

Chili Pepper, from Mexico to Europe: Food, Imaginary and Cultural Identity

Esther Katz

INTRODUCTION

In Mexico, chili peppers are everywhere, in markets, food stalls, industrial food, in all dishes, even children's candies, as they are eaten from an early age. The chili flavor is the main characteristic of Mexican cooking. In the Americas, chili pepper is used most in Mexico.

Several species of chili pepper are grown in the Americas, but only the Mexican species, *Capsicum annuum*, was introduced in Europe, where its mild and fleshy varieties are known as bell peppers. This plant was immediately successful. Unlike the tomato, often perceived as poisonous, the chili pepper started being cultivated in many areas of Southern Europe soon after its introduction.

Chili peppers crossed the Atlantic from Mexico to Europe, but not with the women who were holders of its culinary knowledge. So, how was the chili pepper integrated in the food habits, categories and representations of the societies where it was adopted? Were its cooking ways similar to the Mexican ones? How did the Europeans proceed? Did they cook the chili pepper according to their local culinary techniques? Did they import Mexican food processing? Or did they innovate? Is it possible to compare their representations of this plant with the ones of its native country?¹

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1. This paper is based on bibliographical data and on a research study of food carried out over the span of twenty years in the Mixtec Highlands (State of Oaxaca) and other parts of Mexico (1984-2004), as well as short fieldworks on chili pepper production and consumption performed in Hungary (Budapest and Kalocsa, August 1991, with the linguistic help of Annamária Lammel), Spain (Andalusia and Murcia, October 1992) and France (Basque Country, May 2005, October 2006). Some of the ideas included here were approached in a previous article dealing with the chili

INTRODUCTION OF CHILI PEPPER IN EUROPE

Christopher Columbus is supposed to have brought to Spain the first samples of chili pepper. As Amazonian species (*C. chinense and frutescens*) are more likely to have been the ones cultivated in the West Indies at that time (Heiser 1976), *Capsicum annuum* may in fact have been brought a few years later from Mexico or Central America.

Spain was of course the chili pepper's first point of arrival in Europe. According to Long (1986; 1992), based on Braudel (1949), it became widespread in this continent through several routes controlled by two empires, Charles V's in Western Europe (with sea routes established by the Catalans between Spain, Italy and the Middle East) and the Ottoman empire (expanding in the Eastern and Southern Mediterranean as well as in the Balkans, up to Hungary).²

Long (1986) distinguished several phases in chili pepper adoption in Europe. Chili pepper was first taken to botanical and aristocrats' gardens as an ornamental plant or a curiosity (even in cold countries such as England or Germany) and was first used as medicine, but after a hundred years it stopped attracting elites (Long 1992). In the meantime, in the sixteenth century, soon after its introduction, Spanish farmers started growing it in their gardens (Monardes 1565-74) and using it as a spice. Peppers quickly reached regions of Southern Italy such as Calabria (Teti 1995),³ were known in Southwestern France in the seventeenth century (Prévost 1655; Sabban 1986; Barrau 1991) and arrived in Hungary from the Balkans in the early eighteenth century (Kisbán 1989). They expanded all over Southern Europe, from Spain to Bul-

pepper and tomato (Katz 1992). Thanks are due to farmers and consumers of chili pepper in the regions where fieldwork was done, as well as to Janet Long (Mexico), Eszter Kisbán, Maria Molnár, Agota Nagy-Wohl (Budapest), Concepción Obón, Diego Rivera (Murcia), Françoise Aubaile-Sallenave, Jacques Barrau (†), Laurence Bérard, Ariane Bruneton-Governatori, Marina Goloubinoff, Aline Hémond, Annamária Lammel, Anne Luxereau, Marie-Claude Mahias, Philippe Marchenay, Yves Monnier, Marie-Hélène Sauner-Leroy (France).

2. Andrews (1992, 91) suggests that chili pepper may as well have reached the Eastern Mediterranean from Persia and India where the Portuguese were trading spices.
3. But it is not mentioned in Sardinia before the eighteenth century (Guignoni 2001).

garia, in regions where climate was appropriate, including continental areas with hot summers.

When introduced, the chili pepper was immediately considered a “pepper”. It became “the poor people’s pepper”, as it allowed farmers who could not afford Asian black pepper to spice up their often monotonous food (Barrau 1991, 343). But the mild peppers were also used as vegetables and European farmers made them even milder. Bell peppers are probably the result of a selection made by Italian farmers (Long 1992) and the so-called “tomato” and “Hungarian wax” peppers were likely selected by Bulgarians.⁴

From mid-18th century, European elites, starting with the Spaniards (Luján 1988: 128), became interested in chili pepper again, but this time as a culinary item. French elites only adopted it in the nineteenth century, using it in exotic spice compositions (Sabban 1986).

In the same century, when the Continental Blockade limited availability of black pepper, farmers of the Hungarian Great Plain stepped up chili pepper production, which later became more industrialized (Somos 1984: 22-25). In Spain, the regions of Extremadura and Murcia also became specialized in commercial cultivation. Murcia now competes with Hungary over industrial paprika powder production (Zapata *et al.*, 1992: 20-26). Bell peppers are cultivated on a large scale in most countries of Southern Europe (Somos, *ibid.*).

CULINARY USE OF CHILI PEPPER

In Mexico there are about a hundred varieties of *Capsicum annuum*, more or less spicy, more or less large, with a long or round shape and colors varying from pale yellow to dark red, but each region has a limited number of local pepper varieties. Some varieties (*serrano*, *jalapeño/chipotle*, *poblano/ancho*, *guajillo*, *pasilla*, *mulato*) are now cultivated on a wide scale for the national market. As *C. annuum* only grows below 1200 m of altitude, dry chili pepper has always been traded from the lowlands to the highlands, which are the

4. “Hungarian wax peppers” (*fehérözönpaprika*) were introduced in Hungary by Bulgarians in the nineteenth century and “tomato peppers” (*paradicsompaprika*) in the twentieth (Somos: 1984, 22-25). The latter are common in Bulgarian salads (Chauvet, in preparation).

most populated areas. A highland species, *C. pubescens*, was introduced from the Andes in the twentieth century, but it is seasonal and cannot be dried. *Chile habanero* (“from Havana”), a variety of the Amazonian species *C. chinense*, is cultivated in the Yucatan peninsula (Long 1986).

Capsicum annuum is eaten fresh when it is green (immature) or yellow and dried when it is red (mature). Usually, only *C. pubescens* and *chinense* are always eaten fresh, green or mature, as they are fleshy. On the Gulf Coast, one variety (*chipotle*, called *jalapeño* when fresh) is smoked (*chilpochtli* means “smoked chili pepper” in Nahuatl).⁵

In Mexico, most dishes, especially beans and stews, are cooked with small green or dry chili peppers. Dry chili pepper is also the base for meat stew sauces and marinades (*adobo*, *recado*). Even though the dishes are already spiced up, more chili may be added, so it is always put on the table, either fresh or in a sauce (*salsa picante*). When fresh, small green chili peppers are nibbled with the food or added to the dish, chopped, cut into slices or as pickles.⁶ Hot sauces are common all over Latin America (Lambert Ortiz 1984), but the Mexican *salsas* have a specific touch. At its bare minimum, *salsa* is made of chili pepper, salt and water. More commonly, it is associated with red tomatoes or green husk tomatoes,⁷ onions, garlic and often coriander leaves.⁸ Many more ingredients may be added (squash seeds, avocado, etc.). The ingredients are either raw or boiled, grilled or fried, then ground with water in a stone mortar (*molcajete*) or more commonly now in a blender (*licuadora*), the main electric appliance found in Mexican homes. The color of the sauce depends on the color of the chili pepper (green or light to dark red), of the tomato (green or red) and the herbs. Some raw *salsas* are not blended but made with diced green chili pepper, tomato, onions, garlic and coriander leaves, which is also the base for *guacamole* and “Mexican style” (*a la mexicana*) dishes (beefsteak,

5. Cf. Siméon, 1977.

6. Pickles were a Spanish introduction. Not many people know how to prepare them. Chili pickles are commonly found canned or in jars, industrially produced.

7. The common red tomato (*jitomate*) is *Solanum lycopersicum* and the smaller green husk tomatoes (*tomate de cascara*) are different species of cultivated or wild *Physalis* (*Ph. ixocarpa* and *philadelphica* are the most common ones).

8. The last three plants were introduced by the Spaniards.

scrambled eggs, cactus salad, etc.). *Salsas* of different kinds are cooked all over Mexico, each region with specific recipes.⁹ In some areas, especially in Guerrero (Marina Goloubinoff, personal communication, 1993) or Oaxaca, the sauce, sometimes enriched with beans, potatoes, avocado, sesame seeds or hog plums, may be turned into a main dish if there is nothing else to eat. When working in the fields, farmers often just eat *tortillas* filled up with chili sauce.

The Nahuatl name for *salsa*, *chilmolli*—“chili sauce or dish”¹⁰ in Mexican Spanish *chilmole* or *chirmole*—creates an ambiguity between *salsa* and what is now called *mole*, a thick chili sauce typical of central Mexico and Oaxaca, eaten as a main dish. Shortly after the Conquest, the Spanish friar Bernardino de Sahagún described a great variety of *chilmolli* in the Central Mexican Highlands, which may be either one of the two preparations (Sahagún 1999). In present-day Guerrero Nahuatl, *chilmobli* and *chibli* refer to the *salsa* and *mohli* to the *mole* (Marina Goloubinoff, personal communication, 1993). In Mixtec, the sauce, (*nde yaha*, “chili water”) is well differentiated from the *mole* (*neyu ubwa*, “thick dish or broth”). To make *mole*, dry (large) chili peppers are ground on a corn grinding stone or in an electric blender and mixed with other ingredients into a paste, usually fried in a big pan and diluted little by little with a meat or vegetable broth. The meat, vegetables or beans are previously boiled and added at the end. There are many sorts of *mole*: “green” (often with squash seeds), “yellow” (with light red chili), “red” (*colorado*) or “black” (with dark chili, burnt tortillas and cocoa). *Mole* is rooted in pre-hispanic indigenous traditions, but the different recipes, especially the *mole poblano*, a black *mole* from Puebla highly appreciated all over the country, were enriched in the colonial period by Spanish imported ingredients (onions, garlic, herbs, almonds, sesame seeds, etc.) and techniques, such as frying.¹¹

9. But there are no chili sauces in the cooking of the Mayan Indians of the Chiapas Highlands (Petrich 1985; Helios Figuerola, personal communication, 2005).

10. Siméon 1977.

11. *Mole poblano* is said to have been created in a convent of Puebla at the end of the seventeenth century for a banquet served to the vice-king (Pérez San Vicente 1988: 19). Several of its ingredients are typical of the Arab-Andalusian medieval cooking (Bolens 1990). A present-day Moroccan fast-breaking dish, *sellou*, is made according to the same technique: almonds, sometimes walnuts, and sesame seeds are fried separately and blended into a paste with toasted flour, gum Arabic, cinnamon and honey).

Large green chili peppers are consumed as vegetables, more commonly in cities, with Spanish recipes: fried *rajas de chile* (chili strips) are also cooked in Spain, as well as stuffed chilis (*chile relleno*), filled with meat or cheese. Bell peppers, reintroduced in the twentieth century, mainly appeal to people with European cooking traditions (Long 1986). Dry chili powder is rarely used. It is added to fruit slices sold on the street and industrial foods such as corn chips or candies.

In Europe, chili pepper was first acknowledged as a spice, then also used as a vegetable. Either green or red peppers may be eaten fresh. Dry chili pepper is cooked in soups and stews, as fresh pepper, but it is more commonly turned into a spice powder like black pepper. Under the Hungarian name “paprika,” it is now used all over Europe. Traditionally, in Hungary, Spain, Southern Italy and French Basque country, where it is always on the table with salt and black pepper, it spices up hams, sausages and many other dishes (Luján 1988; Teti 1995; Raineau 1993).¹² The fresh hot peppers may be preserved in salt, oil or vinegar, the same way as (or together with) cucumbers, onions or beets.

The large mild chili or bell peppers (it may be difficult to distinguish them) are consumed as vegetables. Raw, grilled, fried or boiled, alone or with other vegetables, they may be eaten as a salad or in a side dish (like *ratatouille* or *peperonata*). They may be stuffed, which is very common in Eastern Mediterranean cooking.¹³ Cooked red peppers may be mashed in a *coulis* or a sauce (in Hungary, “tomato peppers” are condensed like a tomato sauce).

Mexican and European ways of using chili pepper are actually quite different. There was no culinary technique transfer from Mexico to Europe, but rather a re-appropriation according to local food categories (spice, vegetable) and techniques (preserves, vegetable stews, etc.). Some European preparations (pickles, stuffed vegetables) also traveled the other way, as well as mild varieties that went through a further selection process. On the other hand, neither Mexican style *salsas*, nor *mole* were taken to Europe. Both remain emblematic of Mexican cuisine.

12. In Bresse (Eastern France), the *poivre rouge* (red pepper) spices up a local cheese (Bérard & Marchenay 2004).

13. The traditional stuffed vegetables are eggplants and vine leaves. American peppers, tomatoes and zucchinis followed the same recipes.

Culinary uses of chili pepper in Europe and Mexico

MEXICO

Small fresh (green) hot pepper

As such, whole or in pieces

In vinegar

In dishes (broths, stews...)

In salsa

In dishes “a la mexicana”

Large fresh (green) mild pepper

Fried chili strips

Stuffed chili peppers

Dry chili pepper

In powder > chips, fruits, sweets

Whole > in dishes

Ground Small chilis > *salsas*, stews

Large chilis > *moles*, *adobos*

Smoked chili pepper (chipotle)

Whole, in salsa

EUROPE

Small fresh (green/red) hot pepper

As such

In vinegar, oil or salt

In dishes (soups, stews...)

Mild (green/red/yellow) chili/bell pepper

In salad (raw, fried, grilled, boiled)

In vegetable stews (“ratatouilles”,...)

Stuffed pepper (green/yellow)

Mashed, condensed sauce, coulis (red)

Dry chili pepper

In powder > on the table, in dishes

Whole > in dishes

Ground > in hams and sausages

Smoked chili pepper (pimentón de la Vera)

In sausages, dishes

THE IMAGINARY OF CHILI PEPPER

Green and red, fresh and dry

Why is red chili pepper not eaten fresh in Mexico? Why is green/fresh opposed to red/dry? We have to find clues in the complex color symbolism of the indigenous cultures.

In classical Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, *xoxouhqui* refers both to “green” and “raw”. The green color was attributed to immature plants, the yellow and red color to mature plants (Dupey 2004: 22-30). The rainy season was called *xopan*, the “green period” (Dupey 2004), in reference to the renewal of the vegetation, and green chili was associated with the Rain God, as the green color symbolizes water (Long 1990).

For the Mixtec Indians of Oaxaca (Katz 2005), who share many cultural features with the Central Highlands Indians, food symbolism refers to dry and rainy seasons. Wet and dry are two implicit food categories, mainly expressed in cooking terms, and combine with the hot and cold categories. For sowing corn, the ideal time, the climax of fertility, occurs when the earth, warmed up by the sun during the dry season, receives the first rains. Likewise, the ideal diet must combine heat and water: it must be warm, not too hot, and liquid. So dry hot foods or wet cold foods alone are avoided. Chili pepper always makes food warm. Fresh green chili may be eaten alone (as it is hot/wet), while dry red chili (hot/dry) must be cooked or soaked in water first. Chili sauces are always made by grinding or blending the ingredients with water.

In classical Nahuatl, again, the main term for the red color, *chilchitic*, derives from *chilli* and *eztli* (blood). As chili pepper is supposed to be a “hot” food, red is a “hot” color (Dupey 2004). In present-day Guerrero Nahuatl, the word for the orange color is *chilliatolli*, *atolli* being a thick white corn beverage (Hémond 2003). Colors of *mole* dishes are obtained by light or dark shades of dry peppers mixed with light or dark foods: “Yellow” *mole* is made of light red *guajillo* pepper mixed with white corn dough, “black” *mole* is made of dark peppers mixed with chocolate and toasted tortillas. Color intensity and shade are notions expressed in pre-Hispanic and present Nahua color terms (Dupey 2004; Dehouve 1978: 298).

Red and green are opposed and complementary. For the Aztecs, “jade, being green, represented the precious water, which is ‘the blood of the vegetation’, associated, in an opposing pair, to red, the color of blood” (Duverger 1979). During the Fire God festival, Aztecs served a combination of green and red dishes (Dupey 2004). In their paintings, present-day Guerrero Nahua cloth-bark painters often associate these two colors, which are seen as complementary (Hémond 2003). For a harvest festival at the end of the rainy season, in Olinala, Guerrero, fresh green and red chili peppers are set together in marigold bouquets and collars adorning the church and the saints (Long 1993).

Green is related to the rainy season and fertility, but so is red when associated with black. In ancient Nahua iconography, the rainy season is represented by a combination of red and black, while the red-white combination represents the dry season (Dupey 2003:107-117). In contemporary Guerrero Nahua ceramics, red and black are always associated and represent the

earth (Hémond 2003). For present-day Otomis of central Mexico (Galiniér 1990:513-524), red, related to blood and female genitals, and black, to night and cavity, are the main colors of the underworld, the place of origin of the fertility, according to all Mexican indigenous cultures (López Austin 1988).

This type of color contrast is still sought in present-day Mexican cooking, be it rural or urban. Green and red are associated in raw diced *salsas* and “Mexican-style” dishes and other *salsas* are either red or green. “Yellow”, red or black *moles* are festive dishes. Black *mole*, in particular, is served at weddings. More or less unconsciously, Mexican people, even nowadays, keep eating foods that are symbols of fertility.

In Europe, there is also a distinction between red and green, although it does not systematically refer to a distinction between fresh and dried, as in Mexico. Green, yellow or red chili or bell peppers may be eaten fresh. Creating color schemes by blending green and red peppers—or pepper and tomato—in the same dish is common in the Mediterranean. The red color is particularly sought for its culinary aesthetic value. In Spain, red pepper strips decorate white or saffron rice dishes. For Hungarians, the most important characteristic of paprika is the intensity of the red color.¹⁴ Nowadays, pepper oleoresin and powder are employed in the food industry as dye (Long 1986: 115-123). Barrau (1991: 343-344) suggests that the red color played an important role in the introduction of peppers and tomatoes in Europe, where there were few red foods before their arrival: he recalls that these “immoral red fruits” were said to be aphrodisiac and stimulate appetites. In Europe, the color red is related to blood and fire, and therefore to heat, anger, vital and sexual energy. According to the Calabrians, chili pepper is hot and gives strength (Teti 1995). Hungarians claim the same and say that peppers ‘heat up your blood’ or ‘make it boil;’ ‘To be like pepper’ (*paprikás*), means to be angry, agitated or nervous (Halász 1987: 58-59).

14. In Hungarian, the saying “to blush like a tomato” translates into “to blush like a paprika” (*paprikapiros*).

Peppers as a sex symbol

In Europe, red is reminiscent of sexuality, but pepper is more than just red: it has a phallic shape and is “spicy” or “hot.” Peppers in Hungary are a symbol of virility: men add more paprika to their food than women and in Kalocsa a pepper variety is labeled “cat penis”. In Calabria, a pepper bears the same name and another, rounder variety, is called “rooster testicle”. Pepper is often cooked in a specific sausage, which is also phallic, and both foods are supposed to have exciting and aphrodisiac properties;¹⁵ pepper is used as remedy against frigidity (Teti 1995). In the nineteenth century, Basques used to burn dried peppers as incense during wedding ceremonies (Raineau 1993).

In Mexico, pepper is also a symbol of virility. Men eat hotter foods than women; notably they nibble whole green peppers more often, and show off when it makes them sweat. Mexican slang and several indigenous languages use “pepper” (*chile*) as a synonym for the virile member. “Because both will heat bodies,” Mocho Indians (Mayas from Chiapas) will tell you with a smile on their faces (Petrich 1985: 106). Pepper is considered an aphrodisiac and associated with sexual desire.¹⁶ And if overheated when grilled, it is said to “explode and spill its tiny seeds” (Aline Hémond, personal communication, 2004). Chili pepper refers to vital and sexual heat not only because of its phallic shape, but also because it is indeed a “hot” food, both in reality and symbolically. As seen above, certain foods are regarded as “hot” or “cold”; human beings as well can be regarded as more or less “hot” throughout their lifespan: individuals are “cold” when born and progressively acquire heat, peaking when adulthood begins and gradually losing it as they grow old.¹⁷ Intake of “hot” foods aims at maintaining this vital heat. As pepper is par-

15. In a recent Calabrian trade show, a pepper preparation was sold as “Viagra for the poor” (Zoschke, 2007).

16. See the pre-Hispanic legend of the god Tezcatlipoca disguised as a stark naked Huastec merchant who was selling green peppers and turned the daughter of the Toltec king mad with desire at the sight of his anatomy (Sahagún 1999, book III: 197-198 and quoted in Long 1990).

17. This conception of the life cycle, analysed in detail for the Aztecs by López Austin (1980), is common to present-day Mexican people of Indian descent.

ticularly “hot,” it does more than maintaining vital heat, it gives strength and fosters sexual activity, thus enabling proliferation of offspring.

Peppers as identity markers

While taste for sweet is innate, taste for peppers is gradually acquired during child socialization and culturally nurtured (Rozin & Rozin 1981, Fischler 1990). The chili taste is for Mexicans what E. Rozin (1973) calls a “flavoring principle” a basic flavor which gives a specific identity to the food. Mexican food without chili is not Mexican food anymore.

As chili pepper marks the specificity of the Mexican cuisine, it also draws cultural borders. Beyond the Guatemalan border food is not spicy enough for a Mexican, even though pepper is consumed there in nearly the same manner. Pepper is used in almost all Latin American cuisines, but nowhere is it as important as in Mexican cuisine, where it is a symbol of national identity.¹⁸ Above all, peppers mark the cultural frontier between Mexico and the United States. They have the reputation of being unbearable to the palate of a *gringo*. Nonetheless, the Mexican frontier used to be further north, and the Southwestern United States has preserved some of its Mexican roots. Furthermore, the demographic weight of Hispanic minorities is constantly increasing, along with their cultural influence. Peppers have thus been gaining new adepts (*chilibeads*) in the United States (Robbins 1992). Gourmet magazines specializing in chili pepper are quite successful¹⁹ and pepper festivals are held in California, Texas, and New Mexico (Jackson 2004). A whole institute at New Mexico State University (www.chilepepperinstitute.org) is dedicated to chili pepper agronomy research.

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18. In the city of Puebla, Independence Day is celebrated with a pepper dish bearing the colors of the national flag (green, white, red), the famous *chiles en nogada*, a local dish attested since the eighteenth century, consisting of green peppers stuffed with meat and tiny bits of fruit, covered with a white sauce of walnuts and sprinkled with red pomegranate seeds (Pérez San Vicente 1988, 21).
 19. Several printed or on-line magazines are dedicated to chili pepper; a specialized gourmet magazine named *Chile Pepper Magazine*, created in 1987, had 55,000 subscribers in 1992 (Robbins, 1992); it is now printed every two months (www.chilepepper-mag.com), as *Fiery Foods*, created in 1997 (www.fiery-foods.com).

Even within Mexico, pepper intake varies among regions, social or ethnic groups and persons. Those who eat the spiciest foods are Indian peasants, especially in the Central Highlands²⁰ and the State of Oaxaca. From a regional standpoint, the hottest species, namely the *habanero* pepper, is grown in the Yucatan, a lowland peninsula populated by Maya Indians; however, in the Chiapas Highlands, Maya Indians do not eat very hot food (Hélios Figuerola, pers. comm., 2005). Everywhere, the hot flavors are diluted in towns, to a greater extent among middle classes and especially among those of European origin, although the latter tend to get used to peppers over the span of one generation. In the Central and Southern regions, where the percentage of indigenous population is high, peppers enhance an otherwise monotonous cuisine based on *tortillas* and beans. Many Indians in these regions live in poverty and are seen by others as backwards. The Mixtecs of Oaxaca, for instance, tend to denigrate themselves, but, at the same time, in contrast with the finesse and weakness of city-dwellers, they take pride in their strength, endurance and ability to make a living in a rugged environment (Katz 1991). Eating more spicy foods than the city folk is part of that logic: as they say, “we are strong, since we eat nothing but pepper” (*somos fuertes porque comemos puro chile*).

In Europe, pepper has also become a regional or national identity marker. In Italy, since pepper is not grown and eaten by their close neighbors, Calabrians have adopted it as a significant element of their identity, which they carry along with them when migrating to the United States. The pepper perfectly symbolizes cultural traits commonly attributed to Calabrian peasants, closely resembling those of Mexican indigenous peasants: primitive, vigorous in a hostile environment, and gifted with a strong identity which they defend from the denials of outsiders (Teti 1995). Basques from Espelette compare the color of peppers to that of their flag and use peppers, which decorate their house fronts, as a tourist attraction (Raineau 1993), but also to distinguish themselves from their Bearnese neighbors who eat mild instead of spicy peppers (Bruneton-Governatori, pers. comm., 1993).²¹

20. According to David Robichaux (personal communication, 2005), the Nahuatl Indians of the State of Tlaxcala eat the hottest food of all Mexico.

21. According to the Basques, Bearnese *pipérade* is not a pepper dish like their own, but a tomato dish (“*c’est de la tomataille*”), (Bruneton-Governatori, personal communication, 1993).

In Hungary, paprika has become a symbol of national identity. Kisbán (1989) retraced this process through the history of goulash. This beef stew was prepared out in the fields by cattle herders in the Great Plain, where peppers were first introduced. This *gulyás bús* (cowherd meat) or *pörkölt* (stew) took on the name *paprikás bús* (paprika meat) at the end of the eighteenth century, indicating introduction of paprika and, at that time, extended its popularity to regional farmers and taverns. In 1790, Hungarian nobility came into conflict with the Austrian Monarchy in the process of building a unified Austro-Hungarian empire. The romantic view of peasant culture was then in fashion throughout Europe. Hungarian nobles thus drew symbols of national identity from folk culture, in order to distinguish themselves from Austrian nobles, with whom they shared many cultural traits. Until then, sauerkraut with meat, eaten throughout Central Europe, was considered the Hungarian national dish. By an “invention of tradition,”²² Hungarian nobles established goulash as the national dish, as it was specific to a Hungarian region and, thanks to the paprika flavor, distinct from other Central European cuisines. Goulash thus became a true success in Hungary and later throughout the rest of Europe. Its image as a national dish faded at one point, but regained strength with tourism and as a symbol of identity among Hungarian immigrants in North America.

Regional identity of pepper-producing regions has been enhanced through pepper trade shows. For the last years, such food festivals have been held annually in Diamante in Calabria, Espelette in the Basque Country and Kalocsa in the Hungarian Great Plain, where pepper museums were created (Raineau 1993; Jackson 2004; Hudgins 2004; Zoschke 2004). Pepper has become a tourist attraction as well as an agricultural and cultural heritage.

Currently, some regions claim peppers as “produits de terroir” (Bérard & Marchenay 1995; 2004).²³ Farmers in Cáceres (Extremadura, Spain), Navarra (Spain) and Espelette (French Basque Country) obtained a “geographical indication” for their peppers, a certification also sought by Padrón (Galicia, Spain).²⁴

22. According to the definition minted by Hobsbawm & Ranger (1983).

23. The French term “produit de terroir” is applied to localized, traditional, transmitted productions; they are usually developed in a territory according to specific knowledge linked to local traditions (Bérard & Marchenay 2004).

24. For the varieties labeled *pimentón de la Vera* (Cáceres), *piquillo de Lodosa* (Navarra), *piment d'Espelette*. “A geographical indication is a sign used on goods that have a

Peppers became a part of traditional cultures, by means of “invention of tradition” as well as know-how unique to each territory.²⁵ The processes of plant selections carried out over the centuries by farmers of different European regions are now being acknowledged. But economic stakes are also present and these new measures may also have an impact on the evolution of the management of these products and the agricultural heritage. These issues are moving quickly, so it is hard to forecast the future.

CONCLUSION

Chili pepper is an attractive plant. It was one of the American plants most quickly adopted in Europe. But Mexican recipes did not accompany it. Far away from their native setting, chili peppers went through a process of re-appropriation. Europeans used them the same way as black pepper or gherkins and turned some of their varieties into vegetables that gave color to their dishes. Although Mexican and European common imaginary is different from each other, chili pepper actually bears similar symbolic value in both cultural areas. Above all, its flavor is so strong and unique that it is one of the best expressions of cultural borders.

specific geographical origin and possess qualities or a reputation that are due to that place of origin. Most commonly, a geographical indication consists of the name of the place of origin of the goods” (WIPO, 2006). This protection system has been applied in France for a century (labeled *appellation d’origine, denominación de origen* in Spanish) and was adopted in 1992 by the European Union. It takes into account not only the product itself, but also its agroecosystem and the knowledge related to its selection, production, and processing. See Duhart (2008) on the recent situation of Espelette pepper production in relation to geographical indication and cultural heritage. In New Mexico, farmers producing local varieties of chili pepper are now thinking of applying for a geographical indication (de Witt 2004).

25. The notion of “invention of tradition” must not be applied here in a strict manner. It raises a question about the historical depth: when does a product become traditional? (Cf. Bérard & Marchenay 1995). The data presented in this article show that know-how related to chili pepper was often borrowed from culinary practises applied to other plants.

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