

The Power of Sichuan Peppers

Text by Shen Xiaoning

Sichuan peppers, with their unique aroma and flavor, have helped farmers rise from poverty while closely bonding officials and residents in Zhanpu Township, Fengdu County.



Zhang Jisheng cuts and picks Sichuan peppers at home. The government's poverty reduction measures have helped Zhang and his family regain the confidence and courage for a new life. by Yu Jie

Thanks to its distinctive mouth-numbing, spicy flavor, Sichuan cuisine is popular with hundreds of millions of people both in China and around the world. At the heart of Sichuan cuisine is the Sichuan pepper, a spice derived from several species of the genus *Zanthoxylum*. This most commonly used spice in Chinese cuisine creates a tingling numbness in the mouth. Every midsummer, this magical spice ripens for harvest.

In mid-June of this year, plump green peppercorns abounded on densely planted Sichuan pepper trees on the slopes near the southern bank of the Yangtze River in Zhanpu Town, Fengdu County, Chongqing Municipality. The “green pearls,” with unique aroma and flavor, have helped local farmers rise from poverty while bonding officials and residents more closely.

Zhang's New Day

Zhang Jisheng, 53, resides in Baishui Community, Zhanpu Town, where he was the sole provider for the other three members of his family: his wife who couldn't work due to illness, his grade school-aged son and his 90-year-old mother. The whole family survived on a meager annual income of 2,000 to 3,000 yuan (US\$290 to 435) that Zhang Jisheng earned from growing corn.

“In those days, we could only afford to eat rice and corn and dared not imagine eating meat,” Zhang Jisheng recalled. “I often ate smaller portions so everyone else could have more.” Even though the situation was bad, stubborn Zhang Jisheng didn't ask for help from the government or his relatives. The year 2015 was particularly bad for him. His mother died, and his son fell ill. One blow after another shattered Zhang Jisheng, pushing him to the verge of collapse. “I felt completely