

PROVENANCE

## Black Gold

The humble Kampot peppercorn from Cambodia is winning over chefs from all over the world. Meet the Singaporean who's growing the peppercorns against all odds.

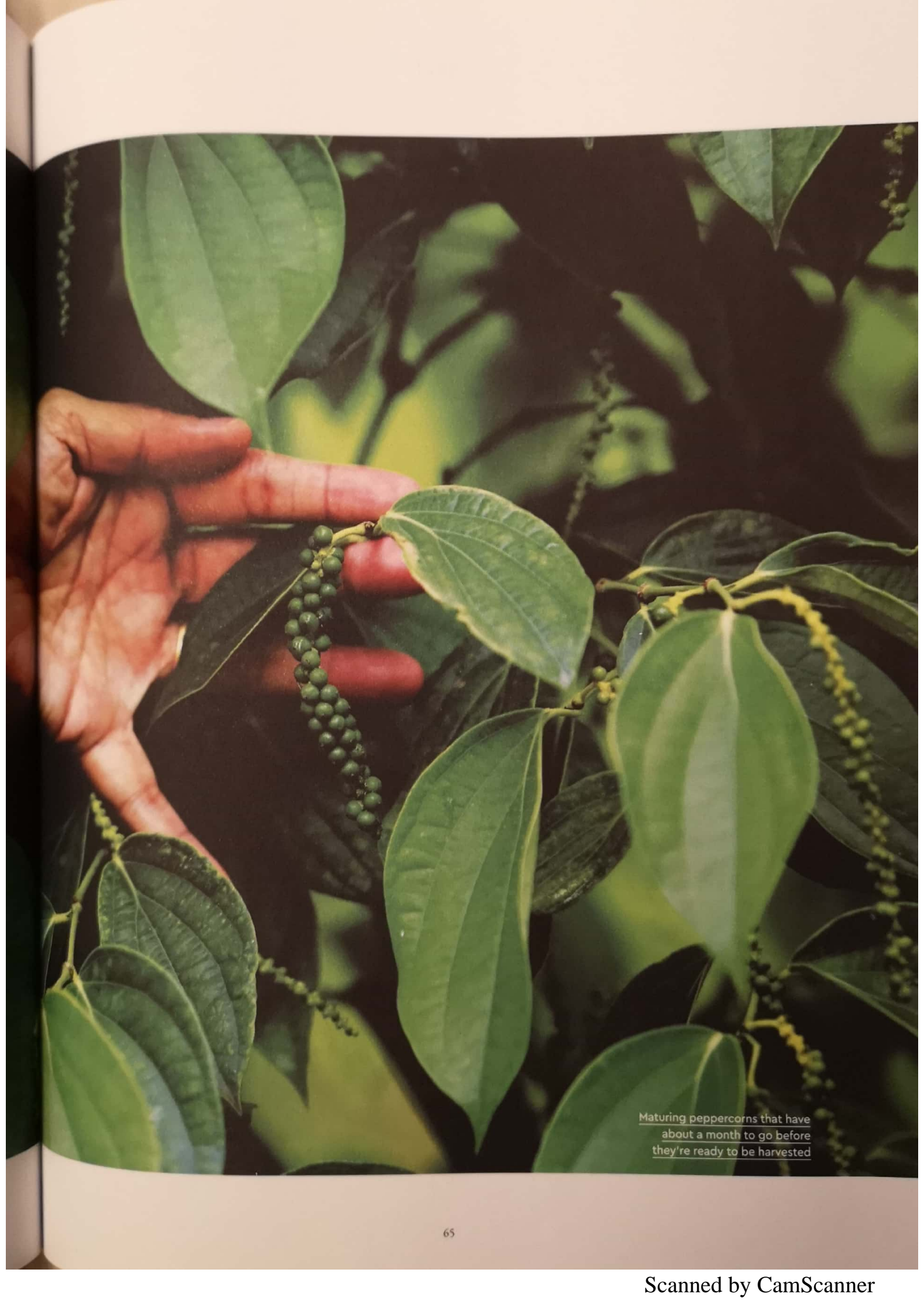
TEXT VIVIAN PEI PHOTOS HONG SPICES

"I never thought I'd be here talking about cow dung and bat guano," jokes Lai Poon-Piau. Lai is the founder of Hong Spices, a Singapore gourmet spice company. At the moment, he is referring to the organic fertilisers used for growing peppercorns—Kampot peppercorns to be exact.

We are in Kampot, a sleepy, largely rural town about three and a half hours southwest of Phnom Penh on the southern coast of Cambodia. I had arrived to meet Lai at Hong Spices Plantation after almost an hour of being tossed around the back of a tuk tuk. "It's not that easy to find [us] since we are pretty new," shares Lai of his 15-hectare farm located in Kon Sat commune in the Tuek Chhou District, sandwiched between the foothills of the Elephant Mountains and the Gulf of Thailand.

The reason I'm here? To find out why Kampot pepper is world famous. But first, I have to admit that even as a culinary instructor and a self-proclaimed food geek, my knowledge about peppercorns was incomplete. What I did know was that a true peppercorn comes from the flowering vine called *Piper nigrum*. Each peppercorn, or fruit, is called a drupe, and contains one single seed, similar to raspberry segments.

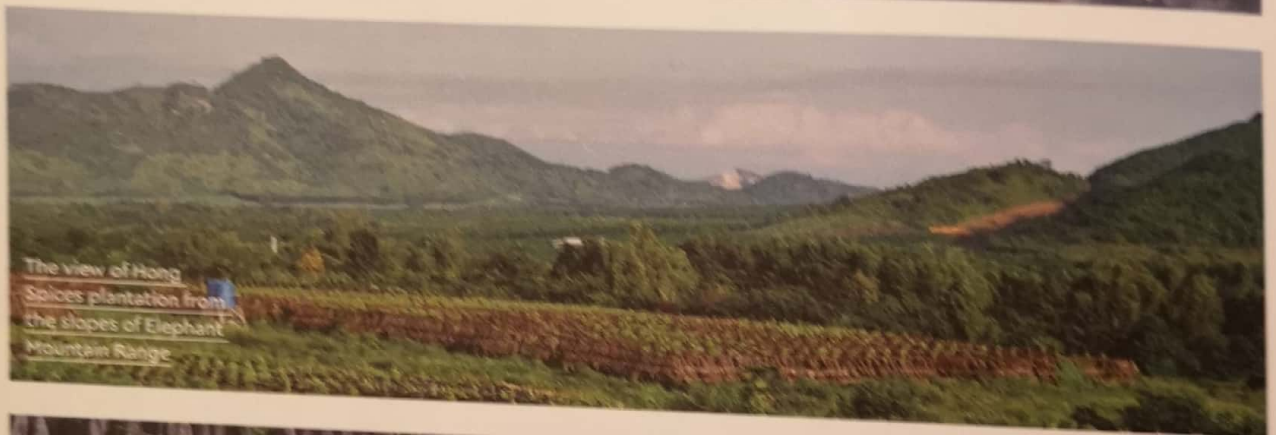
Kampot pepper has been lauded by chefs all over the world for its floral flavour and lingering taste. In Europe, this popular spice can sell for up to US\$120 per kg. Like Champagnes and Stilton cheeses, Kampot peppers have been granted European Protected Geographical Indication—this became official on 18 February 2016 after Cambodia's Commerce Ministry gave the product a domestic geographical indication in 2010.



Maturing peppercorns that have  
about a month to go before  
they're ready to be harvested



# SALT



## AT THE BEGINNING

Peppercorns have been cultivated in the Kampot region of Cambodia for a long time, with records indicating that Chinese pepper farmers worked the land as early as the thirteenth century. The crop first found its way to Cambodia from Indonesia after the Sultan of Aceh burned down the pepper plantation in his province to keep his wealth out of the hands of invaders. He moved the production to Cambodia instead and thus began the story of the Kampot peppercorn.

It's a good thing too, as the area's climate and *terroir* are ideal for growing this plant—the quartz content of the soil gives the Kampot peppercorn its special characteristics. Also, the soil from the nearby mountains is very porous, which is essential for good drainage, particularly during the rainy season. The French colonists realised this and introduced more intense farming techniques during its rule at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. They also exported the product back to France, much to the delight of its chefs who used it in steak *au poivre*. Production continued from strength to strength until the 1970s when the Cambodian civil war started. Unfortunately, the area was a stronghold for Pol Pot into the 1990s and pepper plants were ripped out by the Khmer Rouge. Pepper was seen to be a bourgeoisie product and therefore undesirable during that regime.

Luckily after the war, people began to reclaim their land in Kampot and do what they knew best: grow peppercorns. It was slow-going at first as they basically had to start from zero. However, things began looking up when the Ministry of Trade and the French Development Agency established a PGI (protected geographical indication) label and the Kampot peppercorn thus became the first Cambodian product to win this coveted designation.

The PGI has a very strict set of specifications that producers must follow; from rules governing production (land, cultivated area, natural fertilisers and natural pesticides), to processing, packaging and traceability. Plantations are also controlled by the Kampot Pepper

Promotion Association (KPPA) and by the independent certification body EcoCert. Only accredited members of the KPPA, adhering to the PGI criteria, are authorised to sell pepper using the "Kampot Pepper" appellation of origin.

## THE HONG SPICES JOURNEY

The story of Hong Spices has been a friends and family affair. Blak Labs helped with their packaging, and Lai's daughter, who is an architecture student, came up with the logo. As to its name, he explained that Hong is his middle name in Mandarin as well as a common name in Cambodia, so it was a natural choice.

Before he started growing peppercorns three years ago, Lai was a civil engineer in the oil and gas industry, and then a civil servant for six years with the Workplace Safety and Health Council. Sometime around 2009, he decided he wanted to make a change and go back to his roots—a healthy mid-life crisis as it were—so he started looking for land around the region.

"My original idea was to find agricultural land with specific plans to grow food crops. This was driven by my concerns about food security, particularly for Singapore. However after much research, I learnt that growing food crops is only viable if you have large (thousands of hectares) plots. So I had to switch my focus to cash crops," says Lai. He found reasonable prices and few regulations in Cambodia and took the plunge, though it was a few years before he was able to acquire all the necessary land plots.

He wanted to go through proper channels rather than through the local strongmen as is often the case. The challenge to meet the KPPA (Kampot Pepper Promotion Association) in the beginning meant that Lai had to learn as he went along and figure things out on his own. "The choice of growing pepper was serendipitous. I picked Kampot as it was strategically located in a high growth area/corridor between Thailand to China. I didn't know that this area was uniquely suited for growing peppers. Once I found out, it was the obvious crop to grow."

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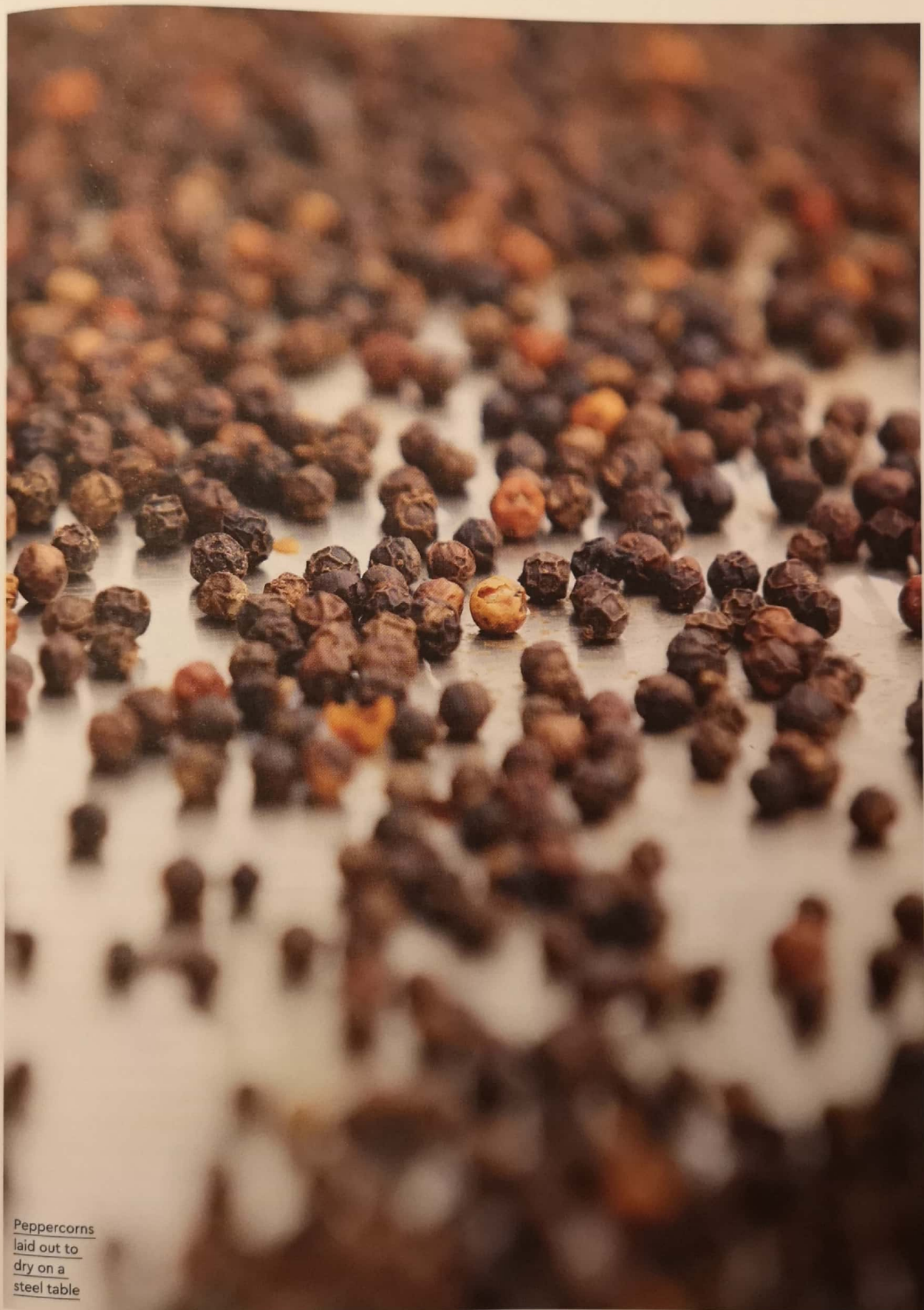


## SALT



Something else that Lai does in his own fashion is in regards to vine spacing. He gives his vines 2.5m to 3m of space, so there is more room for potential mechanical aid in the form of nutrient spraying and picking, whereas other producers tend to grow their vines closer together to maximise production.





Peppercorns  
laid out to  
dry on a  
steel table

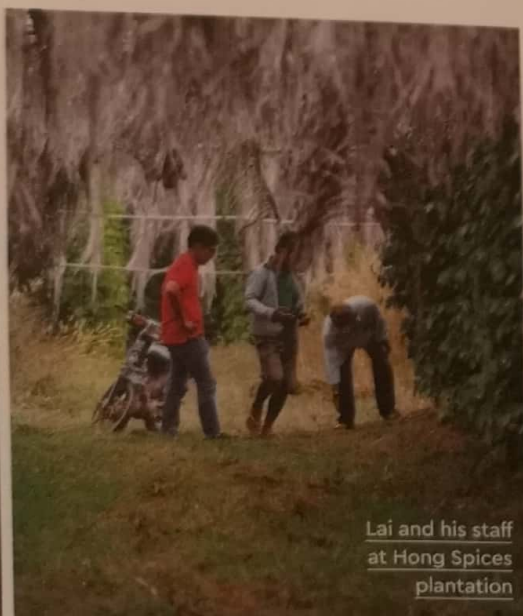
What he also learnt was that local varieties like Kamchay and Lampong ensure good growth, so he hired a local contract grower (who is a relatively well-known Cambodian opera performer, but that's another story altogether) to source those cuttings.

Lai is not the only outsider who's growing peppers in Kampot. Just a hop and a skip away from his farm is La Plantation, a more sizable pepper farm started by a French-Belgian couple Nathalie Chaboche and Guy Porre who discovered Kampot on holiday and fell in love with the area. La Plantation is probably one of the largest grower of PGI Kampot peppers and they have turned their farm and production facility into a place of interest where visitors can get a tour and a meal of *nom krouk* (rice and coconut pancakes) with fresh green peppercorns. Another well-known pepper farm is Sothy's—it is technically in Kep, the next province over, but they are also KPPA accredited.

Lai's investment bagged him about 80 hectares of land, but he currently utilises only about 15 hectares with 20,000 vines growing on 10,000 posts. Comparing this to La Plantation's 20 hectares and 22,000 posts, and Sothy's two hectares suggests that he might have been a bit overzealous in his land purchases, but he assured me he has plans for future growth. It's difficult to fault his enthusiasm.

## MODERN FARMING

That said, Lai doesn't comply 100 percent to PGI standards simply because after much trial and error, he prefers to work a different way. Instead of stripping the land bare as is common practice, he keeps his land as natural as possible, allowing other plants and grasses

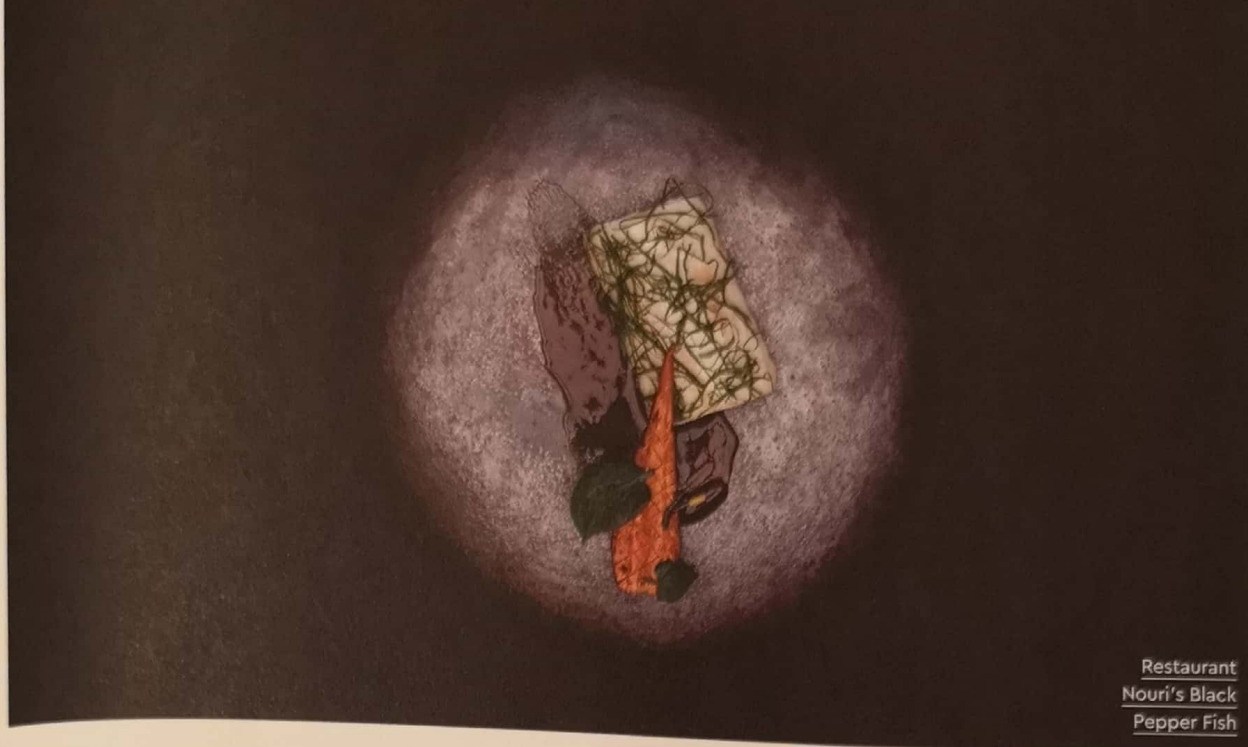


Lai and his staff  
at Hong Spices  
plantation



Hong Spices'  
white, black and  
red peppercorns





Restaurant  
Nouri's Black  
Pepper Fish

The peppercorn berries also have a distinct citrusy, floral note and a lasting, rounded heat that is not overpowering but comforting.

to grow. Former practices lead to soil erosion during the wet season and topsoil being blown away in dry season—other growers even had to buy in supplementary topsoil as a result.

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At least Lai and the growers agree on the traditional methods for fertilisation using cow dung and bat guano as mentioned previously. They also add organic supplements to break up the dung by promoting bacteria growth, which leads to the creation of phytonutrients that are vital to help the pepper plants absorb nutrients from the ground. As with much produce coming out of Cambodia, certified or not, the plants are grown organically—something comforting to know in this day and age.

## PLOT TO PLATE

Amongst Hong Spices fans are chefs like Ivan Brehm of Restaurant Nouri. A recent dish, Black Pepper Fish, was

created to highlight the fragrance of the peppercorn and requires a meaty fish that can withstand the intensity of this berry. Its delicate woody notes are complemented by the addition of vanilla from Tahiti. The peppercorn berries also have a distinct citrusy, floral note and a lasting, rounded heat that is not overpowering but comforting. "We use a combination of red and black peppercorns from Kampot because we wanted the flavourful profiles these two products provide. The berries are grown organically and harvested when at their best. They are much more complex and nuanced than the delicious Sarawak alternative," shares Brehm.

Brehm is not the only one to have succumbed to the charms of the Kampot pepper. Other notable restaurants in Singapore, like Michelin-starred Labyrinth, Blackwattle, and Morsels, are also using this not-so-humble ingredient in their dishes.

But perhaps Kampot pepper's biggest fan is Lai. "Kampot pepper differs in taste from other sorts of peppers," Lai enthused. "The best way to describe Kampot pepper is the wide range of flavours they bring to your palate and how they can make a good meal great!" Lai puts pepper on everything. In fact, his whole family carries around a small resealable pack of ground pepper, which they use at restaurants and hawker centers. "It's really interesting how the peppers can transform the flavour of food. Red Kampot is really good on bak chor mee (minced meat and noodle dish) so we've decided to produce our "Kalyan" Kampot pepper blend in small 2.5g sachets. This will give everyone the opportunity to do the same when they eat out." ❶

*Hong Spices retails at COMO Marketplace and Our Choices at Takashimya B2.*