCTUAIRE sells top-grade, extra-bold Tellicherry for \$60 a pound and Lampong for \$12 a pound. Tio says spices should be judged by a "see, smell, taste" standard, but what he sells he also has analyzed by a lab to be sure the peppercorns have the right oil content and density (to be sure they have not been over-dried) and are free of pesticides. Kalustyans.com carries all the varieties above, for \$4.99 (Sarawak) to \$5.99 (Lampong) for a 4-ounce bag.

(Green peppercorns are just what they sound like: picked before they are mature and then either dried, freeze-dried or pickled in brine. White peppercorns are actually fully ripe black ones that have had the husk removed. Pink peppercorns are a different species, while Sichuan peppercorns come from still another family.)

Any of the black peppercorn "varietals" will transform any dish if you do nothing more than grind it over just before serving. But you can do so much more, with sweet as well as with savory recipes. Just a pinch of black pepper in a pumpkin pie filling or gingerbread batter will add a pungent undertone; you can even sneak a little into the cinnamon coating for snickerdoodles for a hint of heat. But as much as a quarter-cup mixed with panko will create a vibrant, crunchy crust for seared lamb or pork chops, or steaks, or even fresh tuna. Any roast benefits from a coating of crushed peppercorns too.

Peppercorns, whole or crushed, are also easy to use to infuse sauces such as a custardy sabayon to spoon over steamed green beans or grilled fish. Add them to Port and poached pears for a lively but light dessert; a few allspice berries crushed with the peppercorns will intensify the complexity. (Allspice and peppercorns have a natural affinity. The French make a blend called mignonette by combining black and white peppercorns in a grinder with allspice berries and sometimes coriander seeds in a 2-to-1 ratio.)

Black pepper is also underutilized in baking, as far as I'm concerned, maybe because I grew up eating biscuits with pepper gravy. It suits any yeast-bread dough, particularly one with prosciutto or pancetta, but is an even more direct pleasure mixed with Parmigiano-Reggiano in a quick bread that can be sliced to serve with drinks or a salad and toasted for breakfast.

Whole black peppercorns are also an essential ingredient in a good stock, a crab boil or corned beef.

When coarsely crushed, peppercorns take on a more mellow flavor. You can do this with a mortar and pestle or by putting the peppercorns in a paper bag and running a rolling pin over it.

Whole black peppercorns have an enviable shelf life; they keep at least a year if stored in an airtight container in the dark. Once they're ground, the flavor starts dissipating until all that's left is a sneeze risk. It's better to keep a full pepper mill than a small dish of ground pepper handy to the stove. Or, these days, several pepper mills.

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