

Some like it Hot..... and Spicy

It is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine our food without the hot and spicy flavor of green chilies. But, green chilies were the recent introduction to India in the fifteen century by the Portuguese traders. So, how was life before the arrival of green chilies? Did the absence of chilly mean no hot no spicy food? Was hot and spicy flavor squarely unknown to Indians? If not, what could have substituted green chillies in our cuisines?

We did have our very own version of hot and spicy spices to flavor our food, be it fish, chicken, or meat or spicy veggies. The Piperaceae family is super-loaded with many species which are strong flavoring agents in their own right, black pepper or *Piper nigrum*, *Piper longum* or Indian long pepper or *pipli*, *Piper retrofractum*, etc. While two of the key players, black pepper and Indian long pepper remained conspicuous with their pomp and presence. But one member of the same family, *Piper chaba*, has been lost in the dust of history which was once a frequent ingredient of cuisines. One can find mentions of *choi jhal* (jhal = hot in Bengali) in the old historical texts.

Piper chaba is another member of the family Piperaceae which is a native of south and southeast Asia. It is distributed throughout India, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, and Sri Lanka. The plant is a creeper that trudges on the ground, can climb up, and grow around large trees like other piperaceous members. The leaves are oval, the flowers are monoecious, and blossom during the monsoon. The fruit is elongated in shape and looks very similar to the other varieties of long pepper. When ripe, the fruit first turns red and then turns dark brown or black upon drying.

P. chaba, *Chui Jhal* or *Choi Jhal*, is locally famous as a strong flavoring agent in the of southern Bangladesh, and the states of Tripura and West Bengal in India where the East Bengal diaspora prevailed. Generally, stem and roots are cut down, the skin is peeled, chopped it into small pieces, and cook them with sumptuous non-vegetarian items. The culinary tradition was also quite alive in the Indian states of West Bengal and Tripura where people use this spice similarly. In Bangladesh, the stems of the plant are used as a spice in meat and fish dishes. In that way, the use of *Choi Jhal* is quite unique, because the twigs, stems, or roots of *P. chaba* – not the fruit – are used as a spice.



So, when green chilies had arrived with the Portuguese, gradually embraced with open arms and made place in the local cuisines; it actually stepped in into the taste regime already created by local fiery hot spices of Piperaceae; waging a war against them, perhaps robbing of their dominance and shunting a few to oblivion.

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