



cambodia's black gold

Called the champagne of peppers, Kampot pepper was once known by every chef worth his or her salt. Here's why

A THREE-HOUR DRIVE FROM THE CAPITAL, the town of Kampot is famous for its gourmet seasoning. Known as Cambodia's black gold, pepper from Kampot has a delicate flavour and elegant aroma unlike any other. In the 1950s and '60s, it was served in top Parisian restaurants, but supply of the spice dried up in the 1970s when plantations were destroyed or abandoned during the Vietnam War and the Khmer Rouge regime. It was not until the 1990s that farmers began planting pepper again.

"Apart from a few older French chefs, people had completely forgotten Kampot pepper" says Sebastien Lesieur, CEO of FarmLink, a company set up 10 years ago to help farmers with production, processing and marketing.

Today Kampot pepper is attracting a premium price thanks in no small part to groups such as FarmLink. Geographical indication status (GIS)

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was a big win. As with champagne or Scotch whisky, it means only pepper grown in the region can be labelled "Kampot Pepper" – and anyone who sells fake Kampot pepper can be prosecuted. (So, always look for the Kampot logo on the label.)

Terroir (soil, topography and climate) is what makes Kampot pepper so special. As with wine, the growing environment plays a big part in the flavour of pepper. Kampot's *terroir* produces the world's best pepper, as chefs in Europe are rapidly rediscovering. It doesn't have an overwhelming, burning taste that overpowers food flavours. Instead, its aromatic taste and bouquet enhance the other ingredients. Today, 100g



SALT & PEPPER
From top: Green pepper is the unripe, freshly picked berry; harvesting salt from the saltpan; Kampot black gold (opposite)

of Kampot pepper retails for US\$7 (about S\$10) online.

Restaurants in Kampot showcase their home-grown ingredient. Vines Restaurant at Starling Farm (starlingfarm.com) features the local specialty, stir-fried Kampot pepper crab, while French restaurant Greenhouse (greenhousekampot.com) serves the pepper with fish fillet, and has even incorporated it into chocolate cookies.

Following the success of Kampot pepper, FarmLink and Starling Farm are turning their attention to salt. Seawater from the Gulf of Thailand floods the Kampot saltpans and during the dry months (January–April), the salt is gathered by hand and processed without chemicals. The Kampot sea salt sold by FarmLink and Starling Farms is high in minerals such as magnesium, calcium and potassium. More importantly, it supports the people of Cambodia and their traditional farming methods. ★



WHERE TO BUY KADODE

Kadode is FarmLink's highest grade of Kampot pepper. Manufactured to Fair Trade standards, it is available in Lucky Supermarkets throughout Cambodia and at Aeon Mall in Phnom Penh (farmlink-cambodia.com). Pepper and salt are also available from Starling Farm shops: 159, Street 7 Siem Reap, +855 (0) 12 315 156; and 3, Street 178, Phnom Penh, +855 (0) 23 724 274; starlingfarm.com