

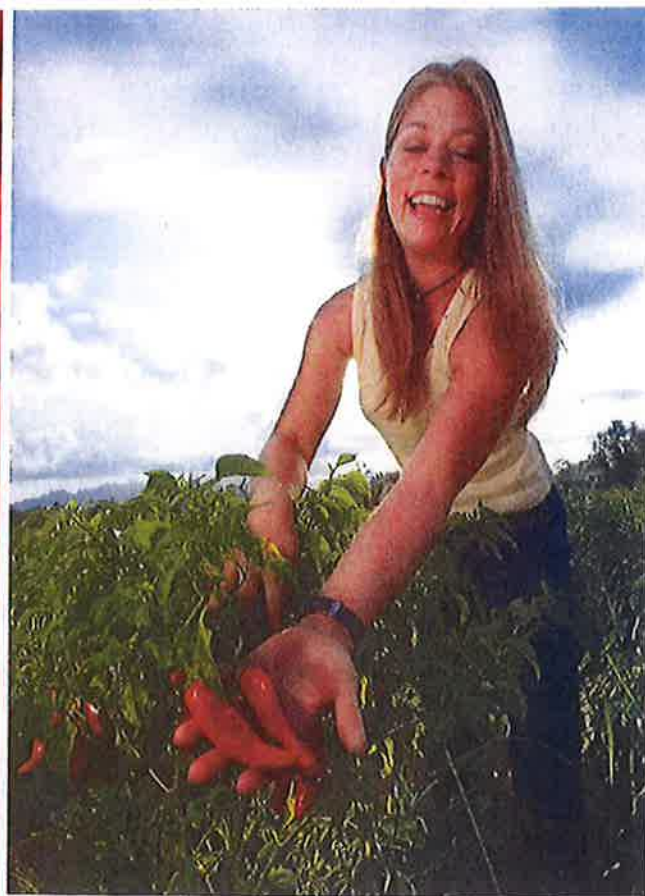


Chile Time

Visit New Mexico during the annual harvest. The peppers are fresh, and the first scents of fall fire the air.



Ristras, vertical strings of red chiles tied together, hang on display for sale. The chiles, once dried, can be rehydrated in boiling water to eat or use in cooking.



Danise Coon, program coordinator for the Chile Pepper Institute at New Mexico State University, inspects the chiles growing in the institute's demonstration garden.

There's no mistaking the turn of season here. You see it in the deepening blue of the sky and the way the sun glows on the gaunt Organ Mountains. You feel it in gusts of cool wind riding the storms into Las Cruces from the north. Most of all you smell it—the singular, almost sweet aroma of chiles roasting. A smell all its own, each whiff, like the scent of woodsmoke in our region, signals the return of fall.

Locals began harvesting New Mexico's signature green chiles back in August, when summer gripped the Mesilla Valley and the fields all around. The picking will continue until frost as the peppers, still growing on the low, compact bushes, ripen to a jewel red.

New Mexico's Treasures

Las Cruces anchors the state's prime agricultural area, fertile with pecans, onions, alfalfa, and cotton. This land, though, draws its flavorful soul from the chile. True fans consider New Mexican chiles a virtual fifth food group. The state is recognized as the home of such sought-after selections as the 'NuMex Big Jim' and 'NuMex Joe E. Parker.' Plus, New Mexico cayennes are a prime ingredient in all Louisiana hot sauce, that slap of liquid flavor so cherished by Southerners.

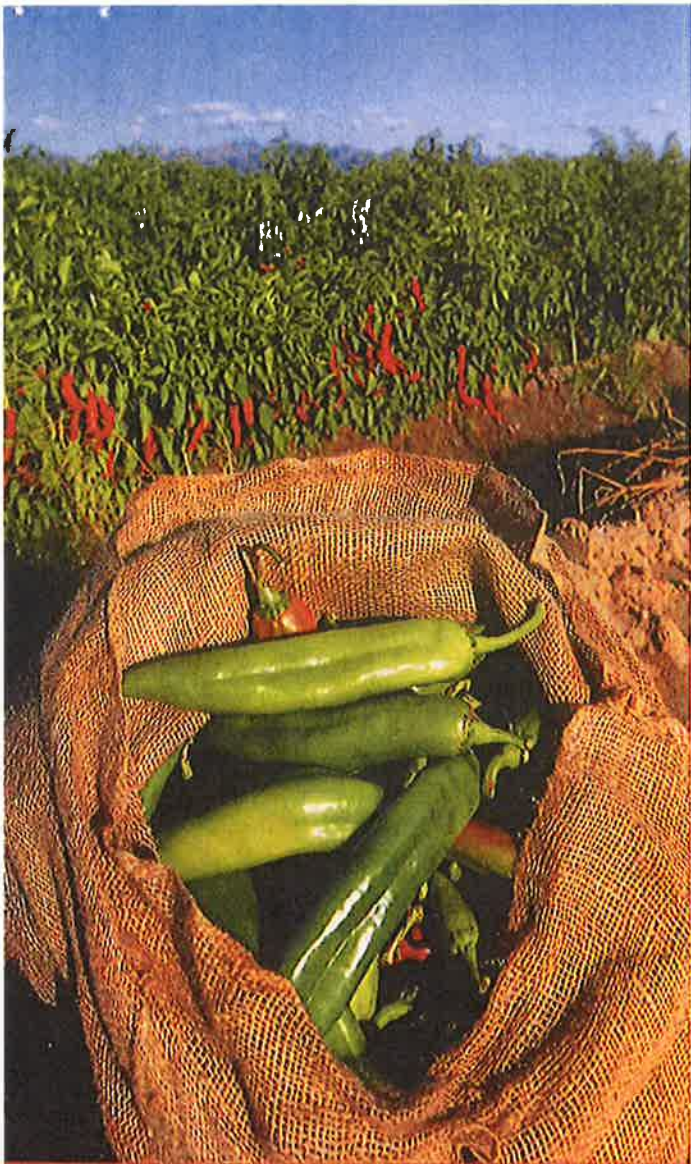
Why do peppers thrive here? Foremost, the long hours

by DIANNE YOUNG • photography MARK SANDLIN

Each fall “chile heads” travel to the unassuming town of Hatch as a sort of pilgrimage. About 40 miles north of Las Cruces, it is, many believe, home to the best chiles anywhere. Small family-run businesses operate out of modest storefronts and roadside stands along its couple of main streets.



New Mexico's chile business
is a family affair.



Celebrating Chiles

- **Hatch Valley Chile Festival**—Each Labor Day weekend, this year September 1-2, Hatch welcomes thousands of visitors, who come to pay homage to its famous chiles, with two days of food, entertainment, contests, and more. For more information visit www.hatchchilefest.com, or call (505) 267-5050.
- **The Whole Enchilada Fiesta**—An annual event in Las Cruces, it revolves around the making of the World's Largest Enchilada. (Think of the ingredients list in terms of pounds and gallons.) The fiesta will feature a parade, vendor booths, live entertainment, and, yes, lots of food. Dates are September 28-30; to learn more, visit www.enchiladafiesta.com, or call (505) 526-1938.
- **Santa Fe Wine & Chile Fiesta**—New Mexico's state capital puts its own upscale spin on the harvest season with five days of seminars, wine tastings, cooking demonstrations, and more September 26-30. Visit www.santafewineandchile.org, or call (505) 438-8060.



Decorative wreaths, made from bright ornamental chiles, are seen and sold everywhere around Hatch this time of year.

of sunlight. "Peppers are suited to this high desert," says Danise Coon, program coordinator of the Chile Pepper Institute at New Mexico State University. "We have very sandy soil and very arid, warm temperatures. They just love the arid environment."

Danise handles the institute's day-to-day operations. She runs its center in Gerald Thomas Hall, which houses a library of more than 800 chile-related books and magazines; contains educational displays; and sells books, posters, and seeds. She also conducts prearranged tours of the institute's demonstration garden.

A World of Peppers

A self-proclaimed "chile head," Danise grew up on a farm in the northern part of the state. "I started eating jalapeños when I was 6 years old," she remembers. Flashing a wry smile, she adds, "I used to have jalapeño-eating contests with my dad." Obviously, a passion for chiles heats her blood. That and her knowledge make her a great guide in the institute's neat, little patch of peppers off University Avenue.

The demonstration garden's 1/3 acre showcases some 150 different kinds of chiles from all over the globe, including those developed at New Mexico State University. Danise explains the process of growing and harvesting as she winds through the 20-plus rows of plants. She details, too, the ongoing research that takes place here. This time of year, the various bushes sport a full complement of fruit (yes, chile is a fruit, not a vegetable). From Anaheim to jalapeño to poblano to habanero, they come in shades of green, brown, purple, and fiery reds, oranges, and yellows. Some are mild, others, searing; and many of the names are as brilliantly tinted as the chiles themselves: 'Prairie Fire,' 'Orange Sun,'

'Inferno,' 'Starburst.' It's a pepper-lover's dream, a paradise of heat, color, and taste set under the wide sky and washed by the open sun. A tour definitely stokes the taste buds.

Chile Capital of the Universe

Orderly fields of chiles grow along the two-lane roads outside Las Cruces. In September, south along State 28 and north along State 185, which parallel the Rio Grande River, you'll see workers moving through the rows as they harvest. Here and there, handwritten signs hawk fresh chiles for sale: A burlap sack filled with 40 or so pounds of New Mexican mild to medium peppers sells for \$15 or less.

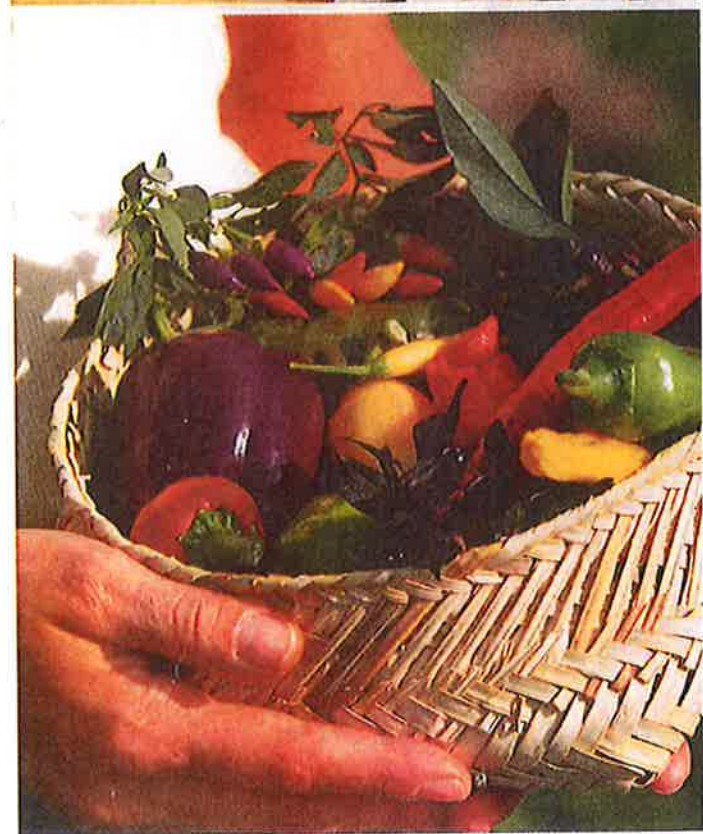
Each fall "chile heads" travel to the unassuming town of Hatch as a sort of pilgrimage. About 40 miles north of Las Cruces, it is, many believe, home to the best chiles anywhere. Small family-run businesses operate out of modest storefronts and roadside stands along its couple of main streets. They sell sacks of chiles and long, colorful ristras. Locals use swift, practiced movements to fashion decorative wreaths of green, red, and bright ornamental peppers. Gas-powered roasters fill the town with a hoarse roar and a rich smoke from the chiles. Folks buy the roasted green chiles to peel, use in dishes, or freeze for future meals. These chiles, they insist, have no equal.


"First of all, we've got the best flavor," declares a proud Jimmy Lytle, whose family has been growing chiles since his granddad came here in the 1800s. His father helped create the 'NuMex Big Jim,' aptly named after him. The Lytles are clearly a fixture around Hatch. They sell green and red chiles—fresh, dried, canned, and frozen—at their Hatch Chile Express shop at 622 Franklin Street. For those who can't make it to Hatch, the family provides mail-order service, shipping out 10- and 25-pound boxes of fresh chiles in August and September. (For prices and ordering information, visit www.hatch-chile.com, or call [505] 267-3226.)

The Hatch Chile Express, though, isn't just about produce; it's a fun take on all things chile. Shoppers can choose from chile preserves, chile jams, and chile jellies. There are chile salsas, dry powders, seeds, posters, dishware, towels, clothes, and even strings of chile-shaped lights. As much as this wacky variety of items says about modern-day marketing, it speaks as much or more to people's passion for New Mexico's chiles. And why not? Theirs is a taste deeply rooted in the land—and the heart.

For More Info

689 chile recipes from recipe finder:
southernliving.com/september 2007





Did You Know?

- Chile, officially dubbed as one of New Mexico's state vegetables, is actually a fruit.
- One fresh green chile pod contains more vitamin C than an orange.
- One teaspoon of dried red chile powder meets the daily requirements of vitamin A.
- Chile is processed in everything from mayonnaise to lipstick. Capsaicin—the chemical that makes chiles hot—can help alleviate arthritis pain and is an ingredient in some medicinal ointments and creams.