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MOORE

Chile lover luxuriates at banquet

LAS CRUCES — Socially and professionally, I've dined with a lot of interesting, eclectic — and sometimes downright eccentric — groups over the years.

I've sampled African insects, sugar-rushed through gourmet dessert buffets and sipped wines so pricey that the cost of a glass or two would have covered my mortgage for the month.

I've enjoyed conch fritters and the official drinks of Florida's "Margaritaville," as Parrotheads applauded the sunset in Key West.

I've hobnobbed with wine snobs, motley gaggles of gourmets and discerning artists and academics who threw wonderful dinner parties. I have fond memories of preprandial cocktails on Midwestern porches with University of Iowa genetics professors who enthusiastically cheered the pollen as blowsy blossoms swirled in fecund spring breezes.

But when it comes to showing a girl a good time, it would be hard to beat the annual Chile Leaders banquet at NMSU's Café 100.

As Chile Pepper Institute director Paul Bosland and other researchers offered an entertaining, multimedia State of the Chile report, Chef Maurice Zeck and his students served up one of the best dinners I've enjoyed in New Mexico ... or anywhere.

Each course featured different kinds of chiles, showcased and discussed with the reverence and respect sommeliers show for the finest wines. NMSU graduate student Gregory Reeves told me about genetic "family" links of some of my favorite kinds of chiles. I heard tales of growing chiles from Arizona to Indiana from new NMSU faculty members Lois Grant and her husband, Richard Pratt, who heads NMSU's Plant and Environmental Sciences Department.

First up was Heritage 6-4 Chicken Soup; a creamy, savory taste sensation that would rival the world-renowned green chile chicken enchiladas served at Santa Fe's legendary Pink Adobe.

"Both!" was the correct answer to the official state question (Red or green?) when it came to the salad course, a piquant and pretty fiesta blend of black beans, jalapeños, corn and jicama with tortilla strips and red chile dressing.

The outgoing world's hottest pepper king, Bhut Jolokia (AKA Ghost Pepper) starred in Holy Jolokia BBQ Pulled Pork, with sides of calabacitas, fried papitas and a delicious stuffed rocoto pepper, a richly nuanced golden variety that rates all those imaginative superlatives I feel have been wasted on mere wines all these years.

We finished with Santo Scorpio Flan, an ambrosial chocolate creation lightly kissed (or succulently stung) with a chile blend that includ-

Chile

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ed a hint of the new contender for world's hottest chile pepper Trinidad Moruga Scorpion Red. At least one fiery pepper was

clocked at 2,009,231 SHU (Scoville Heat Units, a scale measuring the spicy fire of chile peppers), as compared to Bhut Jolokia's 1,578,548 SHU.

Chef Zeck said he's had several requests to write a cookbook, and I'll add my vote. In the meantime, you

can get some ideas and ingredients (from several kinds of chile seeds and plants to chile-based sauces, salsa and the smash hit Dr. B's Bhut-Kickin' Brownie Mix) at the Chile Pepper Institute gift shop in NMSU's Gerald Thomas Hall, or get a catalog and more information online

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at chilepepperinstitute.org.

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