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Paprika



The Red Gold of Kalocsa

Some vegetables rise to greatness from their humble beginnings. Grown in countries all around the world, peppers have ancient links to royalty, come in a rainbow of colours, invented the heat index, and have a unique history as a spice. The word Capsicum in Latin (pronounced CAP-see-coom) derives from the Greek kapto “to bite”. In the broadest sense, they can be divided into two categories as either sweet or hot, but, specific names become confusing because the same pepper can have a different name depending upon how it is used or the place it is grown. Although they were botanically published in 1680, there continues to be disagreement regarding classification of specific species. The general agreement is that there are thirty-one different species thrown into the mayhem of pepper cross-breeding including those from the wilderness but only five form the basis of our home gardens: *Capsicum annuum*, *C. baccatum*, *C. chinense*, *C. frutescens*, and *C. pubescens*. It is the first of this South American dominated field, *Capsicum annuum* that plays a role in this story of vegetable intrigue.

The pepper species grown to create the spice “paprika” also includes some famous sweet and spicy cousins like Ancho, Bell Pepper, Cayenne, Cherry, Cuban, De Arbol, Jalapeno, Mirasol, Ornamental, New Mexican, Pimiento, Pequin, Serrano, Squash and Wax pod types. However, in Hungary paprika is simply another name for all

kinds of peppers. Much like curry, there is a dizzying array of paprika types, colours, and qualities because the peppers used vary in intensity by regional growing conditions. Because it is simply ground dried peppers, possibly smoked, home gardeners can add it to their slow food DIY list.

by Sharee Solow

How did peppers get to Europe from the New World? Much like its solanaceous cousins, potatoes, tomatoes and tobacco it travelled by boat. The first written record comes from Columbus’ ships surgeon Chanca who wrote to the court surgeon to King Philip of Spain describing an ornamental, possibly medicinal “Indian Pepper” used as a condiment by the natives. It was grown as an ornamental houseplant and the pods displayed for decoration in Hungary at first but the paprika craze is documented by Clusius in 1593. The court botanist to Emperor Maximilian describes it in *Capsici Historia* “In Castilia, gardeners and housewives grow this capsicum of Indian-American pepper, though with difficulty. There are many varieties, and it is very generally used as a seasoning agent.” But, were all these varieties the same plant that came from the New World, perhaps not? Károly Gundel believed the Spanish pimiento was from Columbus but the Hungarian capsicum was from India and Persia. This comes from hundreds of years with the name ‘Indian Pepper’ in use and a botanist published in a 1731 herbarium that it came from India. The Victorian



explorer Livingstone noted paprika growing wild in East India, Abyssinia, and Central Africa. However conflicted the evidence may seem, the introduction of paprika to Europe is attributed to Columbus.

Next, paprika travelled to Italy from Spain and on to the Balkans which was part of the Turkish Ottoman Empire and included Hungary and Bulgaria in the 16th century. Bulgarians were the “Gardeners of Europe” and took pepper seeds along with their gardening skills to the better farmlands of Hungary when escaping the Turks. The word paprika (piper in Latin for pepper) comes from the Slavic pepperke or piperka and then peprika reinforcing that the Bulgarians brought paprika to Hungary before the Turks. The Nagy-Alföld or Hungarian Plains was endowed with the special soil and sun that led to selections of pepper qualities that give Hungarian paprika its uniqueness.

The working class regularly used paprika into the 17th century. The word was first published in the 1775 Herbarium as what Csapó called “paprika garden pepper” but by using the same word as both spice and vegetable, translations remain confusing. The spice is sometimes blended and called by the same name although Hungary was the first to use it in an unblended form. Historic descriptions of bacon rubbed with crushed cherry paprika, sometimes mixed with sour cream, begins to make me think of iconic dishes I am familiar with today. The Spaniards blended paprika with other spices to form a flat cake that was baked for storage and ground when needed. Less expensive than black pepper, interest expanded throughout society to include the many colours, varieties, and heat-levels available in the pepper family.

Of course, the quality and freshness of the paprika would vary so festivals were associated with the different phases of paprika production to regulate quality. Apparently the soil and sun of the Kalocsa and Segred climate produced redder and hotter peppers, considered the highest quality Hungarian paprika. I like this description of the growing season which begins on St. Gregory’s day by soaking the seeds (March) changing the water each day for seven days. Next, move them to “the top of a warm stove” before planting in a warm greenhouse a few days later when you are to pray over them for seven weeks when they go outside. September 8 is harvest day when the village participates in bringing the full carts to town to be strung

into 8’ garlands and hung from houses for the Feast of the Nativity of the Holy Virgin. There they dry in the fall until the brittle pods could be crushed and pressed through sieves or pounded in mortars. Although a charming scene, there was not a method for controlling the product or any standards in place. At least not until 1859, when the Pálffy brothers removed the veins and seeds before grinding the peppers using their special machine in Szegeed a new page in paprika history was written. Their production method created a mild “noble-sweet-rose” paprika that had a broader appeal because less capsaicin meant it would work in more cuisines. With the burning heat regulated by how much of the pepper pod was used, it became an international spice superstar.

This meteoric rise led to more plant selection and hybridization to expand the line of products in search of the ultimate flavour profile. The subspecies *Capsicum annum* L. var. *lingum Szegeedense* was completely sweet and no cleaning was needed so it became the base while hotter paprika were blended into it to create depth. Now the market recognized six categories: exquisite delicate (*különleges*), delicate, noble sweet (*édesnemes*), semisweet (*félédes*), rose (*rózsa*), and hot (*erős*). The blending is controlled by the millmaster who must keep the paprika from scorching as it is heated in the grinding process.

Like most spices and herbs, paprika is not without its medicinal value. One might drink *puszta* (brandy and paprika) to cure fever when an epidemic of typhus (*Morbus Hungaricus*) was rampant and, similarly, Jamaicans drank a mixture for malaria. There have been many studies concerning medicinal uses which commonly show that it aids digestion, reduces infection when sprinkled on wounds, and possibly cures night blindness caused from Vitamin A deficiency.

In fact, vitamins are the key to the miracle of the pepper. It has far more carotene than carrots and 3 to 4 grams of Hungarian paprika meets an adult’s daily Vitamin A requirement. Professor Szent-Györgyi discovered that a red-ripe pepper was the greatest single source of Vitamin C (5 to 6 times that of oranges) and named it ‘ascorbic acid’. So next time you are dining out look for a Hungarian restaurant and amaze your friends with the interesting history and health benefits of the pepper and pass the paprika.

“The spice of their food is some red beast, and they call it paprika, and it burns like the devil”

Ubaldus, an 18th century Capuchin friar from Bátaszék.

