

Hannah Johnston: Chile de Arbol, *Capsicum Annuum*

Chile de Arbol, like all members of the Solanaceae¹ family, is indigenous to the western hemisphere. It is a hot pepper similar in shape, size, and spice to the cayenne pepper. The pepper can be cultivated throughout North America but is a more prolific producer in warm climates. The pepper is used widely in Mexican cuisine.

Harvesting Chile de Arbol must be done with care. Capsicum, the active chemical attributed to the heat of the pepper (and the same chemical compound used in police weaponry such as pepper spray), can be very dangerous to work with especially for individuals with prolonged exposure. Gloves are recommended and under no circumstances should the harvester touch their eyes, nose, or any other mucous membrane. Should this occur, the affected individual will find relief in the topical application of high fat dairy products or lime juice to the area.

Chile de Arbol has been cultivated and used for thousands of years. For example, it is believed that *Capsicum Annuum* varieties with other produce including corn and tomatoes were cultivated by the Aztecs living in Tenochtitlan, located not far from modern day Mexico City. The global turn of the food system, however, has allowed Chile de Arbol to be shipped far beyond its place or origin. For example, Quattrocchi's Specialty Foods and Tara Natural Foods in Kingston often keeps it in stock.

Currently, technologies including canning, drying, and refrigeration are common methods of extending food shelf life, permitting increased food mobility domestically and internationally. Drying is still the most common preservation method used for Chile de Arbol. This allows the product to be sold in international markets where the pepper has been taken up in local cuisine or where individuals and communities accustomed to using the pepper might have relocated.

Within North America, changes in food systems have also been accompanied by cross border flows of people. Within Canada and the United States, transnational migration patterns have been integral in shaping the agricultural labour pool. For example, currently within the United States, ninety percent of farmworkers speak Spanish as their first language; the majority of these workers are from Mexico (Thompson and Wiggins 2002). For Chiles grown in the United States, it is highly probable that the seed stock and the harvester have both migrated from south of the United States/Mexico border.

Strong cross border cultural ties between the southwestern United States and northern Mexico complicate the extent to which Chile de Arbol is (and perhaps the people that harvest it are) transnational within the United States/Mexico context. Within this region (there are many other global examples) the geopolitical border has dissected plant and human cultures that predate the border. To this end, and rather than envisioning how and to what extent Chile de Arbol is transnational as exemplified by crossing nation-state borders, we might begin to question the ways that borders have crossed plant, animal, and human cultures.

¹ Commonly referred to as *nightshade*