

# The Purple Beauty

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*Winner of Editor's Choice Award*

They came in boxes. Thirty or forty of them, piled up by the back door, waiting. The first few I opened carried red, and then green – and then, purple. There it was: the purple pepper, the strangest vegetable I'd ever seen. Stranger than the stalks of Brussels sprouts strung like light bulbs or the artichokes sitting in baskets like lizard's feet. I picked up the pepper and held it, turned it, smelled it, and pressed it. The pepper felt as sturdy as bone. It smelled fiery – as a pepper should – and its stem was a vivid green. It sat in my hand as a queen would upon a throne. And so I placed the purple peppers in front of the other produce – the other produce – where all could see. Behold, the purple pepper.

I remember many things from the summer after my freshman year of college, but mostly, I remember the purple pepper. In Colorado, summer mornings are early and cold and quiet. Along the Yampa River in Steamboat Springs, there is a giant wooden painted tomato sign that reads "Sweet Pea Market & Restaurant." It's a quaint little place, but on a good day, the line at the hostess stand loops around the block. If I wasn't standing at the hostess stand, I was inside the market unpacking boxes and stocking shelves with vegetables. I performed the most mundane of tasks: bussing tables, mopping floors, rolling silverware into scratchy paper napkins and pushing buttons on cash registers, picking up crayons from under tables and carrying trays to and from the kitchen, where the cooks and dishwashers sweated without air conditioning, and where I once stabbed my hand on the ticket nail. The side of my right thumb on my good hand, the one that balanced trays and cleaned tables, was slashed open and bled onto the counter. It took an entire box of Band-Aids and the rest of the summer to heal. Now that I think of it, I probably should have gotten stitches. But I remember the purple peppers most. After they arrived, unpacking boxes was a thrill, like opening a door to a long-awaited lover – but they only came once.

It grows as any other pepper would. It is any other pepper, only

picked early: as it ripens, its color turns from the glorious purple to the monotonous red that rolls and falls from grocery store shelves. This is the only fact I knew about the purple pepper. (Later, I would learn that the purple pepper could turn green, too.) I had only known peppers to be green, red, yellow, orange. When I arranged the peppers in a color-coordinating line, customers reached for the purple. They picked it up as I first did, holding it up to the light as if it were a kaleidoscope.

“What a beautiful pepper!” A young woman said, her hands cradling the vegetable (which some, in fact, argue to be a fruit).

“Now, what makes it purple?” She turned to me.

“It has the same antioxidant as a blueberry.” I don’t know why I said it. I think I read it somewhere, but later research would prove this statement a myth – and me, a liar. But I was a good saleswoman nonetheless: her eyes widened, and she brought the purple pepper over to the register. This was how I sold the purple pepper.

One day in late June, at table 14, the table closest to the river and most envied table in the restaurant, a man sitting at three o’clock ordered the beet salad. It came served with a warm crouton and a dollop of goat cheese, teetering and tottering dangerously atop the greens. On my way down the stairs and out the door, the crouton carrying the goat cheese dollop tumbled off of the arugula, smeared against the edge of the plate, and landed in a creamy mess at my feet. I saw no point in picking the thing up. My hands were full – and one plate balanced on my wrist – and knowing the stubborn cook, another crouton would take 15 minutes, if I were lucky. As the terrible waitress I was, I continued on my way, prepared to deliver the beet salad without the crouton and goat cheese dollop.

“But where is the warm crouton with goat cheese?” I should have known. I blushed, pretended I hadn’t noticed, apologized, and returned the plate to the kitchen before picking up the demolished crouton on the ground. In the market, the purple pepper sat purpler than ever. Unfailingly, someone stood in awe of the vegetable (or fruit) before taking it and holding it at eye-level, and then up to the light.

“This pepper is purple,” a man told me.

“Indeed it is.” I don’t know how many purple peppers I sold in one day. I will tell you this: I sold more purple peppers than I did beet salads.

Another day, my boss and I searched for a rat. It had been eating our produce, sneaking into boxes and gobbling up tomatoes and potatoes. Katherine, my boss, was thin and hardheaded, and she drank a gin and tonic at the end of each shift. She had opened a box of heirloom tomatoes one afternoon to find a rat sitting in the mangled scraps of yellow, red, and gold flesh. She screamed a mournful scream, as if someone or something dear had died; and I suppose, in a way, something had. “My heirlooms!” I’d never heard her voice above a certain pitch.

If a box contained one tainted vegetable, we were to throw away the entire box. I was determined to find the rat – not because a rat is bad news for a restaurant, but because a rat is bad news for the purple peppers.

We set traps. In the kitchen, in the basement, behind the ice box, behind the bar. And then the rat found its way behind the bar. It squealed and scratched, and so Dave, the bartender, took a wooden board from under the sink and killed the rat. I yelped. It took a few whacks from the wooden board to stop it from squealing. I remembered my brother, Steven, failing to check the rearview mirror and running over the dog. I was too young; all I knew was the sound was the most awful sound I’d ever heard, so I stood by the door and kept opening it and slamming it shut to muffle the howls of the dog. Eventually, the squealing and scratching stopped. But we had to leave the rat there behind the bar, a nasty and bloody mound of wet white fur, until the customers had left the deck. We left it there for hours, and I laid an old rag over the thing, then shuddered and scrubbed my hands.

I scrubbed my hands clean. I checked the boxes of purple peppers – there were only a few left – with a terrible fear of finding one bitten into. I did not find a tainted purple pepper. I imagine though, if I did, I would’ve refused to throw the entire box away. What would I have done with it? Taken the box home and watched the purple turn to red.

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Peter Piper picked a peck of purple peppers. The purple pepper is picky. It cannot be too cold, it cannot be too hot; you must pick it, eat it or cook it just at the right time: somewhere in between youth and full maturity. Of course, this is assuming you want your pepper to be purple. It could be green and it could be red. All peppers begin green, except some varieties of the purple pepper. The Black Pearl ornamental pepper,

for example, begins with blooms of lavender flowers before sprouting purple peppers that will turn red if left on the vine. But take the Merlot purple pepper, which begins green when planted, and within 2 or 3 weeks turns entirely white. Within another 3 weeks, the pepper takes on stripes of dark purple – and then, in 2 months, a gorgeous inky purple drapes the whole body of the pepper, like night. Cut it open, and its flesh is a piercing green. But the pepper that came by the hundreds in boxes and that I arranged on shelves, the Purple Beauty, begins purple and stays purple if harvested early. Leave it on the vine or sitting pretty long enough and it will turn red – blushing or angry from neglect, I can't decide – but chop it and cook it, and it turns green with heat. It is a moody vegetable (or fruit), the purple pepper. But there is no evidence proving it contains the same antioxidant as the blueberry.

In July, an older woman in the store told me the pepper reminded her of a chameleon. She had pulled her hair into a giant clip on the back of her neck, and it fell in wisps from her ears. I was describing to her the maturation process of the Merlot variety: green, then white, then stripes, then inky.

“A chameleon. A chameleon of a vegetable,” she said. I can't remember what exactly she said next, but it was something about wishing her skin could change colors, like the chameleon's. She laughed and I laughed and then she bought three peppers. I failed to tell her they could turn green.

Every day, a man came in carrying a small plastic bag and a leather wallet. He wore suspenders and a green ball cap. He never so much as glanced in the direction of the purple pepper, not even when she sat in the neat line with the green, red, yellow, and orange peppers. At first I felt insulted for the purple pepper, the queen of the produce; she'd become accustomed to people lifting her up to the light. But she is a humble vegetable. And sitting there in line with her different colors, she knows her beauty to be fleeting. I knew then that I could not set her too far away from the other peppers.

The man made a beeline for the container of salted peanuts, took the plastic scoop, and then turned slowly to me as I sat behind the register and watched from a distance. I always occupied myself with one of my mundane tasks when he came in, so as not to spoil the routine that we both understood to be as such – and to not rush the man, because he was quite old, and his hands trembled when he held the plastic scoop.

So I'd write produce labels that had already been written or break coin wrappers against the counter. He never said anything, though sometimes I thought he would; instead, he would move his mouth in different lines, some resembling a smile, but I never could tell. I went over to the man.

"Salted peanuts today?" It was always salted peanuts, but I asked anyway. He pointed to the container in a jerky motion. His head made the same jerky nod as his finger, and I interpreted the line of his mouth to be a smile. He handed me the plastic bag and the scoop, and I poured the peanuts into the grinder, closed the lid, and held the bag while we watched the peanuts grind into butter.

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I didn't believe the purple pepper would turn green. So I took one from the box one day, the firmest one I could find, and sat it on the counter at home while I heated a pan with oil. Now, I had never learned how to properly cut a bell pepper, but I knew the stem must go; so I chopped the two ends off and looked at the headless Purple Beauty. I sliced it lengthwise and the pepper let out a satisfying snap before rolling onto its side. I wasn't quite sure where to make the next cut, so I peeled back the pepper and took out the core and seeds with my hands. (I later learned this was not the correct method, but it worked just fine.) Then I chopped the Purple Beauty into thin strips and placed them in the pan: sizzle and pop, the most divine sound I've ever heard. It took four or five minutes before they began to turn green, slowly, starting at the tips and then working to the ends, while I paced back and forth and watched. At the slightest hue of green, I stopped and waited. Miraculous.

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How to Cut a Bell Pepper:

Cut off the top of the pepper at the stem. Inside, you will see its ribs.

Cut off the other end of the pepper and set it upright.

Making sure your fingers are out of the way, make one perpendicular cut through one side of the pepper.

Turn the pepper onto its back, and move the knife through the inside of the pepper to remove its ribs and seeds.

Lay the pepper flat, and julienne or dice it into thin strips.

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By August, the purple peppers had gone. We kept the boxes stacked by the back door or under the produce tables, and one day there

were none. I searched the fridge, under the shelves, and in the back rooms, hoping perhaps someone had misplaced them. I asked Katherine where they had gone.

“We sold them all at the Farmer’s Market,” she said. She was thrilled – as she should have been, one Purple Beauty selling at \$2.00 per pound, almost as much as the heirloom tomatoes – but my tasks now became more mundane than usual. On the same day, I pitted cherries for cherry pie. I wore an apron, but I still left the restaurant covered in what looked like blood. I thought the stains appropriate, and I came home to my mother, whose face drained of color when she saw me. Like a chameleon, I suddenly thought.

“The purple peppers are gone,” I told her. I wanted to cry out, as Katherine had cried over the spoiled heirlooms.

Later that week, the old man in suspenders and a ball cap walked through the door and made a beeline for the salted peanuts. I began to study the price list. And then, “Where’s that purple pepper?” He shuffled his feet and turned his whole body to me, because, I presumed, his neck was too stiff to turn only his head.

“The purple peppers? We sold them all.” And he stood looking at me, his mouth making an odd motion – as if trying to form some distant, far-off word. Then he grunted and took the plastic scoop. Of course he had noticed the purple pepper, I thought. It’s a purple pepper, for heaven’s sake.