

THE SIMPLE LIFE

—How does a Singaporean engineer end up becoming a Kampot pepper farmer in Cambodia? Lai Poon Piau, founder of Hong Spices, tells us—

HOW DID THIS MAJOR CAREER SWITCH HAPPEN?

Most of my working life was in multi-national organisations and the civil service. I enjoyed my engineering career tremendously but a part of me always longed to go back to the roots of my family business of running farms and plantations in Malaysia — my fondest memories were those of my brothers and I exploring my father's plantation. Nine years ago, I decided to buy myself a plot of farmland.

WHY DID YOU DECIDE TO GROW KAMPOT PEPPER?

When I was looking at plantations

in Cambodia, it reminded me of my childhood. Picking Kampot, a province 140 kilometres from Phnom Penh, was initially for practical reasons — it had road and rail connections to major markets and ports. It was only after I had acquired the land that I realised the area was famous for its pepper. How could I resist being part of a sector that produces the best pepper in the world?

WHAT DO YOU THINK MAKES KAMPOT PEPPER SO SPECIAL?

My experience in the last five years has shown that the taste of peppers produced on my farm varies slightly from one plot to another — Kampot pepper is ultimately a product of its terroir.

KAMPOT RIVER



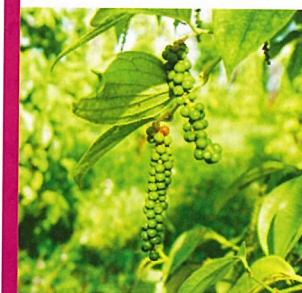
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GIVE US AN IDEA OF WHAT A DAY IN YOUR LIFE IS LIKE.

My day starts at about 6am every morning when we prepare breakfast and plan the day's activities. Our workers arrive at 7am (after sending their kids off to school) and are briefed on the day's schedule. Typically, the more strenuous work is done in the early morning or late afternoon when it's cooler. When the sun is really hot, we carry out light duties like sorting peppers or fixing equipment at the farmhouse. The workday ends at about 5pm, which is my favourite time of the day. I lie in a hammock and watch the sun set.

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KAMPOT PEPPER 101



1 Just like Champagne and Darjeeling tea, Kampot pepper was awarded "Protected Geographical Location" status by the European Union in 2010. It is the only Cambodian product to obtain that status, and the only food product export.

2 It is the quartz that's indigenous to the soil that imparts the floral notes Kampot pepper is known and loved for.

3 The plant produces four iterations — green, black, red and white. The red and white ones are more rare and expensive because it is incredibly hard to harvest fully mature peppercorns.

CRAB STIR-FRIED WITH KAMPOT PEPPER IS A LOCAL SPECIALTY

