CAPERS & CAPERBERRIES

THE CAPER

Capers and caperberries are respectively the blossom and the fruit of a small Mediterranean bush in the family Capparaceae. There are several varieties of plants that are the source of the majority of capers, including Capparis Spinosa. Traditionally, these plants were not cultivated, and all caper production came from the wild. Although capers are now being grown commercially, over half of the modern harvest still comes from wild caper bushes.

Capparis Spinosa grows in the dry region surrounding the Mediterranean – in Spain, Italy, Morocco, France and Turkey. Local people climb into the hills where the caper bushes grow and harvest the plants in the wild in late spring and summer. They will pick the capers that are ready, leave the flowers that have already opened, and return to the same area repeatedly to pick the additional blossoms that have appeared since their last visit.

And capers are just that - blossoms. Capers are the unopened blossoms of the caper bush. They are harvested before they open, before they turn into a flower. The flowers that have blossomed will be left to grow into a fruit, the caperberry. The caperberry will ripen in the mid to late summer, and the same local people will once more head into the hills to finish the harvest they started months earlier.

Capers and caperberries are harvested by hand. After picking, they are taken to a processing plant where they are graded by size and quality, washed and inspected for quality. They are then placed in barrels, and are covered with a brine solution of salt and water. The capers will cure in the brine for approximately 60-80 days. They will then be rinsed, and repacked into glass jars in a vinegar and salt solution.

**There are several reasons why the capers are cured in this manner:**

- Capers are bitter when first harvested, and the curing process removes some of the natural bitterness.

- The salt acts to preserve the caper, and helps to bring out the caper flavor.

- The curing process softens the capers slightly, making them ready to use right out of the jar.
THE QUALITIES OF FINE CAPERS

- It is most important that the initial cleaning and preparation of the capers is performed properly.

- The capers should be of a uniform size in the same jar, and the sizing should be consistent from lot to lot.

- There should be few if any opened or broken capers. They should have a smooth surface without cracks or holes.

- There should be no stems, leaves or other foreign objects in the jar. Some lesser brands of capers are hardly washed and packed within the jar, resulting in a poor product with excess salt, dirt, leaves, stems and sometimes even insects visible among the capers.

- Capers must be handled carefully during the de-brining process, as they can fall apart.

- Some connoisseurs prefer freckled and/or reddish capers, both for their flavor and the eye appeal that they add to dishes. These “mountain capers” are harvested in the higher elevations, where the bright sunlight brings out these striking aspects of their character. These capers may be a bit firmer in texture than their lower elevation cousins.

- Slight color variation is considered normal, and will not affect flavor in the least.

- Although some residue may develop over time on the bottom of the jar, such residue should not be present shortly after packing. This residue is not harmful, but it could indicate improper storage or shipping.
Capers are sold by size, and there are several sizes from which to choose. The smaller sizes are more expensive due to the increased labor to hand pick them.

Caper sizing is not regulated so you must rely on the brand. Roland has set forth strict regulations relating to sizing. Drained weight also varies widely by brands. Examine the label and the specifications carefully when comparing products.

All capers have a similar taste, regardless of size. Smaller capers will add a subtle flavor to the dish, while the larger capers will provide both a visual presence and more prominent flavor profile. Italians and Spaniards actually prefer the larger capers for this very reason. The nonpareille caper is the biggest seller in the United States, but more and more chefs are recognizing that the other sizes offer menu flexibility and bring uniqueness to their own signature dishes. Which capers you decide to use is one of desired menu application and personal preference.

**Super Nonpareille** (3-5 mm. diameter)

- The smallest size of caper, the super nonpareille is perfect for garnishing smoked salmon, topping smaller appetizers or adding to sauces for a tiny bite of flavor.

**Nonpareille** (5-7 mm. diameter)

- Long considered to be the finest caper available, the nonpareille isn’t really any better than its other sized siblings. Actually, many brands will call any caper from 0-7 mm. nonpareille capers. The result is a less uniform caper. Roland only sells nonpareille capers in the 5-7 mm. size range. The nonpareilles are great for pasta, olive tapenade, and garnishing larger appetizers.

**Surfine** (7-8 mm. diameter)

- With a diameter size varying by only 2 MM., the surfine is actually a more uniform caper than the nonpareille. This slightly larger caper can be used interchangeably with the nonpareille.

**Capote** (9-11 mm. diameter)

- The most popular of the larger sized capers, the capote is great in meatloaf, pasta sauces and in antipasto.
USES/MENU APPLICATIONS

- An essential ingredient in tartar sauce or remoulade. Try different size capers for variety and effect.
- Compound butters can be made ahead of time and frozen or refrigerated until needed. Lemon caper sun-dried tomato butter can be used on chicken or fish, and keeps very well.
- Place a few capers in your salad dressing recipe. Puree or crush capote capers before adding to other ingredients in the dressing for maximum effect.
- Vary the sizing of capers added to pasta. Try adding the capote size to your red sauce, along with black and green olives. The larger size caper adds texture as well as flavor to your cooking.
- Capers are a natural complement to seafood. The super nonpareille are a gourmet addition to smoked salmon or lox, and make a typical garnish seem haute cuisine.
- Add a few capers to spreads or dips for flavor and eye appeal. The bright green color will add to the visual effect of light colored dips with sour cream or mayonnaise bases.
- Add a few surfine or capote capers to your hamburgers, along with diced red onion and red pepper. Grill and then, if desired, top with Maytag or Oregon blue cheese.
- Use the larger size capers for the Classic Puttanesca sauce of either olive oil or tomato base. The capers will stand out, both in flavor and visually as well.
- Put a tablespoon into hollandaise sauce, and then spoon over Eggs Benedict.
- Mix capers into tuna fish salad for a surprising fancy change.
CAPERBERRIES

THE CAPERBERRY

Not all of the caper blossoms are harvested in spring, allowing the flower to mature and become a fruit. The fruit of the caper bush is the caperberry. Caperberries are a green berry with a cherry-like stem attached to the fruit. They are spotted, and vary in size from a pea to a cherry. The caperberries are processed like the capers, although care is taken to ensure that the stems are not broken off during the curing process. After soaking in brine, they are sorted, packed in vinegar and are ready to use, either out of the jar or cooked in various recipes.

Caperberries have grown in popularity in the last few years. Much of the interest has come from chefs and restaurant managers who want to provide a unique dining experience for their customers. Chefs know that a large caperberry with the stem attached will strike the customer as new and intriguing. Caperberries have also found favor on the antipasto bar, due to the beauty of the fruit and the fact that they can be picked up by the stem and eaten without utensils.

Bartenders are always looking for new ways to make their drinks stand out from the crowd. Roland® Caperberries have become quite popular as garnishes in Martinis and Bloody Marys.

USES/MENU APPLICATIONS

- Serve as a cocktail appetizer with Kalamata, Nicoise and Provencal olives.
- Substitute in place of capers for a variation on the Puttanesca pasta sauce. The flavor is very similar, but the caperberry adds a striking visual effect to this dish.
- Excellent in caponata, the Italian antipasto of eggplant, tomato, olives and capers. Substitute or add caperberries to the recipe for a nice variation.
- Add to your favorite red pasta sauce.
- Caperberries make great garnishes for many dishes such as chicken, fish, or veal.
- Chop the caperberry coarsely and add to sauces or dressings as an ingredient.

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