

Geography in the News™

Neal G.
Lineback



PEPPER AND PEPPERS

As Christopher Columbus discovered, there is a big difference between pepper and peppers. One of the minor items he was seeking on his trip westward toward the Orient was black pepper. This is a spice from South Asia, used during Columbus's day to flavor slightly rancid foods. Instead, he found chile peppers in the New World, a more versatile seasoning that ultimately influenced dishes around the world.

A Feb. 3 article by Sharon J. Huntington in *The Christian Science Monitor* titled "A Brief History of Hot Stuff" documented the origins and uses of some of the popular chile peppers. Chiles were domesticated originally on the eastern slopes of the Andes, perhaps in Bolivia. By the time Columbus arrived in Cuba in 1492, chiles were being grown and widely traded throughout the Caribbean and Central and South America.

Prior to Columbus's travels to the Americas, European food was amazingly bland and, with no refrigeration, often rancid. Arabs controlled the flows of Oriental spices through the eastern Mediterranean, creating exorbitant prices by the time these high-demand goods reached Western Europe.

As every student knows, Columbus sailed westward from Europe to search for Asia, hoping to bypass the Arab blockade. He believed the world was round, but misjudged the earth's cir-

cumference and thought he had reached the Orient. Although he didn't find black pepper, he carried chiles back to Europe. Soon the Portuguese also discovered chiles in Brazil. Between the two countries, the "new American peppers" were carried around the world. But it was the Portuguese who introduced chiles to Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia and much of the Orient, while the Spanish carried the spice back to the Mediterranean and to the Philippines.

Chile peppers can be sweet, pungent or hot, deriving their spiciness from a natural chemical called *capsaicin* (cap-SAY-ah-CIN). There are four basic species, but many variations. Varieties well known to chile aficionados include jalapeno (HA-lah-PEEN-yoh), habanero (hah-ban-YEH-roh), poblano (poh-BLAH-noh) and serrano (ser-RAH-noh) and cayenne (KYE-ann) and tabasco (tah-BASS-coe). These varieties have had distinctive impacts on many regional cuisines. Some spicy examples are Mexican, Szechwan, Thai, Cambodian, Malaysian, Indonesian, Ceylonese, Indian, Pakistani, Afghan, Persian, Moroccan, Turkish, Hungarian, Ethiopian, Caribbean, Brazilian and our own South-west Mexican-American. The orange habanero is considered the world's hottest chile.

Chiles can be ground into flakes or a powder or they may be pickled whole with vinegar or made into a

sauce. Some American recipes in the 1700s began to include the use of chili powder and sauces began to appear in the early 1800s. In 1859, Col. Maunsei White bottled a sauce made from tabasco chiles in Louisiana and shared it with Edmund McIlhenny. In 1868, McIlhenny bottled his own tabasco sauce in used cologne bottles to test the sauce's marketability. The rest is history, as his *Tabasco* sauce became a worldwide hit. Although *Tabasco* may be the best known, it is challenged by hundreds of other lesser-known brands, including North Carolina-based T.W. Garner Foods' own *Texas Pete*.

Today, the countries leading in chile production are China (8.2 million metric tons), Mexico (2.0 million), Turkey (1.4 million), Spain (0.9 million) and the United States (0.9 million) (The Chile Pepper Institute, 2004).

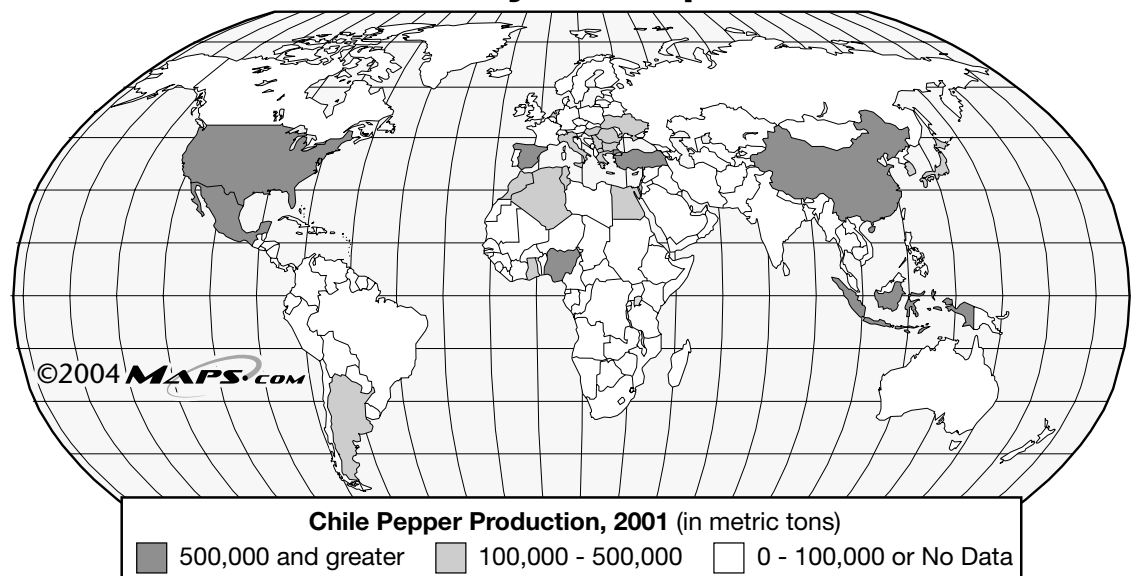
Although black pepper is still the most widely used spice, as a seasoning chiles are irreplaceable in most spicy cuisines.

And that is Geography in the News™. April 2, 2004. #722.

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Additional Source: <http://www.chilepepperinstitute.org>

A Very Hot Topic



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