

Incredible Edibles

Endemic, indigenous, and rare, these six highly coveted versions of common ingredients offer one-of-a-kind flavor profiles.

by Paul Rubio



TO'AK CHOCOLATE

Origin: *Piedra de Plata, Ecuador*

Singularity: The world's most expensive chocolate fetches \$260 per 1.75 oz. bar and hails from a rare cultivar of Ecuadorian cacao trees that still grows around a small pocket of coastal rainforest in the Manabi province. Translating to "earth" and "tree" in ancient Ecuadorian dialects, To'ak consists of 81 percent cocoa mass from pure and hybrid Nacional trees and 19 percent cane sugar, presenting sublime dark chocolate in its purest form. A group of 14 local farmers own and cultivate the land on which the trees remain, complemented by several hundred Nacional hybrids, adhering to strict criteria for hand-picking the best of these rare cocoa beans. Given To'ak's high standards and the small yield common of older trees, supply is naturally limited. In fact, the 2014 harvest (for 2015 consumption) produced but 574 bars.

Tasting Notes: To'ak co-owner Carl Schweizer recommends either savoring the intensity of the chocolate on its own, paying particular attention to the strong aroma before ingestion, or pairing the chocolate with cognac, aged whiskey, rum, or vintage port. For the Rain Harvest 2014 edition, he describes the flavor of To'ak chocolate as rich and nutty upon contact with the palate, followed by "a wave of red and black fruits like plums, raisins, and cherry mixed with an earthy tone, tobacco, fig, and even wooden notes."

Consumption: To'ak chocolate can be purchased directly from the company website (toakchocolate.com) or at a handful of wine boutiques in the United States, including Wally's in West Los Angeles (wallywine.com) and Lush in Chicago (lushwineandspirits.com). Each bar is parceled in a custom-made, masculine Spanish elm wood box (the same wood that houses the beans during their fermentation process of five to seven days), arriving with a tweezers-like utensil to sample the chocolate in morsels and avoid the commingling of the chocolate aroma with those of your fingers, and a 116-page tome on To'ak's genesis and a guide to dark chocolate tasting. ▷





COCO-DE-MER

Origin: *Praslin and Curieuse, Seychelles*

Singularity: The primordial coco-de-mer (or “coconut of the sea”) palm is endemic to two high-rising, mid-oceanic granite islands in the Seychelles, bearing fruit weighing in excess of 50 pounds and harboring erotic-shaped seeds recorded as the largest in the plant kingdom. The majority of the palms grow in the Vallée de Mai National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site on the island of Praslin. Though highly protected by national law and classified as an endangered species, these rare coconuts, which take nearly a decade to mature and germinate, can be purchased with the correct permits, for the right price (often in excess of \$5,000) or with the right connections (the Seychelles government gifted Princess William and Princess Kate one after honeymooning in the Seychelles at North Island).

Tasting Notes: Similar to standard young coconuts, the coco-de-mer possesses a combination of coconut water and a natural gelatinous inner shell prior to maturity, a substance that can be scooped out and eaten like a loose custard. According to Adam Gollner, travel writer

and author of *The Fruit Hunters*, and one of the few people to go on record with impressions of tasting a ripe coco-de-mer, the fruit’s flesh has “a mild citrus-like quality, refreshing and sweet with earthy, spunky notes. It tastes like coconut flesh, only sexier.”

Consumption: In line with national regulations, coconuts are sold as dried, matured kernels, the remaining meat removed to alleviate the weight for export. Though the nut is edible before maturity, consuming it is illegal and can lead to serious jail time if caught. That said, there are two ways around this. Travelers and locals get the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to sample the fruit at the annual Praslin Culinary & Arts Fiesta (seychelles.travel.com) in October, sponsored by the Ministry of Tourism and Culture. Delicacies, from ice cream and flan to bread and candy, are prepared using the discarded flesh from the export crop of coco-demers and sold for a nominal fee. Beyond the festival, your other option is befriending one of the few lucky Seychellois with a wild coco-de-mer palm growing on his or her private property.

Photos: Gallery Stock (Ben Hupfer, Opposite); (top left) Getty Images/Leisa Tyler/LightRocket; (bottom left) Stock Food/Vision B.V.; (bottom right) Micah Wright/AgStock Images/Corbis.



KAMPOT PEPPER

Origin: *Kampot, Cambodia*

Singularity: The Kampot province is Cambodia’s most venerated nexus of fertility, where an idyllic combination of nutrient-rich soil, altitude, and rainfall fosters growth of the country’s prized commodity: Kampot pepper. This indigenous peppercorn was the first Cambodian product to achieve Protected Geographical Indication (PGI), ensuring true Kampot pepper remains unique to its roots, with certification to prove it. Put in perspective, this is the same unique status Champagne receives in France, whereby authentic Champagne comes solely from its namesake region. Throughout southern Cambodia’s organic Kampot pepper fields, berries are harvested at all stages of maturity to produce black, red, and white dried peppercorns, commanding prices in the ballpark of \$25–\$30 per pound and sold in packaging with a PGI logo.

Tasting Notes: In dried form, Kampot pepper is more aromatic and zestier than its global peppercorn counterparts. In its pre-dried, green, or red form, the fresh, pea-sized fruit carries a mild taste, with undertones of what we know as “pepper” alongside an earthy component common to green vegetables. Fresh Kampot pepper is something you won’t experience outside of southern Cambodia.

Consumption: Dried Kampot pepper is readily available on websites like Amazon.com, but several purveyors ship peppercorns directly from Cambodia, namely FarmLink (farmlink-cambodia.com), a grassroots company that links local farmers to foreign exporters and consumers. A surge in local agritourism has translated to numerous pepper farms opening their doors to curious visitors, such as Sothy’s Pepper Farm (mykampotpepper.asia), which offers free tours in seven languages and insight into the underbelly of Cambodia’s agricultural economy. For fresh Kampot pepper, the Greenhouse Riverside Restaurant (greenhousekampot.com) on the Kampot River utilizes just-picked berries ground or blended into hearty sauces of classic Khmer recipes as well as contemporary Kampot pepper masterpieces like fresh-baked, chocolate red pepper cookies. In the neighboring coastal town of Kep, Cambodian nationals frequent the Crab Market and beachside restaurants for endless indulgence in the unofficial national dish, Kampot pepper crab, and stir-fry dishes with pepper stalks as one of many healthy greens. ▷



BLACK IVORY COFFEE

Origin: Chiang Saen, Thailand

Singularity: What do elephants and Thai Arabica coffee beans have in common? Well, up in the northernmost reaches of Thailand, they hold the secret recipe for the rarest and most expensive coffee on the planet. Premium, ripe coffee cherries are sourced from northern Thailand's hill tribes and fed to the 20 rescued elephants at the Golden Triangle Asian Elephant Foundation. Once ingested, the elephants' natural enzymes break down the proteins typically responsible for bitterness in coffee; and the fruits ferment throughout the digestive process, naturally bringing out the sugars. Seventy hours later the whole cherries are retrieved from the elephant dung, then thoroughly washed, dried, peeled, sorted, and finally roasted into what we know as coffee beans. Seeing as it takes 73 pounds of raw cherries to produce 2.2 pounds of roasted beans, the supply of Black Ivory Coffee is capped at an average 250 pounds per year.

Tasting Notes: Black Ivory Coffee founder Blake Dinkin says that this unique coffee should be enjoyed without milk and with minimal to no sugar due to its natural sweetness. He describes elements of dark chocolate, malt, spice, and a hint of grass in the delicate, almost tealike taste. Retailing for \$50 per cup, this isn't your typical morning cup of joe; it's most appreciated either between dinner and dessert as a palate cleanser or paired at dessert time with chocolate or dried ginger, cognac or brandy.

Consumption: In addition to its unique processing, Black Ivory Coffee is brewed exclusively in a bespoke machine, inspired by the haute coffee culture of 19th-century European royalty, and modeled after an elaborate, circa 1840 French siphon brewer. Two dozen five-star hotels across Southeast Asia (14 of which are in Thailand) offer the Black Ivory Coffee experience, in which staff hand-grind the beans tableside in the dedicated machine and serve the special brew. In the United States, there's only one place to sample Black Ivory Coffee: the Elephant Story boutique in Comfort, Texas (two hours west of Austin). It's also possible to order the brewer and coffee packs directly from the company website (blackivorycoffee.com), with a starter kit running \$375 and each extra 1.25 oz pack of whole roasted beans at \$66 each—however, there is frequently a wait list, as stock tends to sell out.



AMABITO SEA SALT

Origin: Kami-Kamagari Island, Japan

Singularity: In 1984 construction workers discovered an unusual clay pot along Kenmin-no-Hama Beach on Kami-Kamagari Island in southern Japan, a find that archaeologists soon identified as a salt-making instrument dating to the Kofun period, the oldest era of recorded history in Japan. This discovery prompted interest in unraveling the secrets around ancient Japanese salt-making methods, leading to the identification of its key ingredient, seaweed, and finally a re-creation of the intricate process used circa 7th century. Nowadays, ancient salt-making redux is in full effect in Kami-Kamagari. Salt water from the Seto Inland Sea is collected into large pools, and, after evaporation has commenced, Hon'dawara seaweed and iodine are introduced. Once the seaweed has thoroughly dyed and flavored the water, the solution is boiled in a replica of the clay pot until crystallization occurs, then placed into a centrifuge and finally cooked over an open fire, producing handsome, beige-hued salt crystals called Amabito No Moshio.

Tasting Notes: Thanks to the infusion of seaweed, Amabito No Moshio quickly taps into the fifth sensation of taste (after sweet, salty, bitter, and sour), referred to as umami, a savory flavor distinct from saltiness. When sampled on its own, this sea salt reveals a complex profile, high in mineral content and at once sweet, salty, and umami. In general, Amabito No Moshio can replace traditional salt and MSG in Asian cooking. It's equally popular as a table salt, sprinkled on breads, vegetables, salads, pastas, and meats.

Consumption: Amabito No Moshio is found in high-end grocery stores throughout Japan. In the United States, several brands can be purchased at Japanese specialty markets. The most famous, Kamagari Bussan, is available from the website Yunomi (yunomi.us), which ships food products directly from Japan, and at the gourmet food store The Meadow (atthemeadow.com), with locations in Portland, Oregon, and New York City.

Photos: (Opposite top and center) Paula Bronstein. This page: (Bottom) Getty Images/Carlos Osorio.

DENSUKE WATERMELON

Origin: Hokkaido, Japan

Singularity: Think status symbols and perhaps Rolex, a Birkin bag, or a Rolls-Royce come to mind. But how about a watermelon? On Japan's northernmost island of Hokkaido, each year the small crop of Densuke watermelon—a smooth, bowling ball-shaped variety of the pink-centered fruit with a distinctive black rind—can command a price upward of \$6,000 for a single melon. The first 100 or so of the season are sold at regional auctions in early to mid-June, going to the highest bidders, who seem to be a mix of wealthy Japanese businessmen, luxury department store buyers looking to increase traffic, and Japan's growing bourgeoisie. The later crop tends to sell for dramatically less, usually at an average price of \$100.

Tasting Notes: The luxury fruit market has its niche in Japan, and consumers have developed a sophisticated palate for highly specific fruits (there's even a luxury fruit parlor in Tokyo called Sembikiya with 14 outposts). The Densuke watermelon is said to be denser, sweeter, and juicier than other watermelons. However, when staff at The Toronto Star got wind of Canadian grocer Loblaws importing nine of the delicacies in 2014, they purchased one to conduct their own unofficial primary investigation, pinning a \$199 Densuke watermelon against a \$7 run-of-the-mill Ontario watermelon. The results: Few staffers could tell much difference between the two, and more preferred the Ontario watermelon.

Consumption: Each Densuke watermelon typically comes in a wooden box, the fruit firmly wrapped in rope and numbered. The first yield is sold at auctions in Hokkaido and sometimes resold at luxe department stores such as Isetan in Tokyo. Outside of Japan, the watermelons must be specially ordered via business-to-business transactions through grocers with a license to import fresh fruit. At press time, the aforementioned Loblaws is the sole North American grocer carrying the Densuke watermelon. ♦

