

WHAT'S IN SEASON?

Peppers

BY BARBARA KOB SAR

In California, peppers are the quintessential fall fare. Red, orange, and yellow bell peppers mirror the colorful hillsides while mildly spicy to blazing-hot chili peppers warm the soul. Peppers slowly ease us into the cooler months, but shout out loud that fall is here.

Peppers are members of the Solanaceae (nightshade) family of the plant kingdom, which also includes eggplant, tomatoes, and potatoes. But right now for me, it's all about the stunning array of peppers I find at the farmers' markets. I feel the need to rush home from market when heirloom and ethnic peppers make their appearance. Italian Figaro is a favorite. This heirloom pimiento reminds me of a tiny round pumpkin, slightly flattened at top and bottom. To make the most of the thick crunchy walls of the Figaro pepper I use slices or chunks for salads and sandwiches or showcase them in eggplant and mushroom dishes.

"Our Figaro peppers are beautiful and sweet," says Anne Tom of Brookside Farms in Brentwood. Along with her husband, Quong, and their son, Welling, Anne sells exclusively at weekly farmers' markets, but among the customers are many local chefs, so it's not uncommon to find fresh Brookside Farm produce at restaurants in the area that source seasonal local products for their menus.

Corno di toro ("bull's horn") is another heirloom Italian pepper, perfect for roasting or sautéing. When fully ripe this pepper resembles a glossy red or yellow cone. Sauté a handful of whole corno di toro and a few mashed cloves of garlic with extra-virgin olive oil for an appetizer that looks spectacular and tastes delicious paired up with a baguette.

The banana pepper was most likely developed in Hungary; it can be sweet or hot depending on variety. I start thinking "gou-



lash" for dinner whenever I spot the sweet yellow Hungarian banana peppers at market. Hot Hungarian wax banana peppers are perfect for stuffing and baking.

Recently, I found some short branches heavy with Thai hot dragon peppers at the market. They were too hot for me to eat but I can never resist a pretty pepper to decorate the table. I might consider dropping a few whole Thai peppers in a stir fry for flavor but remove them before serving the dish.

The degree of heat in peppers is determined by the amount of capsaicin they contain. Color alone is no determination, but typically, smaller peppers are hotter than larger peppers. For instance, the little red-ripe cayenne packs a punch while the red, heart-shaped pimiento takes first place in the mild and sweet category.

Hot peppers are commonly referred to as chile peppers. They actually may be relatively mild, like the paprika and Anaheim, but can also be sizzling hot, like the habanero.

Depending on conditions, the heat factor varies in peppers grown from identical seeds. In 1912 Wilbur Scoville developed a test to measure the heat of chiles (capsaicin) in what's called Scoville units. Pimentos and bell peppers measure 0 to 99 units, for example, while jalapeño and Fresno peppers are at the 5,000 to 14,999 mark, and the habanero and tepín are a scorching 100,000 to 300,000 units.

Most of a chile pepper's heat is concentrated in the interior ribs or veins near the seed heart. The seeds taste hot only because

FIGARO ITALIAN PIMIENTO



CORNO DI TORO



THAI HOT



EARLY JALAPEÑO





FALL CROPS

apples
 artichokes
 Asian pears
 beets
 broccoli
 Brussels sprouts
 carrots
 cauliflower
 dried fruits
 eggplant
 grapes
 greens
 herbs
 kale
 kiwifruit
 nuts
 oranges
 persimmons
 peppers
 pomegranates
 pumpkins
 quince
 rutabagas
 shelling beans
 squash
 strawberries
 sweet potatoes
 tomatoes
 turnips

they are close to the veins. When removing the seeds and veins from hot peppers always wear rubber gloves and do not touch your face or eyes, since the volatile oils may cause severe burning. I tested this warning only one time and spent the evening with my hands in ice water!

Slight confusion in names surfaces in the chile world when a fresh chile is dried. Since I like to be adventurous and substitute chiles, in recipes, knowing names helps avoid surprises.

Poblano peppers (mulatos) are my pick when making fresh salsas; in their dried form they are called anchos. The poblano may be marketed as pasilla in its fresh, dried, or ground forms, but a true pasilla is an elongated fruit and the poblano is a short, wide chile.

The chipotle is a smoke-dried jalapeño and lends a wonderful flavor to sauces. Serrano peppers turn up fresh and canned, and in the dried form they're known as chile de arbol. Unlike many chiles, the chile de arbol remains bright red even after drying.

Among the sweet peppers, the bell is most renowned. It's most likely named after its tell-tale shape. It may grow erect like the edible and ornamental Sweet Pickle or pendant like the Gypsy pepper, with two to four lobes depending on variety. Virtually all sweet peppers are green in color at the "ready-to-pick" stage, and turn to red, yellow, or purple (depending on variety) as they ripen and mature.

Yellow, orange, and red Sweet Gypsy peppers are a favorite with Chef Peter Chastain at Prima Ristorante in Walnut Creek. "Gypsy peppers need to be really fresh," Chastain says, "and are great candidates for a pepperonata dish." (One of Chef Chastain's recipes follows.)

When roasted, bell peppers take

on unexpected flavors that really stand out when added to pasta, salads, and bean dishes. Bake, broil, or simply spear the fresh pepper with a long, wooden-handled fork and hold it over a gas flame until blackened (or set on a medium hot grill). Once charred on all sides, place in a heavy paper or plastic bag and seal to allow the pepper to steam for about 10 minutes. When cool enough to handle, peel, stem, and seed if necessary.

All peppers are rich in vitamin C. The fresh peppers are glossy with tight skins and moist green stems. If necessary sweet green peppers can be stored in a plastic bag in the refrigerator for 6 to 7 days, red sweet peppers and heirloom peppers 3 to 4 days, and chili peppers 5 to 6 days.

Enjoy, and see you at the farmers' markets. ♡

Barbara Kobsar writes a regular column on seasonal produce for the Contra Costa Times, and contributes to many other publications. She has authored two cookbooks that focus on traditional home cooking. When not roaming the farmers' market aisles, she is behind her market stand selling her Cottage Kitchen jams and jellies, which she makes from fresh farmers' market produce.



*'Red and Green Peppers Look Like Christmas'
by Kerry Damianakes, December 1995'*

INVOLTINI DI PEPPERONI (ROLLED, ROASTED YELLOW SWEET PEPPERS)

Executive Chef Peter Chastain from Prima Ristorante in Walnut Creek uses this recipe in several ways. It is meant to be an antipasto and comes from Puglia originally, but it can also be “deconstructed” for use over pasta. Toast the breadcrumbs separately and sprinkle them on top of the cooked pasta along with some good pecorino.

- 3 yellow sweet peppers
- ½ cup breadcrumbs
from good country bread
- Extra-virgin olive oil
- 5 anchovy filets
- 2 cloves California garlic, germ removed
- 1 dry, hot chile such as chile de arbol,
seeds removed (optional)
- 2 tablespoons capers
- ¼ cup sultanas (white seedless raisins)
- 3 tablespoons pine nuts
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 1 mint sprig

Preheat oven to 500°. Place the peppers on the middle rack. Put a cookie sheet underneath them to catch any dripping. Roast approximately 20 minutes until the skins are charred.

Remove into a bowl and cover with a towel until cool. Peel the skins off and remove the seeds and stems. Cut into 2½ inch segments, season with salt and pepper, and set aside.

Slice garlic as thinly as possible. Combine with anchovies and about ¼ cup olive oil in a small sauté pan. (Add also the hot chile if using). Over slow heat, cook until garlic begins to turn golden and anchovies dissolve.

Add capers, pinenuts, and sultanas and increase heat until the capers “flower”/open.

Add breadcrumbs and remove from heat. Roll peppers in this mixture until completely coated. Sprinkle with chopped mint. Arrange on a platter or plate individually. Serve at room temperature.

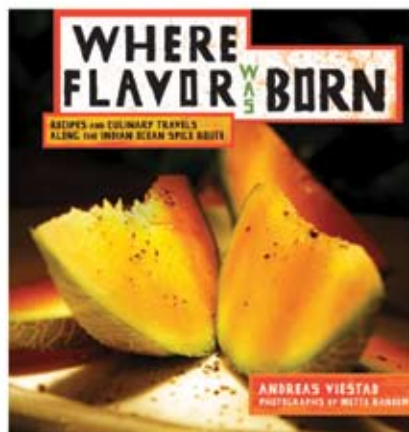
This can be made a day ahead and stored in the refrigerator; as long as you allow it to warm up in the kitchen it will be delicious. Some people like it with a splash of vinegar or a squeeze of fresh lemon. Serves 6.



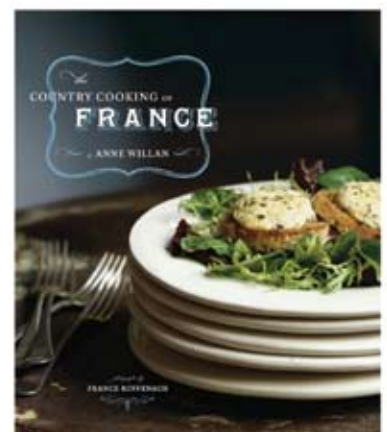
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