

# King pepper: Better than gold or silver

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(F30)

Shake a little of this black powder in your hand, sniff and you will probably sneeze. This common seasoning shouts with flavor and discloses its essence to every consumer with the first bite.

Standing beside its partner, the salt shaker, pepper reigns as king of the spices. "Pepper is small in quantity and great in virtue," according to Plato. It was the first Oriental spice to reach European soil and today is widely used throughout the world.

Pepper's importance over the past 2,000 years goes beyond use as a seasoning. Peppercorns served as money and were considered a more stable medium of exchange than gold or silver when localities minted their own coins which were then scraped each time they passed through another's hands.

Pepper served as a means of tribute: Rome saved itself from Attila the Hun in 452 by presenting him with cinnamon and pepper. Peppercorns were used to pay custom duties and rent, and to buy land. Rewards and punishments by fines were payable in peppercorns.

THE SEASONING was left as a legacy in wills and even as dowries in marriages: John III of Portugal (a country which dominated the pepper market in the 16th century) paid part of his sister Isabella's dowry in that spice when she married Charles I of Spain in 1524. In the Middle Ages, government officials such as the Masters of the Treasury in Venice were bribed by businessmen with an annual present of one pound each of pepper, cinnamon and ginger as an assurance of remaining in business.

By medieval times, pepper became a measure of wealth: If a man "lacked pepper" it meant that he was poor.

"Pepper bags" was a name assigned by the aristocracy of Saxony to nobles who married commoners for their money. The nobles were sometimes forced to swallow such inordinate

quantities of pepper prior to the marriage that it killed them.

When pepper reached the Mediterranean world, it was noted as having medicinal qualities. Soon after, its gastronomic qualities were realized and it was added to almost all Roman dishes including desserts.

FOR THE love of pepper and other spices, Emperor Domitian built a special spice market, the horrea piparatia, which was reached by walking down the Via Piparatia, or Pepper Street.

Throughout the Middle Ages, Venice was the European capital of pepper, at a time when Europeans were consuming over 6½ million pounds annually.

The pepper monopoly passed through many hands over the centuries: When the Portuguese reached the Spice Islands, the market passed to them.

Trade passed from the Portuguese to the Dutch who formed the Dutch East India Company. At the turn of the 17th century, the pepper monopoly ceased.

Competitive companies such as the British East India Company and the French led by Pierre Poivre, which translates to Peter Pepper, brought prices down.

Today, rich and poor alike can afford the strong, outspoken flavor of pepper. Add a dash to any dish for extra zest.

The following recipes offer opportunities to try dishes spiked with pepper as an essential seasoning.

Fresh Black Pepper Pasta is excerpted from a new book for pasta lovers, "The Joy of Pasta" (Barron's) by Joe Fumaloro and Louise Imperiale. Richard Nelson's "American Cooking" (New American Library/Times Mirror) is a hearty compendium of delicious dishes including this Cheese Souffle.

## CHEESE SOUFFLE

Serves 4

- 1 cup whole milk
- 1 small bay leaf
- 1 shallot, sliced
- 1 small garlic clove
- 1 small piece celery
- 1 tsp. salt
- 6 peppercorns
- 3 tbsp. unbleached all-purpose flour
- 3 tbsp. butter
- ¼ tsp. white pepper
- ¼ tsp. English dry mustard
- ¼ tsp. Dijon-style mustard
- ¼ cup Camembert cheese, forced through a coarse sieve
- ¼ cup freshly grated Gruyere cheese
- ¼ cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese, divided
- 5 egg yolks
- Bread crumbs
- 7 egg whites
- Paprika

Put the milk, bay leaf, shallot, garlic, celery, salt, and peppercorns in a pan; stir over low heat and bring to a boil. Cover, remove from heat, and allow to steep for 5 minutes.

Melt the butter in a small, heavy pan; remove from the heat and stir in the flour. Add the pepper and mustards, and strain the prepared milk into the butter mixture. Stir over heat until it boils. Add the Camembert and Gruyere cheeses and half the Parmesan; mix well. Beat the egg yolks until light and fluffy and mix into the sauce.

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees.

Butter a 2-quart souffle dish, dust with the bread crumbs and a little Parmesan cheese. Beat the egg whites to stiff peaks and add the egg-yolk-cheese mixture. Fold gently but not

too thoroughly, so that a little of the egg white still shows. Fill the souffle dish, leaving a ¼-inch rim at the top. Sprinkle the top with the rest of the Parmesan cheese and bread crumbs. Place in a shallow pan of hot water and bake for 45 to 50 minutes, or until just firm to the touch. Do not open the oven door during the first half of the baking. Remove, sprinkle with a little paprika, and serve at once.

## FRESH BLACK PEPPER PASTA

Makes ¼ lb.

- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 2 eggs, at room temperature
- 1 tsp. salt
- 1 tsp. olive oil
- 4 tbsp. water
- 1 heaping tbsp. finely ground fresh pepper

1. Put the flour on a flat surface and shape it into a mound. Make a well in the center and add the eggs, salt, olive oil, 2 tablespoons water, and the ground pepper. (Be sure when you grind the pepper, it isn't too large or it will tear the pasta.) Mix with a wooden spoon by combining the eggs and the flour with a circular motion, taking some flour from the inside of the well. Add the remaining water and mix until it comes together.

2. Transfer the dough onto a floured board and knead it for 10 minutes. Work the dough into a ball, cover it with a bowl, and let it rest for 15 minutes.

3. Roll the dough (using more flour if needed) into a cylinder about 6-inches long and slice into 1-inch pieces. Flatten each piece of dough with a rolling pin or the palm of your hand. Roll dough out on a pasta machine.

Note: This pasta may be frozen for up to 1 month. All the butter sauces are extremely good with this pasta.

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