

INGREDIENT

A World of Peppers

Chiles bring a lot more to the table than just heat

BY MARICEL E. PRESILLA PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES OSELAND

WHEN I BEGAN GROWING peppers in my New Jersey backyard, seven years ago, I tried to restrain my mad-collector instinct at first, planting only the hot cultivars I knew would take well to the region's warm, humid summers: fiery habaneros, natives of Mexico's Yucatán peninsula; floral-tasting scotch bonnets, the habanero's cousins from the Caribbean; and reliable jalapeños and serranos, the workhorses of Mexican cooking. But soon, encouraged by a bumper crop, I became more adventurous. Within three years I had graduated to about a hundred cultivars, most of them central to the cooking of the Americas, the birthplace of peppers. Now, during the summer, peppers occupy every sunny patch of soil in my backyard—a vista of beautiful, thriving plants bearing fruits as bright and dazzling as Christmas tree lights.

The experience has been a fascinating chapter in my long quest to understand the astonishing botanical diversity of the *Capsicum* genus, to which all peppers belong, and to explore the myriad ways in which cooks in my native Latin America have come to use these ingredients. The visual guide that appears on the following pages features 48 peppers, some well known in the United States and some obscure—a cross section representing a vast range of size, color, heat, and flavor. I've been able to grow them as seedlings from domestic purveyors and use them all interchangeably in my cooking. (See THE PANTRY, page 108, for sources.) In doing so I've gained an immense appreciation for the versatility of these fruits. They not only add heat to food but lend beguiling tastes and bring sweet, sour, and salty flavors into sharper focus, whether I'm using them in a slow-simmered Peruvian chicken stew, a tangy ceviche, or a fresh table salsa.

The study of chiles has given me a deeper understanding of Latin American cuisines, revealing, for example, how a preference for hot peppers among indigenous populations has profoundly shaped the cooking of Mexico, Guatemala, Peru, and Bolivia; how the Spanish inclination toward sweet varieties like the cubanelle and the *ají dulce* has helped define the cuisines of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic, where pre-Columbian cultures have largely disappeared; and how an African penchant for fiery pepper condiments traveled back across the Atlantic to influence the foods of the Caribbean and Brazil.

It is no accident that peppers are the backbone of New World cooking: they originated in South America, probably in a region encompassing parts of Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina, and Bolivia. The *Capsicum* genus,



a branch of the Solanaceae family, contains 31 known species, only five of which are domesticated. Over the centuries, those five species traveled from their places of origin; they were manipulated by farmers so they'd produce a kaleidoscopic array of subvarieties. The majority

of cultivated peppers today are of the species *C. annuum*, which evolved from a tiny, devilishly hot wild pepper and now comprises most of the commercial peppers available in the United States, including jalapeños. *C. chinense* peppers exhibit a wide range of heat levels and, often, tropical-fruit and herbal notes. *C. baccatum* encompasses the most important cooking peppers in the Andes, like the fruity *ají amarillo*. *C. frutescens* peppers are generally small and slender, ripening to a bright red; they've found a special niche in Central America and other parts of the world. Finally, there are the Andean *C. pubescens* peppers, lovers of high elevations and cool climes; the species exhibits only a few pod types, of which the chubby *rocoto* (a mainstay of Peruvian and Bolivian cooking) is the best known.

All capsicums are fruits (technically berries) with a usually lustrous skin and a ribbed and seed-filled interior. All contain phenolic compounds called capsaicinoids, which account for their heat and are concentrated in the fruit's soft, pithy placenta. That heat can range from a mild, lingering tingle to a clean, sharp bite to a ferocious burn—sometimes in cultivars that look remarkably alike on the outside.

On first encountering capsicums in the Greater Antilles, Spanish explorers dubbed them pimientos, no doubt because their piquancy reminded them of black pepper (pimienta). Eventually, they also took to calling them chiles, after the Nahuatl word for peppers, *chilli*, which they learned while conquering Mexico. Adding to the confusion, many Spanish settlers also adopted the indigenous Caribbean Taíno word *ají*, which they disseminated throughout South America. When I speak or write of capsicums generally in English, I use just *pepper*; in Spanish, I'm more discerning, favoring the predominant term for peppers in whatever country I'm writing about: *chile*, *ají*, *pimiento*, and so on. For the peppers in the visual guide, I've used the most widely accepted commercial names.

Today, capsicums, which spread far and wide along expanding trade routes after the Spanish and Portuguese conquests, are deeply woven into the fabric of culinary life in many parts of the world, especially Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent. It is in their natal Latin America, though, that they find their most diverse expression.



AJÍ LIMÓN

This elegantly contoured Andean cultivar reaches a length of about two and a half inches and has a charming, citrusy flavor and a pleasant yet potent heat comparable to that of the northern Peruvian *ají limo*. Sometimes called the Peruvian yellow pepper, it ripens from green to a lustrous lemon yellow. (*C. baccatum*.)



CAYENNE

From its South American home, the bitingly hot cayenne traveled across the world with Portuguese explorers. It is now widely cultivated in North America. The seasoning powder sold commercially as cayenne pepper is no longer made exclusively with cayennes but, usually, with a blend of other hot cultivars. (*C. annuum*.)



CUBANELLE

This is the fresh sweet pepper of choice in Hispanic Caribbean cooking. Cubanelles take on a red color when fully mature but are normally sold when they are pale green. This five-inch-long pepper is ideal for frying; that explains why it's sometimes called Italian frying pepper. (*C. annuum*.)



AJÍ SANTA CRUZ

The bright color and pungent fruitiness of this three-inch-long Bolivian pepper make it an ideal replacement for the orange-hued (and sometimes harder to find) *ají escabeche*, typically used in northern Peruvian cooking. It grows on a tall plant that needs plenty of space and sunlight. (*C. baccatum*.)



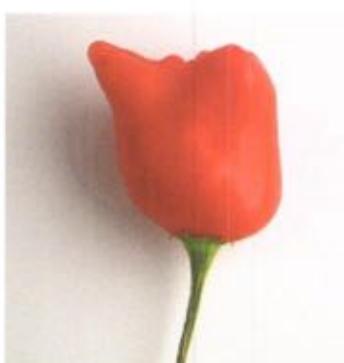
CAYENNE (GOLD)

This five-inch-long, smooth-skinned, yellow cayenne was developed in the U.S. It is a cousin of the more widely known, red-colored long cayenne (left) and, with its clean, direct piquancy, works well in Peruvian ceviches (raw fish dishes) when you can't find the more traditional *ají limo* or *ají amarillo*. (*C. annuum*.)



ARIBIBI GUSANO

To me, this fascinating Bolivian pepper resembles a caterpillar. The roughly one-and-a-half-inch-long pod is deeply aromatic and, like many members of the *C. chinense* species, deliciously hot. The aribibi gusano gives an intense aroma to fresh salsas, making for an unusual garnish. (*C. chinense*.)



CHAPEAU DE FRADE

Shaped like a bishop's crown, with a pronounced lobed and concave tip, this very hot pepper is called *pimenta cambuci* in its native Brazil. It is almost too beautiful to eat, but its fruity flavor is as alluring as its curious silhouette. I like to use it raw in seafood cocktails and savory fruit salsas. (*C. baccatum*.)



BELIZE SWEET HABANERO

Seeds from this small, winsome red pepper came from the town of Punta Gorda in Belize. It resembles the much hotter scotch bonnet pepper more closely than the smoother-skinned habaneros of the neighboring Yucatán. Like the *ají dulce*, its *chinense* cousin, it is very aromatic and only moderately hot. (*C. chinense*.)



CHILE DE AGUA

This six-inch-long Mexican pepper has a shape reminiscent of the much milder *poblano*'s. Oaxacan cooks often stuff it with a savory pork hash. They also cut it into strips, sauté it with onions and epazote, finish the mixture with milk and fresh cheese, and serve it with warm tortillas. (*C. annuum*.)



EARBOB

This earring-shaped South American pepper has an intense heat more widely associated with some cultivars of the *C. chinense* species. Crush a couple of pods lightly with some salt and add them to chicken soup for a dose of fruity heat. (*C. baccatum*.)



ECUADORAN AJÍ

On an Ecuadorian table there's almost always a tangy fresh condiment made with red onions and this pungent red pepper. Maturing to a length of four inches or so, the Ecuadoran *ají* ripens from a deep green to an arresting bright red. (*C. baccatum*.)



GRENADA SEASONING

This medium-size pepper from the island of Grenada, in the Lesser Antilles, has an intense tropical-fruit aroma but is milder than many other Caribbean peppers; it is similar in flavor to the *ají dulce*. It is an excellent choice for cooked sauces and bean dishes. (*C. chinense*.)

**MARABA**

Probably named after a municipality in Brazil's Amazon region, this small, hot pepper is easily distinguished by its blunt tip and the attractive purple shading on its golden surface. I use it raw whenever I want to add a combination of exciting color, potent heat, and deep herbal aromas to my food. (C. chinense.)

**MIRASOL (PURPLE VARIETY)**

Not to be confused with the Andean aji mirasol, the Mexican mirasol is a moderately hot, three-inch-long chile that normally ripens to a bright red; a purple cultivar is shown here. Better known dried, in which case it is called guajillo, it adds sharpness and a bright color to cooked sauces. (C. annuum.)

**NUMEX BIG JIM**

This stunning, foot-long pepper is one of many descendants of the New Mexico pod-type cultivars developed by the horticulturist Fabián García in the early 20th century. Easy to peel and mildly hot, it is ideal for stuffing or fire-roasting; it's also delicious roasted, cut into strips, and sprinkled with olive oil. (C. annuum.)

**NUMEX SANDÍA**

Crossbred from a Californian anaheim chile and a New Mexican pod-type pepper called the NuMex 9, the sandía is easier to peel than the anaheim and much hotter than either of its parents. But, as with many New Mexican varieties, its heat does not linger and is balanced by a fine, apple-peel flavor. (C. annuum.)

**PIMENTO DE PADRÓN**

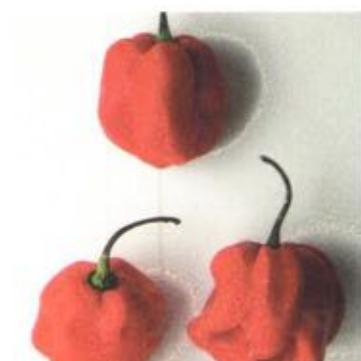
Though these tiny, thin-skinned peppers hail from Spain, they were likely developed from Mexican seeds. Very tasty when fried in olive oil and sprinkled with coarse salt (see page 32 for a recipe), these peppers are generally mild, but it is not uncommon to find a few in a bunch that are hot enough to make you gasp. (C. annuum.)

**POBLANO**

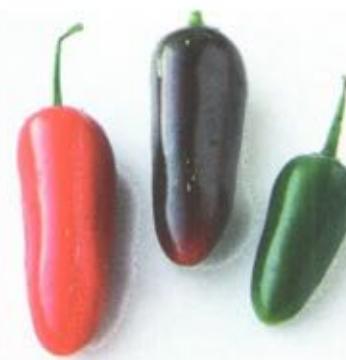
In Mexico, the large, moderately hot poblano is the quintessential pepper for stuffing. Some cultivars mature from a deep green to mahogany; others ripen to a chocolate brown. When dried, the greener peppers become wrinkled and dark brown ancho chiles, which are essential to cooked sauces and moles. (C. annuum.)

**QUINTISHO**

This roughly half-inch-long, aromatic-tasting Bolivian hot pepper ripens from green to gold and can be used in a number of dishes requiring extra heat. It is sometimes listed as a C. baccatum, other times as a C. annuum, but its greenish white and purple flowers are consistent with C. chinense cultivars'. (C. baccatum.)

**RED HABANERO**

A few slivers of this flavorful and versatile little pepper add a splash of spectacular color and a deep herbal flavor—as well as ample heat—to fresh salsas. For a milder experience and the same, wonderful flavor, try the Suave habanero, developed by the Chile Pepper Institute in Las Cruces, New Mexico. (C. chinense.)

**SERRANO**

Widely available in the U.S., the Mexican serrano is a small, pungent chile with a clean, sharp flavor. Mexicans favor it over jalapeños when making fresh salsas or guacamole. It is also delicious pickled (see page 32 for a recipe). (C. annuum.)

**STARFISH**

This whimsically shaped Brazilian pepper is very hot and has a crisp, thin flesh. The pod type is similar to that of the Brazilian chapeau de frade (see page 29). I use starfish peppers as a garnish; they also add fruitiness and heat to fresh salsas and vinaigrettes. (C. baccatum.)

**TABASCO**

The tabasco pepper is the best-known domesticated variety of the C. frutescens species. It's not known when tabasco peppers first migrated north from Central America, but they are now inextricably associated with the Louisiana-made sauce of the same name. (C. frutescens.)

**TRINIDAD PERFUME**

This is the Trinidadian counterpart to the popular and much smaller aji dulce. A super cooking pepper, it has all the complex flavors of a hot chinense like the habanero but delivers mild heat and thus requires less restraint on the part of the cook. (C. chinense.)