

Grinding Away on Black Peppercorns

Black pepper has been used in cooking for centuries, but we still have a lot to learn about this ancient spice.

BY LAUREN SAVOIE

Ground black pepper is one of the most ubiquitous and well-loved spices in the world. It holds a place of honor next to salt on restaurant tables and at kitchen workstations and appears in at least 2,000 of our recipes, from *cacio e pepe* to steak au poivre. No matter the recipe, we love its balanced heat and earthy, toasty flavor.

All true peppercorns are harvested from *Piper nigrum*, a vining plant native to the Indian state of Kerala, which is located on the Malabar Coast. While peppercorns have been cultivated and used in Indian cooking since 2000 BC, we know that by AD 100 they were heavily traded throughout Europe and Asia. In the Roman cookbook *Apicius*—one of the oldest surviving cookbooks—black pepper is listed as an ingredient in 80 percent of the recipes. Today, black peppercorns are grown in tropical climates throughout the world, with Vietnam being the largest producer.

A peppercorn's color—green, white, or black—depends on when it was picked and how it was treated. Black peppercorns may be labeled with their place of origin, such as Lampung (Indonesia), Malabar (India), Vietnam, or Ethiopia. While these all come from the same plant, variations in terroir and climate may make the flavor unique.

What Are Tellicherry Peppercorns?

Then there are Tellicherry black peppercorns, which are often lauded by many as the best in the world. Tellicherry peppercorns have two defining characteristics. First, they are grown in India. Second, Tellicherry peppercorns are 4 millimeters or larger in size. According to experts, larger peppercorns have less heat and more robust, aromatic flavors. Nearly any given peppercorn harvest in India will contain a mix of regular and Tellicherry peppercorns, with Tellicherry peppercorns representing 10 to 20 percent of the crop.

Once ripe and harvested, all the peppercorns are treated the same way. They are boiled briefly and then dried in the sun until they take on a black, shriveled appearance. Once dried, the peppercorns are taken to distribution facilities where they are shaken between a series of screens to sort them according to size. The largest peppercorns are graded as Tellicherry and sold at a premium on the global market.

What's all the fuss about Tellicherry peppercorns? Are they worth seeking out for their superior flavor, or will regular supermarket black peppercorns do? To find out, we gathered 10 whole black peppercorn products, four Tellicherry and six regular. Most of the products were supermarket top sellers, but we



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also included two mail-order Tellicherry products we've liked in previous tastings.

How to Taste Black Pepper

Our first challenge was to figure out how to taste the peppercorns. Grinding them and sampling them plain left our mouths numb after just two samples, so we changed direction. We coarsely ground the peppercorns, mixed them with cooked white rice, and tasted them. The differences among the products were subtle, but we did notice slight variations: Some of the peppers were fragrant and floral, while others were just hot. Despite these flavor nuances, all the peppers were perfectly acceptable, with the exception of one product that was a bit too earthy and musty.

However, most of us don't typically eat spoonfuls of ground pepper mixed into plain white rice, so we decided to sample the products in more realistic cooking applications. We rounded up dishes in which the pepper flavor was prominent enough for us to really home in on differences but wasn't overpowering. Our team conducted tasting after tasting: *cacio e pepe*, steak au poivre, pepper-crusted beef tenderloin, pepper and ricotta crostini, and even ground pepper sprinkled on plain cucumbers—but the flavor variations among the products were too subtle to truly make or break a dish.

Preground versus Whole Peppercorns



WHOLE PEPPERCORNS

Fragrant and bright when ground

Many people swear by freshly ground pepper—so much so that waiters at high-end restaurants offer freshly ground pepper in the same way they do freshly grated Parmesan. But considering how little the flavor differed among the peppercorns we tasted, we wondered if it actually matters whether peppercorns are freshly ground. To find out, we purchased preground versions of our two top-rated products—Tone's and Penzeys—and tasted them alongside freshly ground samples in blind tastings of rice and egg salad.

There were striking differences between the preground peppers and the freshly ground whole peppercorns. First, the preground products were gritty and tough. One taster noted that sampling the preground specks of pepper in egg salad was like "chewing through wood." In comparison, the texture of freshly ground peppercorns was softer, more malleable, and much less distracting in the dish. Second, the preground peppers had almost no flavor. Tasters were able to pick up on a tiny bit of heat but mostly thought the peppers tasted "musty," "almost dirty." Freshly ground peppercorns were "fragrant," "floral," and "bright," with a much more pronounced heat.

According to experts, the oils responsible for pepper's heat and floral aroma start to dissipate as soon as the peppercorn has been cracked. While it might be slightly less convenient to grind whole peppercorns, we think it's worth doing.



PREGROUND PEPPER

Musty, gritty, and tough

We had the best luck when we tried the ground peppers stirred into a simple egg salad. The flavor differences among products were still subtle, but we were able to pick up on the aromatic floral notes in some peppers that we'd tasted in the rice test. Once again, one product was singled out for overly earthy, almost mushroomy flavor and dull heat. However, all the other peppercorns were perfectly acceptable. They provided balanced levels of heat, and some featured pleasant hints of citrus and warm spice or woody notes.

Should You Buy Tellicherry Peppercorns?

In our tastings, we found that we didn't have a clear preference for Tellicherry peppercorns. In fact, the pepper we deemed overly musty and earthy was a Tellicherry product from the mail-order brand Kalustyan's. Because this product received our highest recommendation in a previous tasting of black peppercorns, we ordered and sampled multiple jars and noted dull heat and mustiness in every batch, despite the peppercorns all being within their sell-by dates. A representative from Kalustyan's wouldn't tell us if the company had changed anything about its product, but peppercorns—like many spices—are subject to variations in weather, climate, and harvesting that could account for the unpleasant flavors we noted.

Most other manufacturers wouldn't share specifics about the origins of their peppercorns, but we learned that many use blends of peppercorns harvested from around the world depending on what's available and fresh. When we measured a sample of peppercorns from each product, we found that almost all the peppercorns in our lineup would be large enough to qualify as Tellicherry peppercorns. Though the Tellicherry designation is usually given only to peppercorns sourced from India, this finding could explain why all the peppercorns in our lineup were plenty fragrant and earthy.

The Best: Tone's Whole Black Peppercorns

Our biggest takeaway from this tasting is that you should always buy whole black peppercorns and grind them yourself (see "Preground versus Whole Peppercorns"). When compared to preground peppercorns, freshly ground peppercorns were described by tasters as being "fragrant," "floral," and "bright." Two of the brands whose products we tasted make this easier by offering their peppercorns in jars with built-in grinders, and we confirmed with these companies that these peppercorns are indeed the same type we tasted, just in different packaging.

We think you'll get good results with almost any of the whole black peppercorns we tasted, but we gave our highest recommendation to Tone's Whole Black Peppercorns. This product was mildly spicy and had fragrant, citrusy notes; it's available nationally at Walmart. For black pepper aficionados who want a bit more heat, our runner-up was Penzeys Whole Tellicherry Indian Peppercorns, which had a "perfumy" aroma and "zingy" spiciness.

TASTING BLACK PEPPERCORNS

We sampled 10 nationally available whole black peppercorns ground and mixed into white rice and egg salad. We used brand-new grinders—one per product—to grind the peppercorns for each tasting (including the two products that came with built-in grinders). The peppercorns were priced from \$1.14 to \$3.84 per ounce; eight were top-selling nationally available products (according to data obtained from IRI, an independent Chicago-based market research firm), and two were mail-order products. We also sampled the preground versions of the top two whole peppercorn products in blind tastings of rice and egg salad. Prices shown were paid online or in Boston-area supermarkets. Results were averaged, and products appear below in order of preference.



RECOMMENDED

TONE'S Whole Black Peppercorns

PRICE: \$2.43 for 2.13 oz (\$1.14 per oz) ORIGIN: Proprietary mix

COMMENTS: Our top-ranked product was "mild" and "floral," with a "subtle, lingering heat." Tasters liked the "fragrant" "citrus" notes, which slowly "bloomed" into a "buzzy," "pleasant" spiciness. A bonus: It's the cheapest product in our lineup.

PENZEYS Whole Tellicherry Indian Peppercorns

PRICE: \$6.49 for 2.2 oz (\$2.95 per oz) ORIGIN: India

COMMENTS: This mail-order Tellicherry pepper had a "perfumy" aroma, "woody" "warm spice" notes, and a heat that "builds slowly." Tasters particularly liked it in egg salad, where it added "just the right amount of zing."

MCCORMICK Whole Black Peppercorns

PRICE: \$6.49 for 3.5 oz (\$1.85 per oz) ORIGIN: Proprietary mix

COMMENTS: Tasters loved this product's "warm, buzzy, toasted peppery flavor" and "mild heat." Some picked up on a "sweet" fruitiness that was reminiscent of "fresh green peppercorns."

OLDE THOMPSON Tellicherry

PRICE: \$9.94 for 7.4 oz (\$1.34 per oz) ORIGIN: India

COMMENTS: Another Indian Tellicherry pepper, this product was "earthy," with a "slight acidity." The heat was a bit more "numbing" than we're used to with black pepper, but overall this pepper was "bright" and "vibrant."

MORTON & BASSETT Whole Black Peppercorns

PRICE: \$6.99 for 2.1 oz (\$3.33 per oz) ORIGIN: Vietnam

COMMENTS: This supermarket product was "zippy," with "pops of spice" and a "lingering heat." Some tasters thought its spiciness was a bit too prominent, but most appreciated its "fragrant," "woody" notes.

MORTON Pepper Grinder

PRICE: \$2.49 for 1.24 oz (\$2.01 per oz) ORIGIN: Brazil, India, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Malaysia

COMMENTS: This product was "punchy," "bright," and "slightly sweet." It's available only in a container with a built-in grinder, but the peppercorns can be removed if you want to use them in your own pepper mill.

SPICE ISLANDS Tellicherry Peppercorns

PRICE: \$9.22 for 2.4 oz (\$3.84 per oz) ORIGIN: India

COMMENTS: This pricey product had "vibrant," "woody" notes but lacked heat. Some found the flavor a bit flat.

BADIA Whole Black Pepper

PRICE: \$3.39 for 2 oz (\$1.70 per oz) ORIGIN: Proprietary mix

COMMENTS: This supermarket pepper had a "nice kick of heat" and "strong spiciness" but lacked a more nuanced aroma. Those who could pick up on some of this pepper's fragrance noted a slight "vegetal" earthiness.

SIMPLY ORGANIC Whole Black Peppercorns

PRICE: \$5.49 for 2.65 oz (\$2.07 per oz) ORIGIN: India and Vietnam

COMMENTS: This product was "mild," with "muted heat" and subtler "herby" notes. It was a bit "too dull" for some tasters, but we liked its "woody" aroma and slight "earthiness."

RECOMMENDED WITH RESERVATIONS

KALUSTYAN'S Tellicherry Indian Black Peppercorns

PRICE: \$6.99 for 2.5 oz (\$2.80 per oz) ORIGIN: India

COMMENTS: This Tellicherry pepper, which was once a test kitchen favorite, received low marks for its "overly earthy," "mushroomy" notes and "duller heat." While some tasters liked the "deeper fragrance" of these peppercorns, others thought they tasted a bit "musty" and "smoky," "almost burnt."