

Using Local Foods

This leaflet is part of a series intended as a marketing aid for farmers' market vendors.

Topics were suggested by a vendor as a means of informing and educating customers about items that could be locally grown. Herbs, spices, and condiments are the foundation of many healthful cuisines around the world. This series covers oregano, basil, hot peppers, seed spices, and cilantro—all of which are produced in the U.S. and sold at farmers' markets.

Each short, illustrated leaflet can be printed in color or black-and-white. Basic information about each food includes its history and suggested uses. Cookbooks or the Internet should be consulted for specific recipes. For more information about the Local Foods Series and local food systems, contact the National Sustainable Agriculture Information Service at **1-800-346-9140** or **www.attra.ncat.org**.



Photo: Janet Bachmann, NCAT

A memorable meal in Chihuahua, Mexico, consisted of beef cooked five different ways, served in very small portions arranged around the rim of a plate, accompanied by sauces. The pasilla sauce was made from the inner flesh of the pasilla chili after the peppers were charred on a grill, then kept in a paper bag until trapped steam loosened the flesh from the tough skin. The restaurant was located down a side street a block from our colonial hotel. There were no printed menus, only a blackboard. No one there spoke English (and I spoke little Spanish), but the family proprietors and I both understood the language of excellent food. "Es pasilla!" I exclaimed (of the sauce). "Si, Si!" the table server assented, appreciatively. Years later, I set my wintered-over pasilla chili plant outdoors. The roots somehow got through holes in the pot to the ground beneath, and the plant grew huge, covered in dozens of the long, slim, greenish-black fruits. —Katherine Adam

- 1) Andrews, Jean. 1984. Peppers: The Domesticated Capsicums. University of Texas Press, Austin. 170 p.

ATTRA Local Foods Series No. 5 – Hot Peppers (Chili Peppers)

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ATTRA Local Foods Series No. 5

Hot Peppers (Chili Peppers)



Photo: A. Carlos Herrera

A Spreading Heat

Peppers (*Capsicum* species) come in a variety of colors, shapes, flavors, and Scoville units (degrees of heat). After being introduced to the Old World from the New in the 16th century, capsicums quickly became an indispensable part of the cuisines of many nations.

Following trade routes to the East Indies established by the Portuguese, capsicums arrived and became essential ingredients in Southeast Asian dishes, as well as Indian and East and South African. The peppers used in West Africa came from The Canaries. Capsicums were introduced to southeastern Europe from India over

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Ottoman Empire land routes and to the rest of Europe via Spain.

Jean Andrews writes in *Peppers: The Domesticated Capsicums*: “No other spice ever spread so quickly. To date, 22 wild species and three varieties, as well as five domesticated species and four varieties related to these have been collected and studied. Wild ancestral forms of all but one of the domesticated species have been identified.”(1)

Scoville scale showing relative hotness of peppers

350,000–580,000	Red Savina Habanero
100,000–350,000	Habanero chili, Scotch Bonnet Pepper (<i>C. frutescens</i>), Datil pepper, Rocoto, Jamaican Hot Pepper, African Birdseye, Madame Jeanette
50,000–100,000	Thai Pepper, Malagueta Pepper, Chiltepin Pepper, Pequin Pepper
30,000–50,000	Cayenne Pepper, Aji pepper, Tabasco pepper, some Jalepeños
10,000–23,000	Serrano, some Jalepeños
2,500–8,000	Jalapeno, Guajillo, New Mexican varieties of Anaheim pepper, Hot Paprika (Hungarian Wax Pepper)
500–2,500	Anaheim, Poblano, Rocotillo
100–500	Pimiento, Pepperoncini
0	Bell Pepper

Many Peppers in Many Places

Most hot peppers come from different varieties of the plant species *Capsicum annum*. However, in countries around the world, peppers from several more species are used. For example, in Caribbean cuisine two other species—*C. chinense* and *C. frutescens*—are widely used, with some strains of pepper being specific to different islands. These Caribbean peppers have a distinctive aroma and flavor that particularly complements ingredients such as goat and lamb—as well as tropical fruits and starches. The pungent fruits of *C. chinense* (locally

known as habaneros or Congo pepper) were used by the Carib Indians of the West Indies for preparing the everlasting “pepper-pot” stew with cassareep, prepared from the juice of bitter cassava. Interestingly enough, *C. chinense* is also the species of pepper used on the other side of the world, in Thai cooking.

Brazilian cooks favor a variety of pepper types—jalapeños and (smoked) chipotles, habaneros (in sauces), pasilla, ancho/poblano, New Mexico red, and cascabel. Not surprisingly, the cuisine of Mexico also utilizes a wide variety of capsicums—mostly *C. annum*. But in the highland canyons northwest of Mexico City *C. pubescens*, a type never taken to the Old World, flourishes—a tall bush achieving a height of 6 feet, with a trunk 6 inches in diameter. This species is day-length sensitive and will not flower or set fruit if it receives more than 12 hours of direct sunlight per day. Seeds are black (rather than white or cream-colored), flowers are purple or purple-white striped, and leaves are furry. This Mexican type, known as Chili Manzano, has 1-inch, bell-pepper-shaped yellow fruits. Another member of this species is the Rocoto pepper, from Peru. Although it is similar in many ways to Manzano, Rocoto has red fruit. While these peppers are found very occasionally in produce markets near the Mexican border, seed for them can usually only be obtained through seed savers. The flavor of these peppers is fruity (like the habanero), but extremely hot.

Know Your Peppers

Jalapeños (*C. annum*) are the hot chili most familiar to Americans. They are found in most supermarkets as fresh produce, pickled, on pizzas, in con queso, salsas, and nacho sauce. The peppers called chipotles are also jalapeños, in processed form—they are smoked, then canned in a tomato-onion sauce, with spices.

Jalapeños have a fairly short growing season and can be raised as annuals over most of the U.S. Nevertheless, New Mexico is still the source of much of the U.S. supply.



Fresh jalapeños, thick-walled and fleshy, come in various sizes and can range from comparatively mild to quite hot, depending on the variety. In response to public demand, the University of New Mexico has recently succeeded in breeding some of the hotness back into mild jalapeños developed there.

Cherry and Cascabel are round chilis, often sold pickled.

Anaheim types

Anaheims, developed from seeds brought to California in the early 1900s, are a mild stuffing pepper frequently used in dishes such as chili relenos. When dried, they are an ingredient of mole sauce and chili powder. Anaheims are a thick-walled pepper.

Cubanelle types

Like Anaheims, cubanelles are stuffing peppers. These light-green, mildly hot peppers feature in certain Caribbean and Latin American dishes. The largest variety is Aconcagua (named after the famous Argentine mountain peak). Another, the heavily wrinkled Peperoncini (*C. annum* var. *annum*), is a wonderful accompaniment to Italian beef sandwiches. Another member of this pepper group, Hungarian hot wax peppers, may be red, orange, or yellow—with orange being the source of the hottest paprikas.

Sauce types

Ancho, increasingly found in American supermarkets, is the dried form of poblano chili. Mulatto (black chili), and Guajlajaro (red) are both similar to Ancho. These peppers all have distinctive taste, some heat, and are typically used in sauces. The Pasilla chili’s slim, raisin-colored fruits can be purchased in powdered form.