Chili” or “Pepper” – Which One Is It? – Pepper Geek

The word “pepper” originated from the Tamil word for long pepper, “pipali,” which belongs to the same plant family as black pepper. Therefore, “pepper” essentially means black pepper. On the other hand, “chili” comes from the Nahua word “chili,” which refers to the peppers that Central American natives have been cultivating for centuries.

The reason why we refer to chilies as “peppers” can be traced back to Christopher Columbus and his expedition across the Atlantic Ocean. Columbus was seeking to establish a direct trade route for spices from Asia to Europe. The traditional overland trade route was costly and fraught with numerous obstacles. In a brilliant move, Columbus decided to sail west from Europe in an attempt to reach Asia. He believed that he had landed in the East Indies when he made landfall in 1492.

Black Pepper

During his time in the East Indies, Columbus searched for valuable commodities such as pearls, precious stones, gold, silver, and spices, including pepper (black pepper or Piper negrum). However, instead of finding black pepper, he encountered chili peppers, known as Ahi. These spicy peppers reminded Columbus of black pepper, so he simply decided to call them “pepper.”

In Columbus’s journal, he acknowledged that the peppers he encountered were not black pepper, but he still referred to them as pepper because they were the closest thing he had found to it. Columbus brought these peppers back to Spain, and their popularity quickly spread throughout Europe. From there, they made their way to Asia, Africa, and eventually all around the world. Despite the misnomer, the name “pepper” stuck, and

we continue to refer to chilies as peppers even today, more than 500 years later.

It is essential to recognize that all chilies originated from Central and South America, even though they are mistakenly referred to as peppers.