



ON THE PEPPER TRAIL

JANE MUNDY DISCOVERS CAMBODIA'S TASTE SENSATION – KAMPOT PEPPER

ALL PICTURES: CHARLES FOX

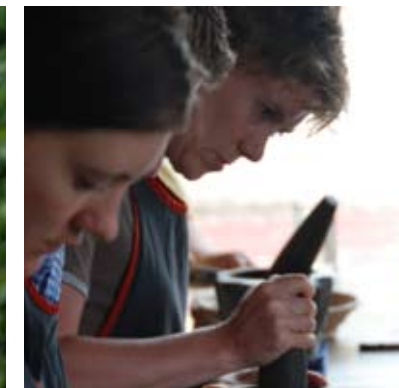
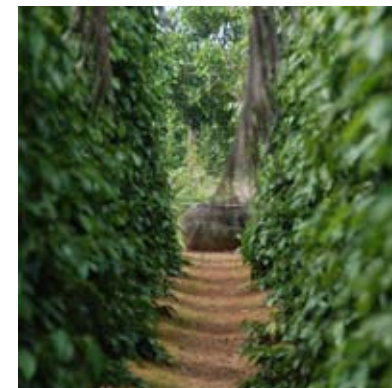
In the early 1970s every top restaurant in Paris was said to use Cambodian Kampot pepper. Today, America's two biggest food magazines, *Bon Appetit* and *Gourmet*, predict that the Cambodian food is the new 'it' cuisine for 2008. Pepper is pivotal in Khmer cooking, so move over, swanky salts – it's Kampot pepper's turn to seize the limelight as foodie bibles decree that no self-respecting kitchen anywhere should be without it.

The pepper plant is thought to have come from the Malabar region of India. It has been harvested since the 13th century, and by 1873 the export trade was brisk. But that year marked the beginning of the Aceh war in Indonesia, and the Sultan of Aceh burned down the pepper plantations rather than leave them in the hands of his country's Dutch enemies.

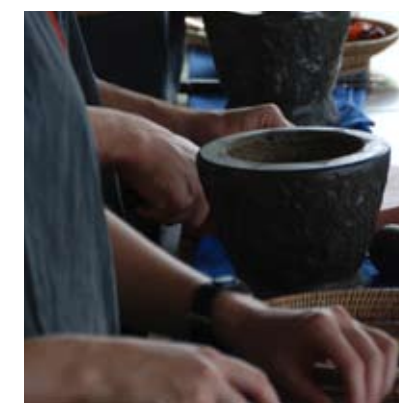
Some of the pepper production then moved to southern Cambodia, mainly the Kampot region three hours from Phnom Penh. Before the 1970s, French chefs had a constant supply of the fragrant spice shipped over, but the Khmer Rouge (1975-79) flooded the plains and grew only rice.

It has taken a few decades for Cambodia and the pepper plantations to become re-established, but the plant is primed to reign again as the world's most sought-after pepper. And fortunately for food lovers, the crops are yielding. Plantation farmers around Kampot are beginning to reap what they sow, thanks to traditional methods practised for hundreds of years.

The majority of farmers grow pepper vines along 'standards' – vertical poles of dead wood. I visited two pepper plantations just outside Kampot in January. It was apparently too early then to predict a good harvest, although the neat rows of vines were heavy with clumps of green peppercorns (they look like runner beans on



Left, Cooking schools in Phnom Penh teach students to use Kampot pepper along with typical Cambodian ingredients (above) Far left, A pepper farm in Kampot



steroids). Each vine takes about three years to start producing and can yield around two to three kilos per year for 15 years, although optimal conditions can produce five kilos.

As peppercorns ripen, they are green, then take on a red colour when fully mature. The peppercorns are sun-dried for a few days, until they turn black. At that point, they are shaken, graded and sorted, all by hand; the biggest corns are 'number one' grade. White pepper is also matured on the tree, but it is soaked in water for a few days and rubbed to separate the husk from the white corn. It has a milder flavour and is used to spice delicate dishes. This is in contrast to Western cuisine, where white pepper is generally used in light-coloured sauces.

The green corn is the young fruit, picked on the vine, and is usually served in 'clumps', with the vine attached. It has a shelf life of just a few days, so it is harvested, sold and eaten right away. It can also be pickled in brine or vinegar.

"The preferred way for export would be to freeze-dry the peppercorn to retain the green colour and flavour, but this technique is out of the question in Cambodia for now," says Jerome Benezech. Refrigeration, is for now, cost-prohibitive. Benezech is a partner at FarmLink, an organisation that works directly with farmers to provide fair-trade opportunities and help develop better marketing practices, quality control and packaging.

"The farmers know how to grow pepper. They know more about growing than us," Benezech explains. "FarmLink works with NGOs [non-governmental associations] such as Cambodia Agriculture Value Chain Program [CAVAC], to get money for irrigation, and Groupe de Recherche et d'Echanges Technologiques [GRET], which is involved in the Geographical Indication Protection program and marketing." What Kampot farmers need most is a champagne-style trademark on the name to protect the product and keep fakes at bay.

So what makes Kampot pepper so special? Its taste is comparable to the complexity of a fine red wine: several tastes affect different areas of the palate. The first hit of flavour starts at the tip of your mouth, then it hits the top and finishes at the back of the palate. The first 'hit' is explosive, yet aromatic – flowery jasmine with a hint of eucalyptus. Then the smooth, peppery bouquet gives way to a final taste of lingering tannins.

Black Kampot pepper is ubiquitous in Khmer cooking. As well as for seasoning, it is a side dish in itself: crushed – not ground – and



PEPPER LIME DIP

For a simple way to incorporate this Cambodian ingredient into your next meal, squeeze the juice of a few fresh limes into equal parts of finely ground black Kampot pepper and salt, and mix into a paste. Although deceptively simple, this flavourful concoction adds zing to chicken wings, barbecued meats or even French fries. It also goes well spread on top of grilled fish.

Above, Harvesting the pepper farms
Left, Black and white pepper

SPICE UP YOUR LIFE

Get a taste of Kampot pepper at these venues across Cambodia:

Phnom Penh

Friends the Restaurant
215 Street 13, Phnom Penh
tel +855 (0)12 802072
www.friends-international.org

Frizz Restaurant & Cooking School
67 Street 240
tel +855 (0)23 220953
www.frizz-restaurant.com/index

Garden Center Cafe 1 & 2
23 Street 57
tel +855 (0)23 363002
www.gardencentercafe.com

Kampot

Blissful Guesthouse & Restaurant
Off the river front
tel +855 (0)12 513024

Epic Arts Cafe
Near Psar Granath (Old Market Area),
tel +855 (0)12 350824

Les Manguiers Guesthouse & Restaurant
A few kilometres north of Kampot town
tel +855 (0)92 330050

Rikititavi Restaurant
Riverside Road
tel +855 (0)12 235102
www.rikititavi-kampot.com

Siem Reap

Amok Restaurant
The Passage, behind Bar Street
tel +855 (0)63 965407

Banana Leaf Restaurant
Pub Street (Old Market Area)
tel +855 (0)12 800309

Champey Restaurant
Mondul 1, Svay Dongkum Commune
tel +855 (0)63 964713

mixed with salt and lime, then served as a dip or condiment with a big 'wow' factor.

Countless Cambodian street stalls serve up grilled fish and meats with pepper lime sauce, but if you aren't feeling that adventurous, start at one of the many restaurants in Siem Reap. You can also comb the streets near Phnom Penh's waterfront, stopping at a restaurant like Friends. Besides turning out terrific food, Friends provides training for street youth and subsequently finds them jobs in commercial kitchens.

"The flavour of green peppercorns is like nothing else," says Gustav Auer, Friends' business coordinator and chef. "They are incredible. Pound the pepper gently, just one time, to bring out the flavour. Fry very quickly in sunflower oil – too long will make it bitter." Auer buys peppercorns at Phnom Penh's Central Market for the best quality – black all year round, and green when in season from September to February.

To experience Khmer cuisine hands-on, Frits Mulder at Frizz restaurant in Phnom Penh conducts cooking classes for US\$20 in an open-air setting near the Mekong River. Plan to spend the day, starting with a trip to the market, enjoying your own lunch creations, and ending with a drive back to town. "Even though I have been cooking Khmer food for several years, I'd never made green or red curry this good since attending the cooking class," says Canadian Lorian Roberts, who spends several months every

year in Cambodia. “And chef taught us how to make rice porridge with white peppercorns...delicious.”

Pure Kampot pepper can't be found outside Asia—yet. But Cambodia is currently conducting studies on the creation of geographical rights for key products such as pepper from Kampot, palm sugar from Kompong Speu and silk from Banteay Meanchey to name a few. Once the products have been examined to see if they meet the criteria to meet aforementioned geographical indication (GI) standards, it is hoped these goods will help streamline trade and promote exports. A GI designation for Kampot pepper means increased marketing, along with fair and stable prices for Cambodian farmers. “When we start exporting, it will be important for Cambodia and for the rest

of the world to realise that Kampot pepper is *the* quality product, just like champagne,” says Benezech.

After my trip to Cambodia, I was a Kampot convert. Returning home, I immediately chucked out the peppercorns in my cupboard and replaced them with flavourful, fragrant Kampot pepper.

What a difference it makes in recipes such as classic peppercorn sauce with cream and brandy; just add double the pepper. Compared with mild and subtle Kampot pepper, most other black peppers taste bitter and harsh.

Today, pepper makes up one fifth of the world's trade in spices. However, until I see Kampot pepper on my local restaurant menus and grocery shelves in Canada, which should be soon, I'll be taking a small grinder full of Kampot pepper when dining out. ■



GETTING THERE

Kampot is 120km away from Phnom Penh, a three-hour drive. Most hotels and travel agents in the capital can arrange a car and driver for about US\$50-60 return. *Chamkar Mrich* (pepper plantation tours) can be booked through FarmLink (tel +855 (0)12 365321, www.farmlink-cambodia.com) and pepper can be bought directly from the farm. The highest quality sells for \$8 per kilo but 'number two' quality is about \$1 or less. Apart from the dried spice, fresh green peppercorns on the vine, green pepper in brine or vinegar, and white pepper are also available depending on the time of year.

Above right, black corns are crushed, not ground; green corns are pounded then fried (above left)

រសជាតិព្រេងកំពត

ទស្សនាវដ្តីអាហារដ៏ធំបំផុតរបស់អាមេរិកចំនួនពីរ គឺ *Bon Appetit* និង *Gourmet* បានព្យាករណ៍ថា ព្រេងកំពត គឺជាគ្រឿងផ្សំសំខាន់ ដ៏ពេញនិយមមួយប្រភេទសម្រាប់ឆ្នាំ២០០៨ ។ ដូច្នេះ តើអ្វីដែលធ្វើអោយ ព្រេងកំពតមានលក្ខណៈពិសេសបែបនេះ ? ប្រជាជនខ្មែរនិយាយថា គ្រាប់ព្រេងដែលជាគ្រឿងផ្សំសំខាន់សម្រាប់ម្ហូបខ្មែរ មានរូបរាងដូចជា មុខស្នា ដែលជាសញ្ញាសំណាងមួយ ។ បើនិយាយអំពីរសជាតិវិញ ព្រេងកំពតអាចប្រៀបប្រដូចទៅនឹងភាពស្ងួតស្ងាញ់នៃស្រាគ្រហមដ៏ល្អឬឆ្ងាញ់ : រសជាតិជាច្រើនមានឥទ្ធិពលលើផ្នែកផ្សេងៗនៃក្រអូមមាត់ ។ ការដឹងរសជាតិដំបូងចាប់ផ្តើមនៅបច្ចុប្បន្ន បន្ទាប់មក នៅកំពូលក្រអូមមាត់ ហើយនៅទីបញ្ចប់នៅក្រោយក្រអូម ។ រសជាតិដំបូងគឺ ក្តៅ ក្រអូម - ផ្កាម្លិះ ជាមួយនិងក្លិនប្រេងខ្យល់បន្តិច ។

Gustave Auer អ្នកសម្របសម្រួលផ្នែកអាជីវកម្ម និងចុងភៅ ប្រចាំអង្គការមិត្តសំឡាញ់ និយាយថា “រសជាតិគ្រាប់ព្រេងខ្លី មិនដូចរុក្ខជាតិផ្សេងៗទេ ។ ពួកវាមានរសជាតិពិសេសអស្ចារ្យណាស់ ។ កិនគ្រាប់ព្រេងចម្រុះតែម្តងប៉ុណ្ណោះ ដើម្បីដឹងរសជាតិ ។ លឹងវាអោយ រសជាតិដុតនៅក្នុងប្រេងផ្កាឈូកវ័ត្ត - ប្រសិនបើយូរពេកនឹងធ្វើអោយ វាចត់ ។” Auer ទិញគ្រាប់ព្រេងមានគុណភាពខ្ពស់ (ខ្លី នៅក្នុងរដូវ ចាប់ពីខែកញ្ញា ដល់ខែកុម្ភៈ និងខែពេញមួយឆ្នាំ) នៅផ្សារថ្មី ក្រុងភ្នំពេញ ។

Jerome Benezech ជាដៃគូនៅ FarmLink ដែលជាអង្គការមួយ ដែលធ្វើការដោយផ្ទាល់ជាមួយកសិករ ដើម្បីផ្តល់ឱកាសអាជីវកម្មយុត្តិធម៌ និងជួយអភិវឌ្ឍទម្លាប់អនុវត្តន៍ផ្នែកទីផ្សារ ការត្រួតពិនិត្យគុណភាព និងការវេចខ្ចប់អោយកាន់តែប្រសើរឡើង មានសេចក្តីសង្ឃឹមខ្លាំងលើ គ្រឿងទេសនេះ ។ ការសិក្សានានាកំពុងចាប់ផ្តើមផ្តល់ដល់កសិករនៅខេត្ត កំពតនូវសិទ្ធិផ្នែកទីតាំងភូមិសាស្ត្រ ចំពោះឈ្មោះយើហោ “ព្រេងកំពត” តាមរបៀបដូចគ្នាដែលទំពាំងបាយជូរមកពីតំបន់ Champagne អាចប្រើ ឈ្មោះ Champagne ដែរ ។