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Pepper:

### The World's Most Traded Spice

The world's most ubiquitous pair lives on nearly every dinner table or breakfast bar on the planet. That may be an exaggeration, but what is apparent is the popularity of pepper at least in consciousness is second only to salt. Salt and Pepper shakers are sold as sets; a pairing that should always be maintained. Many of those shakers sit close together to form a complete image or system when together; in these cases it is obvious when one is not in place. Much scholarship has addressed the issue of salt trade. Arguably, salt's preservation ability lends much to its popularity in antiquity. The Christian Bible even instructs one to throw salt out if it loses this specific trait. What, then, of black pepper? Is it to be forever known as merely "salt's partner?" Under careful inspection, the world history of black pepper is every bit as intriguing as that of salt, and worthy of being presented to the public as a traveling museum exhibit.

#### ***Piper nigrum* A Brief History:**

Michael Dove opens his article on Piperaceae in a Malay State with a pre-1661 royal injunction on the cultivating pepper within the Banjar kingdom. The *Hikayat*

*Banjar*, or “The Story of the the Kings of Banjar and Kota Waringin” record the prohibition of *sahang* (Black Pepper) thusly: “And let not our country plant pepper as an export crop, for the ske of making money...wherever a country cultivates pepper all food-stuffs will become expensive and anything planted will not grow well.”<sup>1</sup> The three subsequent rulers maintained this prohibition on the same grounds.

Native to India, pepper was introduced into Indonesia around 1000 A.D. But, there are some scholars who argue that an island described within *The Sutra of the Twelve stages of the Buddha* can be identified as Java, indicting that Western Indonesia could have been cultivating pepper for trade before 400 A.D. In either case, the demanding nature of cultivating pepper led many sultanates to ban its production. Pepper’s troubles continued into the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries where, even as China’s appetite for Pepper increased Malaysian and Indonesian production, it still caused “malice all over the country” and could even lead to the government falling into “disorder.”<sup>2</sup>

Two centuries before pepper arrived in the archipelago, trade relations between India and China blossomed, which led to China importing not only Buddhist medicinal practice but also many foreign products including pepper. As Buddhism waxed and waned across China and southern and southeast Asia, Chinese sea trade overshadowed the land routes. But 1178 Chinese import lists include large quantities of pepper arriving

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<sup>1</sup> Dove, Michael R. “The ‘Banana Tree at the Gate’: Perceptions of Production of *Piper nigrum* (Piperaceae) in a Seventeenth Century Malay State. *Economic Botany*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 1997): 348.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 352-355.

from Java. Less than 50 years later more detailed logs indicate that there were pepper districts within the archipelago.<sup>3</sup>

As the pepper trade with China increased, Chinese pepper dealers began to immigrate south and formed the “principal factor of expansion in overseas Chinese of that time.” By the time Europeans arrived in the East inter-Asian pepper for Chinese good was flourishing. Before the 15<sup>th</sup> century black pepper in Europe was extremely rare. The spice was “worth its weight in gold” in Europe and reviled by the Chinese for medicinal purposes, “as ginseng and cassa bark are today.” Cheng Ho led seven voyages in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century opened sea trade routes between China and southern Asia and even eastern Asia.<sup>4</sup>

The Dutch, the Portuguese, and the English superseded these routes and traded for the same goods using existing formats. The Portuguese held a virtual monopoly on the trade in 1498 with their sea route around the Cape of Good Hope. Scholars believe that it was during this reign that black pepper cultivation was introduced in Nigeria.<sup>5</sup> In late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries Japan became involved in trade with China. Japan’s abundance of silver and insatiable desire for Chinese silk led to Japan establishing itself as the most

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<sup>3</sup> Yung-ho, Ts’Ao. “Pepper Trade in East Asia.” *T’oung Pao*, Second Series Vol. 68, Livr 4/5, (1982): 221-226.

<sup>4</sup> Ju-Kang, T’ien. “Cheng Ho’s Voyages and the Distribution of Pepper in China.” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*. No. 2 (1981): 186; 194.

<sup>5</sup> Gentry, Howard Scott. “Introducing Black Pepper into America.” *Economic Botany*. Vol. 9, No. 3. (Jul-Sep, 1955): 257.

important hub of international trade. Japan's medicinal use of pepper meant that Japanese pepper imports were quite lower than that of the Chinese.<sup>6</sup>

During the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Dutch expanded holdings in the Archipelago and increased trade. They were key sea transports of pepper from Indonesia pepper markets to the Red Sea. They operated in competition with Indian ships containing Indian pepper. The Portuguese could do little to halt the Indian pepper traffic or compete with the Dutch merchants. The long, arduous Portuguese pepper monopoly in western trade had come to an end.<sup>7</sup>

Black Pepper finally made its appearance in the Americas in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The French cultivated a successful crop near Cayenne, French Guiana. Production continued to be sufficient for trade until the end of slave labor in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Pepper plants held at the Federal Experiment Station at Mayaguez, Puerto Rico in the 1950s "are reported to have come from this source." The first recorded source of pepper into the United States was 1900. A pack of seeds arrived at the United States Department of Agriculture from Bangkok, Siam, however no record of their fate exists.<sup>8</sup>

Between the 1880s and the late 1930s the United States increased the import of black pepper from a maximum of 65,000 pounds to an average of 50 million pounds. During the Second World War, pepper became scarce. Servicemen complained about its absence on the mess tables with such gusto that the armed services considered it a morale

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 245-247.

<sup>7</sup> Brouwer, C. G. "Pepper Merchants in the Booming Port of al Mukha: dutch Evidence for an Oceanwide Trading Network." *Die Welt des Islams*. New Series, Vol. 44, Issue 2 (2004): 233-235.

<sup>8</sup> Gentry, Howard Scott. "Introducing Black Pepper into America." *Economic Botany*. Vol. 9, No. 3. (Jul-Sep, 1955): 258.

issue. These concerns and the potential for successful propagation in the tropical areas the Department of Agriculture sent out an Asian Expedition in 1953-54 in order to procure some adequate pepper plants.<sup>9</sup>

The undertaking never fully materialized. Presently, America is the world's largest importer of black pepper. In 2005 the United States imported 51 million kilograms (112,435,620 pounds) of whole black peppercorns. The peppercorns sold for an average of just \$1.59 a kilogram. Bought for less than \$0.05 an ounce that pepper might cost \$2.00 at the market maintaining a markup of about 4000%<sup>10</sup>

### **Building an Exhibit:**

#### **Periphery Exhibits:**

Given the world reach of black pepper it would seem easy to establish a museum exhibit that focuses on the global influence of this plant. The trouble, as with any museum exhibit, is maintaining the balance of public interest and scholarship. Luckily there have been similar traveling exhibits that have focused on similar issues that garnered success. For this exhibit I will draw upon the models of Burke's Museum at the University of Washington *Coffee: The World in Your Cup* and The Field Museum in Chicago, Illinois' *Chocolate Around the World*. Both of these exhibits were designed as traveling exhibits to be set up within a smaller area of existing museums. This proposal of *The World's Most Traded Spice* exhibit will work outside of those restrictions until an official inventory of exhibit pieces is developed.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.globalprovince.com/spicelines/feature/blackpepper.htm> (accessed December 1, 2012)

Located near the entrance to the exhibit there should be a list of all the words for pepper in the world, including ones no longer in use. This should provide a global perspective of just how universal pepper is as a spice. Since pepper followed established land and sea trade routes, numerous large scale maps will be employed to indicate trade routes, both to and from, as well as color coded participating countries and timelines of involvement of pepper trade. A large timeline will scroll the upper border of the exhibit's parameter not only indicating important events in the history of pepper trade, but also major world events to give a connection point for those pepper related events.

Smaller, breakout exhibits will highlight both the more widely known use of pepper as a spice, but also the lesser-known qualities as traditional medicine both within China and Japan as evidenced in Ju-Kang and Gentry's articles. These may include unground pepper collected in preparation for grinding or drying, along with an array of instruments that would have been used to render the pepper for cooking or medicinal use. Between the two sub-exhibits a collection of recipes (both cooking and medicinal) should be arranged in a manner where visitors can see any prominent similarities between the two.

Following the Burke's *Coffee* model, various stages of the propagation and cultivation of *Piper nigrum* will be affixed in dioramas. These would include sections of plantation arrangements, including schematics of larger holdings, as well as the peppercorn drying process.<sup>11</sup> Also included would be a packaging and shipping

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<sup>11</sup> There is a fine photograph of this process in Gentry's "Introducing Black Pepper into America." There is even evidence in this article of instances where pepper is cultivated on the same landholdings as coffee. Gentry, Howard Scott. "Introducing Black Pepper into America." *Economic Botany*. Vol. 9, No. 3. (Jul-Sep, 1955): 263

areas as well as a port facility revealing how peppercorn was slated for transport either across the land and sea trade routes.

Early interest of pepper as an exotic rarity drove prices to “literally worth its weight in gold” in Europe while in China poems and lyrics equated pepper with “riches and luxury” as well. Showing the contrast of what (and how much of a) common good could be purchased in Europe for the same weight of pepper would also give a nice visual to the extravagance and “exoticness” afforded to the early days of pepper. The pepper should be arranged from left to right with a dry weight of pepper, a list, or collection of items of equal value, and finally the same amount of pepper enclosed in small “fast-food” type pepper packets that are thrown in the trash more often than not. On the backdrop quotes from those poems or songs would be painted. As well as a brief biographical sketch of Cheng Ho and his voyages as recounted by T’ien Ju-Kang.<sup>12</sup>

### **Main Exhibit**

To avoid the dichotomic nature of trade and contact narratives the main exhibit area must be developed carefully. A zigzagged layout of the main exhibit that visitors walk through would allow them to follow the chronology of the pepper trade across the world. Beginning with the Malabar Coast in the Southwest region in

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<sup>12</sup> Ju-Kang’s research of Cheng Ho’s voyages serves as a opportunity to portray a non western historical figure in the pepper narrative as well as implementing the idea of what is foreign to areas that the west considers foreign. Ju-Kang, T’ien. “Cheng Ho’s Voyages and the Distribution of Pepper in China.” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*. No. 2 (1981): 186-187.

India with information on the indigenous plants that were harnessed by locals who maintained a monopoly on pepper until the 15<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>13</sup>

Following the chronology outlined in the narrative each landing along the midway will focus on when pepper was introduced to the area, or region. Details should include instances of prohibition, such as in the *Hikayat Banjar*, or instances of full move to pepper as a principal export crop. Following the introduction of pepper into the islands of Southeast Asia, the goods traded for and in contrast with pepper should be exhibited such as Chinese exports of fine silk and porcelain.<sup>14</sup>

More research is required to ascertain when pepper cultivation began in Nigeria. This should be included within the walk through exhibit but only if it can be verified with certainty. This is the first westward movement of pepper as a living plant. At the same time an area landing should include works of European botanist regarding the *Piper nigrum* plant. These areas should include many botanical illustrations by as many sources (European and non European) as available. This might be a good time to reveal the other forms of peppercorn plants as well as how the maturity and processing gives pepper different colors and qualities. This may also attribute to sensory overload and/or break the general flow of the exhibit, but it should at least be considered at this point.

The development of pepper in the Americas will be of particular interest to museum visitors in the United States. French involvement in the pepper trade inasmuch as they transplanted plants to French Guiana for cultivation is another area where more

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<sup>13</sup> Prange, Sebastian R. “Measuring by the Bushel’: reweighing the Indian Ocean Pepper Trade.” *Historical Research*. Vol. 84, no. 224 (May 2011): 214-215.

<sup>14</sup> Yung-ho, Ts’Ao. “Pepper Trade in East Asia.” *T’oung Pao*, Second Series Vol. 68, Livr 4/5, (1982): 226

research is needed to maintain a high quality of exhibit scholarship. Understanding how the United States Department of Agriculture approached the notion of growing pepper in “tropical America” will also give museum visitor a connection to the exhibit.

### **The Take Home Message**

In addition to the over-arching message of the global nature of pepper and its place on the world stage there are two very important but subtler lessons. The visitor will emerge to the modern import/export figures of pepper trade worldwide. Modern techniques on pepper cultivation as well as means and methods of procurement will also be on display. Dove’s work outlines modern cultivation techniques in Indonesia and Malaysia. All of the pepper grown in India and Indonesia “is cultivated not on estates or plantations but on smallholdings, worked by local peasant and tribal communities, many of whom are also involved in swidden (slash and burn) agriculture.”<sup>15</sup> Part of the early attraction to pepper in Dove’s interpretation was that it could easily be implemented within operating agricultural systems without foregoing staple or subsistence crops.

The second subliminal point that can be well articulated is the impact of climate change on the pepper trade. This is intuitive in the sense that pepper is a tropical plant that is growing in nearly every available tropical climate on the planet. However, the nature of how pepper is purchased on the market that allows it to fall prey to fluctuations in climate. The manner in which pepper is purchased on the open market allow for droughts,

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<sup>15</sup> Dove, Michael R. “The ‘Banana Tree at the Gate’: Perceptions of Production of *Piper nigrum* (Piperaceae) in a Seventeenth Century Malay State. *Economic Botany*, Vol. 51, No. 4 (Oct.-Dec. 1997): 349.

floods, and other climate fluctuations to impact its trading price. As the climate changes the concerns are not just for the biological ranges of pepper, but economic impact as well.

Results from a 2009 workshop held at the Centre for Climate Change Research, Kerala Agricultural University, Thrissur, Kerala, India indicated that “Special attention is to be given in this direction to the thermo-sensitive crops like black pepper, cardamom, tea, coffee and cocoa as temperature range (the difference between maximum and minimum temperatures) is likely to increase and rainfall is likely to decline along with deforestation as these crops grow under the influence of typical forest-agro-ecosystems.”<sup>16</sup> The history of pepper is known, the future of pepper is less certain.

## **Conclusion**

The point of such an exhibit is not just to showcase botanical illustrations or tell interesting stories about plants, people, and trade. This exhibit is designed to illuminate the history of a common element in most people’s lives in a way that transcends modern European vs. Non-European arrangements. The revelation that pepper goes beyond national borders not only as a traded spice, but also as a cultivated plant allows for a global history interpretation in which every historical actor has equal billing. Pepper can be exhibited in such a manner (as described above) that will not place European traders

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<sup>16</sup> Rao, Prasada, A.V.R. Kesava Rao, K.N. Krishnakumar and C.S. Gopakumar. *ISPRS Archives XXXVIII-8/W3 Workshop Proceedings: Impact of Climate Change on Agriculture*. (2009):130

as progressive conquerors and exploiters of native people nor will it show the East as simply a source of raw materials and/or exotic goods.

Museum exhibits have to at once maintain historicity and relate to current events. They must teach without patronizing or condescending. The delicate arrangements of artifacts, images, and stories can allow visitors to learn what you want to teach them on their own and in a relatively brief walkthrough. Traveling exhibits also have to anticipate as many different points of reference that patrons could have. To this end, moving the focus from things such as technological “advances” or “primitive” agricultural methods removes any seemingly judgmental interpretation of the histories being presented. By viewing the world through the perspective of pepper as a plant and a spice national borders and archaic dichotomies fall away and leave a true global history void of politics or progressivism.

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