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With Andy Mill

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Southern Noir

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Pick This Pepper

One taste of an Ashe County pimiento, and you may shun watery bell peppers for good

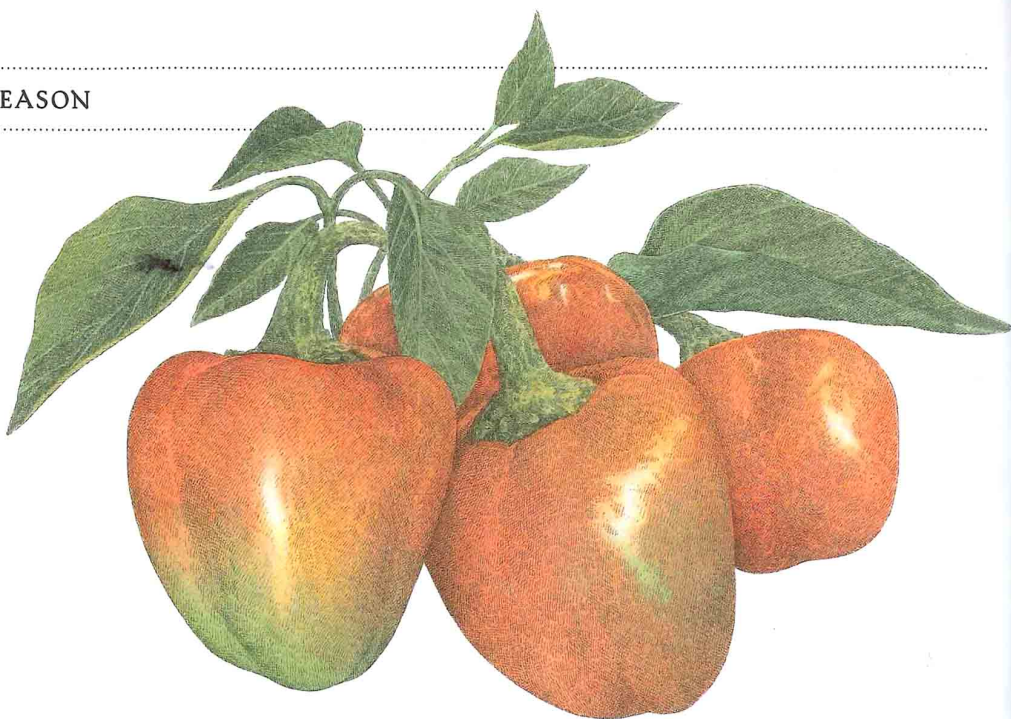
by JENNY EVERETT

ANDREA REUSING FIRST SPOTTED Ashe County pimiento peppers a few summers ago when she was visiting Asheville, North Carolina. “We bought a big bag and used them at almost every meal,” says the executive chef at the Restaurant at the Durham Hotel. “It is the sweetest pepper I’ve ever had, and also the most versatile.”

The heart-shaped heirlooms trace their lineage to the small Ashe County town of West Jefferson in the mountains of the state, and are among the last summer vegetables to come into season—in late August and early September. Unlike traditional grocery-store bell peppers, which are bred for size, resulting in watered-down flavor, the pimentos have a concentrated sweetness and mild pepperiness.

While pimentos’ most popular use may be in pimiento cheese, Reusing recommends buying as many of these as you can carry, trading them for bell peppers in almost any recipe. You can pickle the pimentos, or roast them and puree into a spread for sandwiches or to stir into grains or beans at the end of cooking. You can also stem and seed the peppers, then freeze them chopped to add to soups and stews or whole for stuffing.

Look for pimentos that are firm, heavy for their size (about three to four inches), and deep red. You’ll most likely find heirlooms like the Ashe County at farmers’ markets, though if you can’t, substitute ordinary pimentos or even Anaheim or banana peppers in Reusing’s preparations. If you’re going to use them right away, opt for pimentos that are slightly wrinkled. “I like them so ripe that they are starting to shrink,” Reusing says. “Even raw they are almost jammy.”



Pimiento Peppers Three Ways

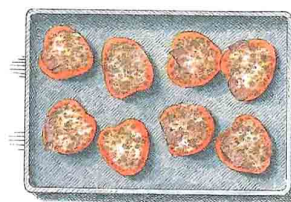


MAKE A ONE-PAN MEAL

“The incredible sweetness of these peppers is a great counterpoint to shrimp.”

Sauté 1 diced **onion** in 1 tbsp. **olive oil** on medium-low for 10 minutes. Add 1 diced **carrot**, 1 diced stalk **celery**, and 1 minced **garlic** clove. Sauté 15 minutes. Add, over medium-high, 1 tbsp. **tomato paste**, 1 tbsp. oil, 2 tsp. **paprika**, and 2 cups **long-grain rice**. Toast 2 minutes. Deglaze with 1 cup **white wine**. Reduce heat; add 3 cups warm **seafood stock**. Top with rings of 6 **pimiento peppers** and 2 **bay leaves**.

Simmer 15 minutes. Add 1 pound **peeled shrimp**. Cook 1 to 2 minutes. Season to taste.



STUFF AND BAKE THEM

“Because the flavor of the pepper is so concentrated, it carries through the long cooking time.”

Preheat oven to 350°F. Coat baking dish with 1 tbsp. **olive oil**. Arrange 4 seeded, halved **pimiento peppers** cut side up and season with **salt** and **pepper**. Stuff each pepper with **farmer cheese** (or feta) and top with a thin slice of **country ham** (or prosciutto) and 1 to 2 tbsp. fresh lightly toasted **bread crumbs**. Drizzle with oil and bake 45 to 60 minutes, until tender and golden brown. The riper the peppers, the less time they take to cook.



PICKLE THOSE PEPPERS

“This is great to make in one big batch, so that you can keep it in the fridge.”

Halve 6 cups of **pimiento peppers** (or cut into rings), leaving seeds intact. Place peppers in large jar with 10 whole **peppercorns** and 3 peeled **garlic** cloves. Heat 4 cups **distilled white vinegar** in a saucepan over medium and add 3 tbsp. **kosher salt** and ¼ cup **sugar**. Bring to a boil and stir until salt and sugar are dissolved. Pour over peppers and bring to room temperature. Seal jar and refrigerate for at least one day before using.