

LEVELED BOOK • 0

# *Pepper: The King of Spices*



Written by Joan Linck • Illustrations by Len Epstein

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## Introduction

*What is black and wrinkled like a tiny raisin?*

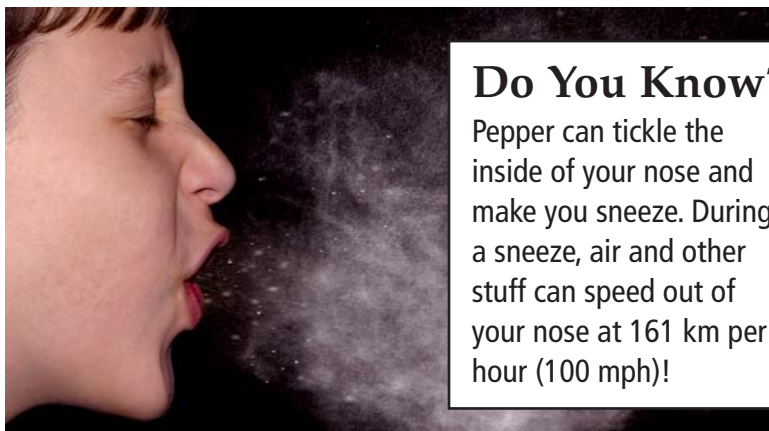
*What has sent men sailing across the ocean  
and was once used as money?*

It's pepper! You may have seen pepper in a shaker. You may have sprinkled it on your food. But do you know what it is? Do you know where it comes from?

The pepper you eat comes from a dried-up berry called a **peppercorn**. If you have ever seen a peppercorn, you might have thought it was a pebble. But it is not. It is a berry that grows on a vine. People use the whole peppercorn or crush it into tiny pieces. They use it to add **flavor** to food. Plant parts that are used to flavor food are called **spices**.



Peppercorns



## Do You Know?

Pepper can tickle the inside of your nose and make you sneeze. During a sneeze, air and other stuff can speed out of your nose at 161 km per hour (100 mph)!

Pepper is a spice with a very strong flavor. People use it on meat and vegetables. You can mix it with other flavors to make plain foods taste better.

Eating too much pepper can be bad for you. If you eat plain pepper, your tongue will feel like it is on fire. You might even feel hot inside. Some people can get sick if they eat too much pepper.

Pepper is known as the King of Spices. This is because it is used more than any other spice in the world. As you read, you will find out that pepper was once even used as money!

## How Pepper Grows

The pepper plant grows as a long vine. The vines often wrap around a tree. Groups of round berries hang down from the vines. Each group can have thirty to seventy berries.



Picking fresh peppercorns

When the berries dry out, they turn black and hard. They become wrinkled like a raisin. The dry berries are called peppercorns. Each peppercorn is smaller than a pea.



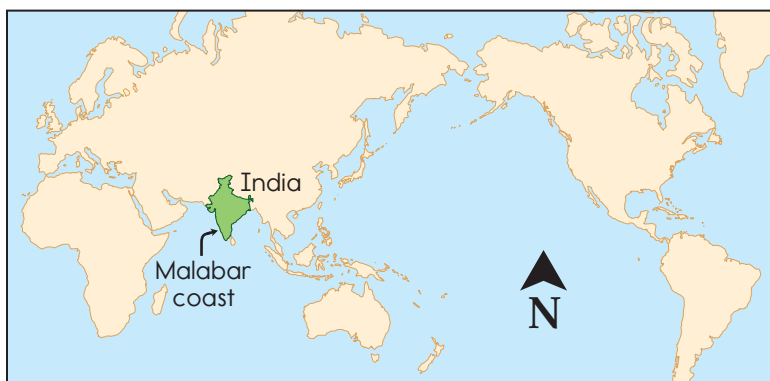
Usually, people do not eat whole peppercorns. Instead, they use the type of pepper you see in a shaker. People use tools to **grind** peppercorns into tiny flakes. This makes pepper easier to eat.



## Where Pepper Grows

The pepper plant needs a lot of water to grow. This is why it is found in places that get a lot of summer rain. To dry out the berries, farmers also need a place with a warm, sunny autumn. By winter, the peppercorns can be used as a spice.

One good place to grow pepper is the southwestern part of India. The weather is perfect for growing pepper vines. Farmers have grown pepper in India for thousands of years. The people of India used pepper to trade for things they wanted or needed.



In the 1400s, a lot of the world's pepper came from southwestern India.

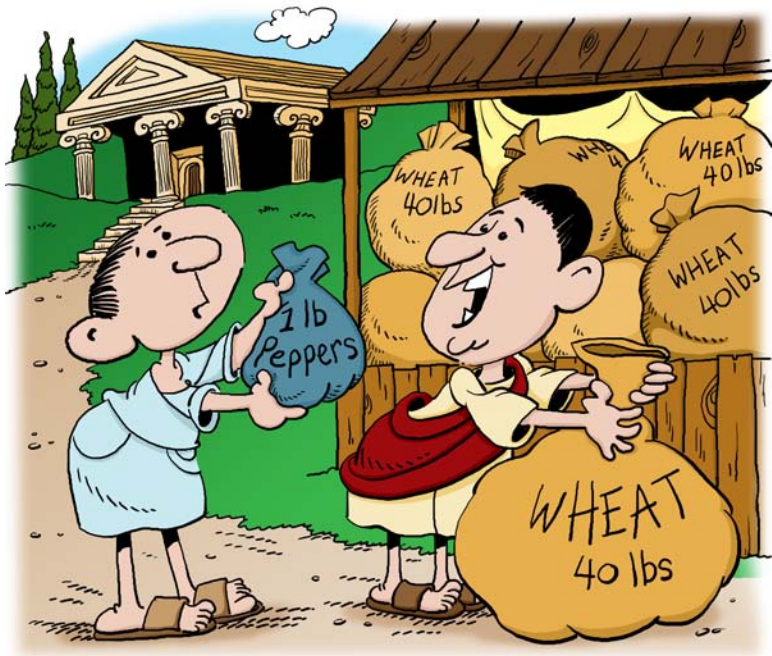
## A Popular Spice

Pepper has been used in many ways. Long ago, people used it to make meat taste better. Some people thought eating pepper could help them when they got sick. They also used it to make their homes smell good.

One place where pepper is popular is Europe. Hundreds of years ago, it was very hard to get this spice there. It did not grow in Europe, but many people still wanted it. There was a very small **supply** of pepper but a big **demand** for it. This meant that people who had pepper could sell it for a high price.

Peppercorns were in such demand that they were sometimes used as money. People might get paid in peppercorns. They could use their peppercorns to buy things they needed. They could even pay their rent with peppercorns!





People could also **trade** peppercorns for other food. In Rome, a person could trade one pound of pepper for forty pounds of wheat!

In Greece, pepper cost so much that most people could not afford to buy it. If a poor person had pepper, leaders might have thought it was stolen. Sometimes poor people were punished just for having pepper. It was clearly a spice only the rich could afford.



## **A Long, Expensive Journey**

In the 1400s, people in Europe got a lot of their pepper from India. It grows in other places, too, but those places are even farther from Europe than India. To get pepper to Europe from so far away, people had to pay others to bring it to them. In the 1400s, it took over a year to get pepper from India to Europe. There were no planes, trains, or trucks back then.

The peppercorns had to travel in carts or on the backs of animals, and sometimes by boat. As bags of peppercorns were moved from place to place, their price went up. Each worker had to be paid.

Watch the coins  
below as the  
price of pepper  
rises.



First, the pepper berries had to be picked in India. Farmers gathered them in large bags or baskets. Then they put them on big blankets to dry in the sunlight.

All the farmers had to be paid.



Workers loaded the peppercorns onto wagons, and the **journey** began. Strong animals pulled the wagons to a river.

Bags of pepper were loaded onto boats. Then the boats took the pepper down a river to the shore. All the wagon and boat workers had to be paid.



Now the pepper was ready to cross the ocean. It was loaded onto larger boats that sailed from India to Africa.

The boat workers and the captains had to be paid.





When the pepper arrived in Africa, it had to move over land. A strong buffalo or camel carried it. The pepper was taken down the Nile River on a wide boat. The boat workers and the people who led the animals all had to be paid.



The load of spice had to cross the sea between Africa and Europe. So it was put onto one last boat. It could be sent to Greece, France, or many other countries. All the boat workers had to be paid.



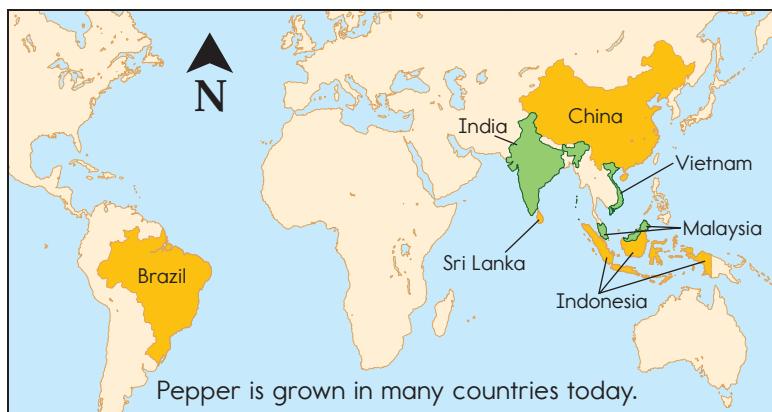
When the boat reached Europe, the journey was almost complete. The pepper was carried over land by carts. All the drivers had to be paid. At last, it was sold at a high price. This helped pay everyone who worked to get it to Europe.



Kings and queens in Europe paid their own **explorers** to find new ways to bring back spices and other riches. Explorers were able to sail from Europe all the way to India and back. This was cheaper than bringing it over land.



Queen Isabella of Spain (left) paid Christopher Columbus (right) to find ways to bring back riches from around the world.



## Pepper Today

Pepper is used around the world today. But it is much, much cheaper now. You can buy it in a store with just a few coins. Many places even give it away for free. Imagine how a king from 600 years ago would feel if he saw free pepper!

Why is pepper cheaper today? Now there is enough supply to meet the demand. Also, people can ship peppercorns around the world in just a few hours. People use fast ships, trains, trucks, and even airplanes to quickly get pepper to those who want it.



## Thinking Critically

Today, as in the 1400s, people use pepper more than any other spice. Do you think pepper will always be the King of Spices?

The pepper that comes out of your shaker is just like the pepper from 2000 years ago. It tastes the same. It still grows in India and in rainy parts of the world.

So the next time you grind pepper on your food, imagine you are a king or queen. Think of what you could have bought in the 1400s with a whole shaker full of the King of Spices. It was like sprinkling your food with little bits of gold!





## Glossary

- demand** (*n.*) how much people want a certain thing (p. 8)
- explorers** (*n.*) people who visit and learn about new places (p. 13)
- flavor** (*n.*) the taste of a food or drink (p. 4)
- grind** (*v.*) to crush something into little pieces or powder (p. 6)
- journey** (*n.*) a long trip (p. 11)
- peppercorn** (*n.*) the dried berry of a vine plant used to make the spice known as pepper (p. 4)
- spices** (*n.*) plant parts used to give flavor to a food (p. 4)
- supply** (*n.*) the amount of something people have (p. 8)
- trade** (*v.*) to give one thing and get something else for it (p. 9)



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