

ONE HOT COMMODITY

THE PIQUANT PATHS OF THE PIRI-PIRI PEPPER

BY J. R. PATTERSON

Illustrations from *Hortus Eystettensis*
(*The Garden at Eichstätt*)
by Basilius Besler, 1613

T

o look at a map and imagine the Portugal of today, that small strip of undulating hills along the Atlantic Ocean, as the world's preeminent exploratory force, a powerful military presence, and the global authority on trade takes a generous imagination. Take a closer look at Portuguese food and the country's history becomes clear. Like a pot boiling down, Portugal has not shrunk in the years since its territorial zenith so much as concentrated, with the flavors of the world deepening between its narrow borders for centuries. It is surprising then that the taste most internationally associated with Portugal today—the spice of the *piri-iri* chile (or chili, or chilli, or chilie, in all its myriad forms) pepper—is a relatively new arrival. But the many restaurants touting “Portuguese-style” chicken and “Portuguese hot-pepper sauce” are paying hom-

age to the wrong culinary idol. Portugal's relationship with *piri-iri* has been one of discovery and rediscovery, and the story of the pepper does not only belong to Portugal alone but instead owes it prominence to war and the shadow of Empire.

When the Portuguese first sailed west to find a faster route to India in the late 15th century, they were looking to secure their own kitchen, not change world cuisine. European empires were expanding at this time, and so were the European cravings for foreign flavors. Portugal in particular, a country whose taste buds had previously thrived on the tart vinegars, oils, and citrus of pre-Colombian Iberia, welcomed the tastes of the world with open arms. In flowed black pepper, cardamom, and cinnamon from India's Malabar Coast, allspice from the West Indies, cloves from Indonesia, and cod (salted and spatchcocked into kites of *bacalhau*) from the Grand Banks of Newfoundland.

The gastronomic impact went both ways. Just as explorers appropriated the flavors of the countries they visited, their hegemony on the global spice trade allowed Portugal's influence to spread to all corners of the earth. Wine and garlic taken to India became incorporated into curries, particularly in eastern India where the famed Goan dish Vindaloo is derived from the Portuguese *carne de vinha d'alho*. To Japan went refined sugar, as well as a variety of other new dishes. The Japanese words for bread, cake, and other desserts are Portuguese derivatives. Japanese cuisine embraced many of these European imports. The sweet, eggy dessert *keiran soman* is a nipponized *fios de ovos*, while tempura was derived from *peixinhos da horta*, the fried devotional temperance chow of Catholic missionaries. Perhaps the most astonishing Lusofonic influence came through Catarina de Bragança, queen consort of Britain's Charles II. It was her, and not the English navy, who hooked the Brits on their favorite drink. Legend has it that her nuptial luggage included crates stamped *Transporte de Ervas Aromaticas*, or T.E.A.

The chile pepper, whose fire has licked cuisines across the world, were also encountered by Portuguese traders on their international travels. Perhaps the most pervasively globalized food today, these "flame tongues of the earth," wrote J.M. Coetzee, "in all their hundredfold variety belong to the New World, which fights the fire of the sun with the flame tongues of the earth."

Portuguese *conquistadores* first encountered peppers in the Caribbean and the northern coast of South America. At a time when goods were valued as much for their taste as their capacity to store on long sea journeys, the hot peppers of the New World were quickly favored not only for their bite but for their potential as a trade good. Chile peppers dried well, and their seeds remained viable over long sea voyages.

Chile cultivars, particularly *Capsicum frutescens*, the Tabasco Pepper, were only one of the many New World plants taken back to Portugal as part of the *conquistadores'* haul. However, the hot peppers were not incorporated into the

country's cuisine in the way tomatoes and potatoes were. This was in part due to their arrival being usurped by Vasco da Gama's 1497 arrival in India, which was supplying a steady supply of black pepper, then the world's most coveted spice. Portuguese cravings for a spicy nip were satiated, and "on the Iberian peninsula," writes Lizzie Collingham in her book *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors*, "chilies (*sic*) were grown more as curious ornamental plants than as sources of a fiery flavoring."

Still, chiles did find their admirers in the Old World. Trading ships carried seeds of *C. frutescens* onwards, depositing them in Portuguese ports within present-





day Guinea, Angola, Mozambique, India, Thailand, China, and Japan. The worldwide domination of chiles was set.

It was on Africa's western coast that the proliferation of peppers through the continent first began. Large plantations of melegueta, a member of the ginger and cardamom family also known as "grains of paradise," had already been established in Guinea as a local substitute for black pepper. As melegueta too became redundant under the new sea-trade links with India, the plantations were abandoned, creating space for the exotic new pepper to be cultivated.

Coddled by the heat of western Africa, the *C. frutescens* needed little human encouragement to flourish. Attracted by the chiles' bright red color, birds (whose temperature receptors are not triggered by capsaicin [the source of a pepper's fire], allowing them to eat the spicy plants without reprisal) raided the garden plots of western and eastern

Africa and began to distribute seeds deep into the continent. The *C. frutescens* cultivars became so rife throughout Africa that when European explorers later breached the thick jungles of the Congo Basin, they took the chiles to be native species.

Joachim John Monteiro, traveling along the Congo River in 1875, found a land awash in wild chile. "It grows everywhere in the greatest luxuriance as a fine bush loaded with bunches of the pretty bright green and red berries," he wrote in his book *Angola and the River Congo Basin*. "It seems to come up spontaneously around the huts and villages, and is not otherwise planted or cultivated."

By then, chile had turned from a foreign foodstuff to pervasive culinary staple. Noted Monteiro, "It has a most violent hot taste, but the natives consume it in incredible quantities; their stews are generally of a bright-red color from the quantity of this pepper added, previously ground on a hollow stone with another smaller round one. Their cookery is mostly a vehicle for conveying this chili (*sic*) pepper."

As it was adopted into the cultures of sub-Saharan Africa, the *C. frutescens* acquired new names. Dubbed *malagueta* by Guineans, Kimbundu speakers in Angola knew it as *jindungo*, while Kamba speakers on the eastern coast knew it as *ndul*. Safaring Brits, their mild palates set alight, labelled it the African devil, or bird's-eye chile. The name that became most widely known, however, was *pili-pili* or *piri-piri*, a Swahili epizeuxis that means "pepper pepper," pointing, perhaps, to the plant's pungency.

From the 19th century the Portuguese empire was actively encouraging its European citizens to settle abroad. By the 20th century establishment of the *Estado Novo* dictatorship, significant communities of settler-colonists had grown in Angola and Mozambique. Whether the national taste had changed enough since the days of the spice trade, or whether something in the African cultivars of *malagueta* made the *piri-piri* varietal particularly irresistible, the settlers took to the hot pepper with a ferocity their European ancestors had not. In his 1977 history of African

cooking, *First Catch Your Eland*, South African novelist Laurens van der Post wrote, “The man who has become hooked on *piri-piri* hungers for his favorite dish like a junkie for heroin, because the person who has once acquired a taste for African chillies (*sic*) becomes an addict.” Predictably, mutual fondness over a spicy pepper was not enough to stem the tenuous relationship between Portuguese colonials and the indigenous population. One by one, as other African nations fought to overturn the rights-refusal and systemic racism of the colonial organism, those in the Portuguese colonies were no different. In 1961 the first coordinated actions taken against the *Estado Novo* occurred in Angola; Guinea followed in 1963; Mozambique in 1964. For the next decade, guerilla warfare tore apart the nations as the Overseas War (as it was known in Portugal), or the Wars of Liberation (to Africans), ground on.

Change was not limited to the southern continent. In 1974, the Carnation Revolution removed Portugal’s long-ruling dictatorship from power, and by

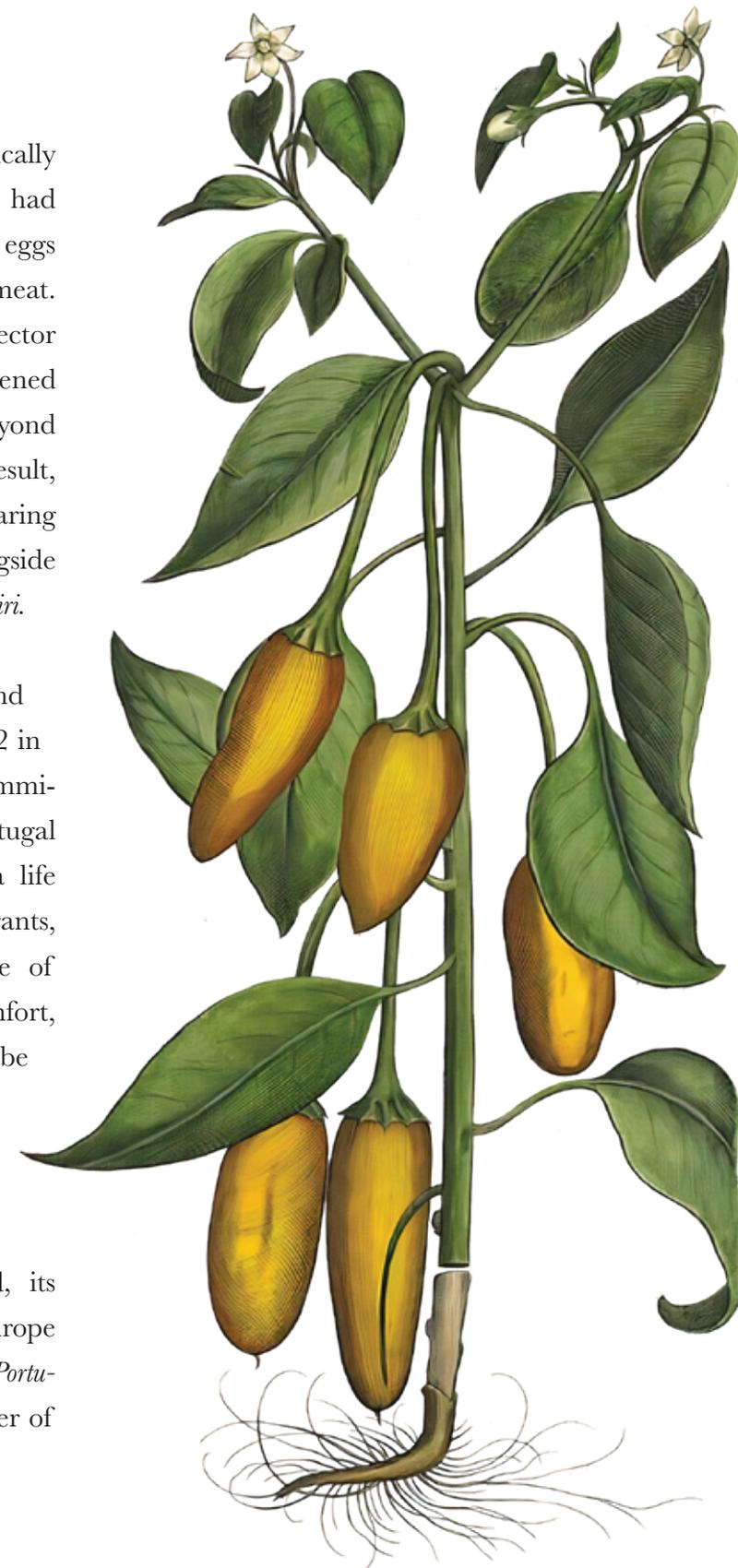
the following year, Guinea, Cape Verde, Mozambique, São Tomé and Príncipe and Angola had gained their independence. The end of the colonial oppression did not mean the end to war, however, and Angola and Mozambique descended into brutal civil conflicts.

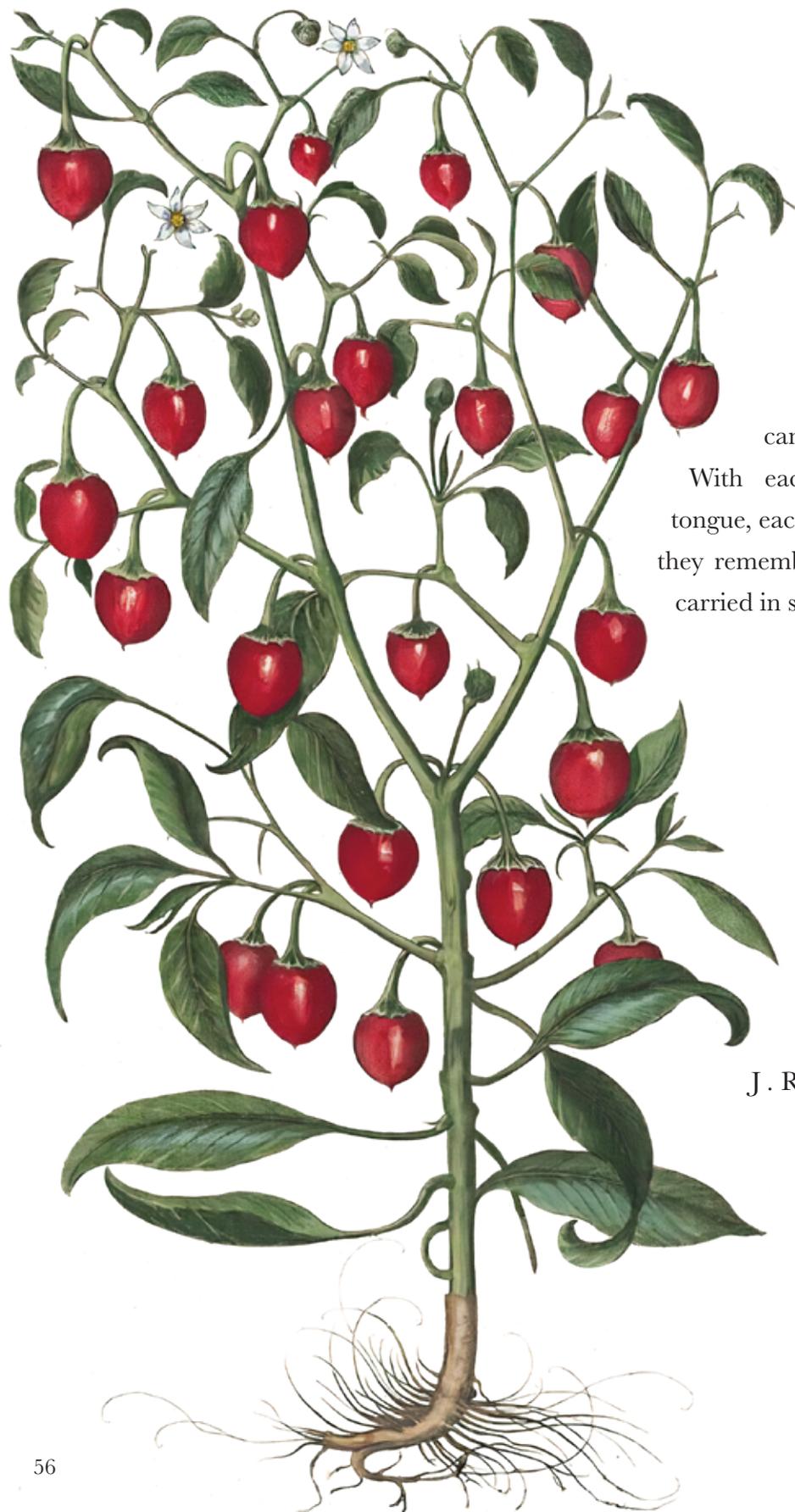
A mass exodus the Portuguese settler population followed, with over a million Portuguese refugees returning to Portugal. Despite largely being of western descent, the *retornados*, or “returnees,” were not completely European and were especially not accustomed to the acerbic palate of continental Europe. Many of them had been born in Africa and sought to bear the traditions of their homeland—their cuisine in particular—with them to their new home.

By the late 1970s, *retornados* had set about incorporating *piri-piri* into traditional Portuguese recipes. Mixed with oil and herbs, a *piri-piri* sauce found its way onto the table, nestled beside the long-established bottles of olive oil and vinegar. Complementing the arrival of the *retornados* were advances in Portugal’s

agricultural sectors. As an historically poor agrarian society, chickens had been kept as a continual source of eggs rather than a one-time supply of meat. Improvements in the poultry sector allowing for larger production opened up chickens as sources for meals beyond holidays and special occasions. As a result, grilled and roasted birds began appearing on more tables, increasingly alongside the newest African import, *piri-piri*.

Until the civil wars in Angola and Mozambique came to an end (1992 in Mozambique, 2002 in Angola), immigrants continued to migrate to Portugal enticed by the opportunities of a life beyond warfare. For these immigrants, as for the *retornados*, the presence of their homeland’s chile was a comfort, a reminder that some things can be retained, carried forward. But the pepper also stands as a reminder of change. As *piri-piri* went on to spread through Portugal and beyond, its story became twisted, its African origins and journey to Europe muddled and lost. It became the *Portuguese* spice. But therein lies the power of





taste. It is memory and transportation. With every bite of grilled chicken slathered with the piquant pepper sauce, the immigrants can be transported home.

With each lick of the flame tongue, each touch of the *malagueta*, they remember the powerful details carried in small packages. ■

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Sorbeteros Photographs by Florentino Velasquez Floro, Jr.
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