

odds and ends

review. This is a passionate invitation to read. ★

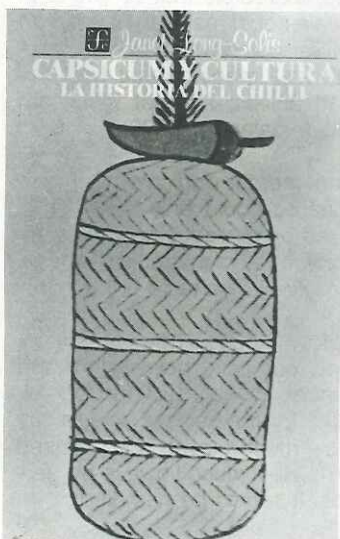
Augusto Morales

* Those who make *marimbas*, a xylophone-like instrument whose plaintive tones create some of the most traditional Guatemalan music.

** Master of an *encomienda*, estates granted to the Spanish conquerors; the Indians on the land were forced to provide him with labor and tribute.

☆☆☆☆☆☆

Chile is More Than Just a Spice



Capsicum y cultura —la historia del chilli (Capsicum and Culture, The History of the Chilli) by Janet Long-Solis is an excellent book; it is very well written —reads almost like a good novel—, provides an original and thorough treatment of the topic, and brings together a wealth of historical and cultural data with scientific rigor.

The first version of this book, recently published by Fondo de Cultura Económica, was the author's doctoral dissertation, presented to the Department of Social Anthropology at the Universidad Ibero-Americana in Mexico.

After the author's introduction, the text is divided into 12 chapters: "The Archeological Evidence;" "Chilli as Tribute"; "Sixteenth Century Historical Antecedents;" "References from the 17th to 19th Centuries;"

"World-wide Diffusion of Capsicum;" "Taxonomy;" "The Cultivation of Chilli;" "The Chilli Trade;" "The Industrialization of Chilli;" "The Use of Capsicum in Traditional Medicine;" "Capsicum as a Ritual Element;" and "Capsicum: A Cultural Constant in Mexico."

There are also several interesting appendices at the end of the book: "A Dictionary of Chillis;" "The Word Chilli in Several Indian Languages;" "Song to the Chilli;" and "References to Chilli as Tribute in the *Suma de Visitas de Pueblos* (*Summary of Visits to Towns*)". Finally, there is an extensive bibliography and a listing of illustrations.

The chilli —or Capsicum, the scientific name for the genus— appears to have been one of the first cultivated plants in Mesoamerica. Its cultural tradition, then, is long and varied. In addition to being a food product ("Without chillis, they don't think they are eating," wrote Fray Bartolomé de las Casas about the natives of Mexico), Capsicum was also given as a form of tribute during the Spanish colonial period.

For the past 8000 years, chillis have been a regular component of the Mexican diet. That tradition goes on unbroken today in all sectors of society. In addition, the chilli frequently finds its way into popular songs, sayings and jokes with double meanings. So it wasn't surprising that the symbol for the World Soccer Cup held in Mexico last year was "Pique," a chilli dressed in a soccer uniform and a broad-brimmed Mexican hat.

Capsicum has been used extensively for medicinal purposes, as well as for curing the "evil eye"

and for "purging" the body. Modern medicine has demonstrated its usefulness as an anesthetic and documented its importance as a source of vitamins.

One of the many factors that led to the discovery of the New World was the search for a shorter route to the Far East, source of spices that were much coveted, quite rare and very expensive in Europe at that time. Products such as tea, coffee, sugar, chocolate, tobacco and, of course, the chilli were unknown in Europe before Christopher Columbus' fateful 15th century encounter with the Americas.

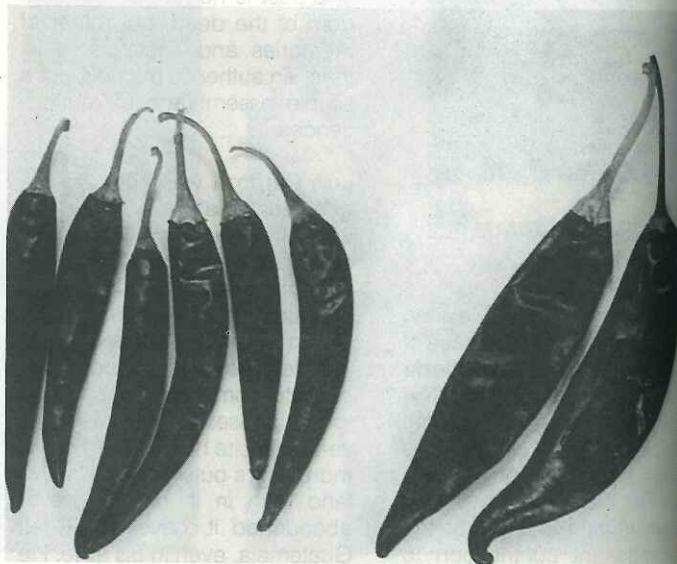
While Columbus never did find a new route to the Orient and its spices, he did discover a great diversity of New World food plants. The chilli, also known as *ají* in some places, was among them. In addition, two other very important plants found their way to Europe for the first time then: *Pimenta officinalis* (black pep-

per) and *Vanilla planifolia* (vanilla).

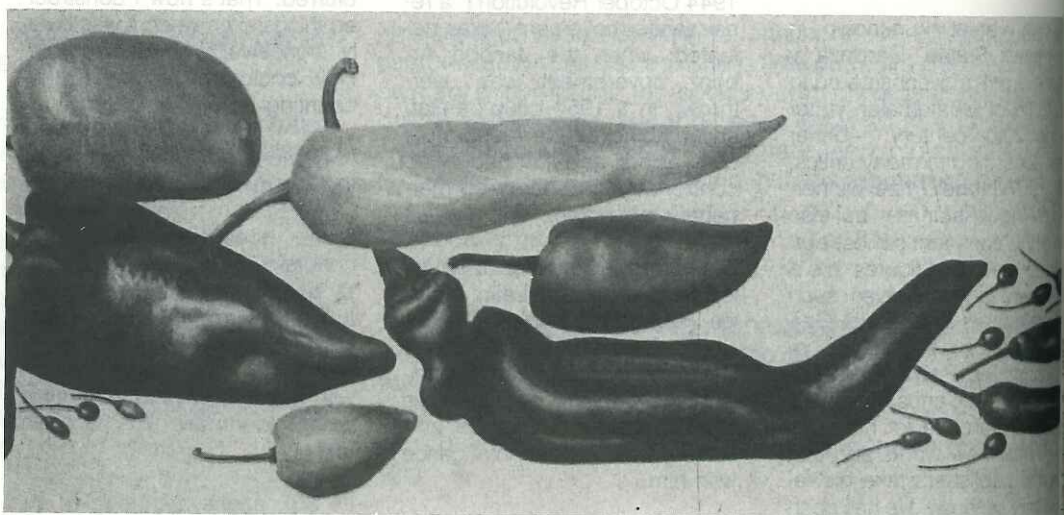
All of this and much, much more is to be found in Janet Long-Solis' detailed and entertaining account of the chilli's fascinating history. But beyond the humble chilli, the author also provides a rich reconstruction of the historical periods in question, an important contribution in its own right.

So while it may seem odd, we recommend this book to anyone with even a modest interest in history. You will learn a lot from *Capsicum and Culture*, and not only about the chilli. It sets an example for other researchers who work on what may otherwise seem to be dry and mundane topics. We think that experts will find the hoped for rigor and information in Dr. Long-Solis' book. And we are sure that it will be enjoyable reading for everyone. ★

Pantxika Cazaux



"Guajillo" chilli, one of its many varieties



"Chiles"