

The spice of life

Elizabeth Shove

My name is Johannes. I was born in Ghent in 1628 and I was about fifteen when I went to sea in a *Fluyt*, which is the Dutch word for a fast sailing ship. When I say fast, I mean fast by the standards of the day. It took us five or six months to reach Malacca and although we lost about a third of the souls on board that didn't bother me. I was oblivious to the risks: young and strong, fit and healthy, that was me.

The spice trade was at its peak and providing we made it back with our cargo of pepper, cinnamon, nutmeg and ginger, we'd make a handsome profit. Our ship, aptly named the *Gouden Gans*, or in English, the Golden Goose, was owned by the VOC. Back then, VOC did not stand for 'volatile organic compound', but for *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*, also known as the Dutch East India Company. In those days, the VOC was a force to be reckoned with. The mark-up on good quality pepper from Malabar could be as high as 400%, and although it was a risky business, Malacca was bustling with adventurers. We had ousted the Portuguese just a few years earlier, taken command of the fortified port and terrorised the unruly natives.

In India, pepper had been used to season food from time immemorial, but I've never understood how it became the source of such enormous profit. According to Wikipedia (founded in 2001), spices were highly valued because they allowed Europeans to disguise the taste of rotten meat, but that's not the whole story. Lord knows how, but Dutch and Portuguese traders managed to cultivate a taste for spicy food in Europe and manipulate demand to their advantage. Nothing stays the same and nowadays salt and pepper are given away for free in little paper tubes. I've seen them in McDonalds. But I digress.

We landed in Malacca sometime in October, and I headed for one of the little boarding houses in the port. I didn't let on, but I was glad to be on dry land. After a few days I realised that I'd come to the right place and that Mrs Tengku, my landlady, was probably the best cook in the world. She made truly delicious food, fresh, fragrant and delicately spiced. The Tengkus don't speak a word of Dutch but I picked up enough of their language to say please and thank you and sometimes a bit more. The stews were spectacular. Yes, there was pepper but also hints of cinnamon, ginger, nutmeg and a sweet earthy taste that I couldn't quite place. I was amazed. Mrs Tengku noticed my reaction and smiled. 'Pipli', she said, which translates as long pepper. 'We keep it for ourselves. It's a secret.'

But it was too late, the cat was out of the bag. If I could get my hands on a private supply of long pepper and ship it home, I'd make a fortune, I was certain of it. Smuggling is strictly against company policy, and the penalties are extreme, but that didn't hold me back. I found a carpenter who was willing to fit a false floor in my trunk and I filled this hidden compartment with dark catkins of long pepper.



When the trade winds shifted, we set off on the return journey. All was going to plan until fate caught up with me. The bloody flux took just a week to do its work and once the balance of humors was out of whack there was nothing to be done. Overcome with an excess of phlegm and bile, my body was unceremoniously dumped overboard along with the other casualties of the night. No one objected when my erstwhile mate, Gerrit Jan, laid claim to my few possessions.

Some months later, the *Gouden Gans* docked in the Netherlands and Gerrit Jan took my trunk back to his home in Delft. Gerrit Jan is not that bright, and it was only then that he began to wonder why my clothes took up so much room. He broke open the box and revealed a layer of strange botanical items: shrivelled and ever so slightly mouldy. They smelled a bit like pepper, but Gerrit Jan had no idea what they were, so he threw them out. I couldn't believe it. I knew he was thick but how stupid was that!

If I'd had my way, long pepper would have graced the finest tables of Europe. New dishes would have been created to take advantage of its subtle flavours. The finest chefs would have been itching to get their hands on just a little of this magic substance, and I'd have been rich, rich, rich. Instead, the spice of life had been taken from me and I was as dead as the proverbial doornail, decomposing at the bottom of the sea.

These days you can buy long pepper on Amazon, but tastes have changed. It is not for sale in Tesco or Waitrose, and it has not really caught on in the Western world. The VOC was disbanded in 1799 but by then new routes had been opened up and the spice trade was nothing like as lucrative as before. No one believes me when I say my stash of long pepper could have altered the course of history, but to be honest, no one really believes in ghosts either.