

Peppers



It seems odd to think that a quintessentially Mediterranean vegetable like the pepper is actually an import from the Americas, likely a native crop of Brazil that made its way across South and Central America. But until the arrival of Columbus in the New World, peppers were unknown in Europe and Asia. Reaching Haiti, Columbus found hot peppers, which he noted as superior to the peppercorns available in Europe (at a steep price—pepper was indeed the reason for his voyage to what he thought was India), and brought them back to Europe, where they grew easily and spread quickly. Like most novel fruits and vegetables, peppers were

food for the poor at first. Vincenzo Corrado, a native of Apulia who was also the first cookbook author to give recipes for peppers, wrote that “although they are a rustic food of the masses, many people like them.” Southern Italians became especially enamored with peppers. Typically eaten when unripe, therefore still green, peppers were fried and then dusted with a sprinkling of salt, or cooked over hot coals and flavored only with olive oil and salt by eighteenth-century cooks. By the end of the nineteenth century, Italians could choose among three hundred pepper varieties, most of them the result of spontaneous hybridization.

REGIONAL DISHES

Stuffed and pan-fried (Latium); filled with raisins, pine nuts, capers, and anchovies (Apulia); cooked with cod (Campania); stuffed with long pasta, capers, anchovies, and olives (Naples); fried and then sprinkled with bread crumbs, capers, Pecorino, and oregano (Calabria); stuffed with sautéed onions and crumbled sausage, Pecorino siciliano, garlic, raisins, and salted anchovies, and then fried in olive oil (Sicily); slowly braised with tomatoes and onions (called “peperonata”), a dish enjoyed all over Italy; turned into “diavolicchio,” extra-virgin olive oil infused with chili peppers (all over Italy, but especially in southern regions where it is often used to dress pizza); “Spaghetti Aglio, Olio e Peperoncino,” fragrant with garlic and crumbled spicy chilies and slick with fruity olive oil—one of the classic dishes of Italian cuisine throughout the peninsula and the world.

STUFFED PEPPERS

Because of the capers, anchovies, and olives (already very salty), you don’t need to add salt to the tomato sauce.

- 12 red peppers
- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 garlic cloves, crushed
- 5 plum tomatoes, chopped
- ½ cup salted capers, rinsed
- ½ cup pitted black olives
- 4 salted anchovies, rinsed, boned, and chopped
- ¼ teaspoon oregano
- 1 tablespoon minced Italian parsley
- pepper
- 1 pound perciatelli
- salt

Roast the peppers in a preheated broiler, turning once, until charred on all sides, about 15 minutes. Peel; scoop out the seeds, being sure to keep the peppers whole. Place in a large oven-to-table dish. Preheat the oven to 350°.

Heat the olive oil in a saucepan. Add the garlic; cook until aromatic; discard. Stir in the tomatoes; cook 15 minutes. Add the capers and olives; cook 5 minutes. Add the anchovies; cook 5 minutes. Stir in the oregano, parsley, and pepper.

Meanwhile, bring 4 quarts of water to a boil. Add the perciatelli and salt, and cook until they are not quite al dente; they should still offer a lot of resistance, since you will be baking them; drain. Toss with the tomato sauce, and divide among the 12 peppers. Bake for 35 minutes, and serve hot. SERVES 6

Previous page: Chili peppers as depicted by an eighteenth-century naturalist. This page: Chili peppers lend heat as well as flavor to numerous Italian dishes.