

Chileheads convene at New Mexico State

by Dan J. Williams

The child's drawing tacked to Dr. Paul Bosland's office door shows a big green chile with arms, legs and eyes. Above the figure, it says, "Dad = Chile Man."

Actually, Bosland, a professor of vegetable breeding at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, prefers "Chilehead." But what the heck. As director of the fledgling Chile Institute, the only organization of its kind in the world, he'll take all the recognition he can get. And right now, he says the five-year-old institute could use some.

"We would like New Mexico State University and Las Cruces to be the center of the universe for people who want to learn about chiles," Bosland says. "We want people to know we're here to promote the wonders of capsicum."

As all true chileheads know, capsicum is the genus of almost all U.S. varieties of chiles, from the common New Mexican long green to Jalapeños and *Habaneros*.

Bosland and 250 other institute members say Las Cruces would be the ideal spot for an international clearinghouse of chile information—offering everything from history and research to recipes and gardening tips. They've already cooked up plans for a \$2.5 million International Center for Chile. They've got the land, cour-

tesy of NMSU. All they need now is money. Lots of money.

"We've got about \$10,000 so far," Bosland says. "Mostly in pledges."

With \$2,490,000 still to raise, it appears the institute's dream will be a long time coming. But most members say the time is ripe for some serious fund-raising. Across the country and around the world, chiles are hot, they say. Chileheads are popping up everywhere, and the institute's future looks bright as an October *ristra*, hot as a *Habanero*.

It won't be long, institute supporters say, before big food-industry corporations recognize the marketing value of a center

that would promote an exciting and trendy food, ornamental and natural medicine.

"We're all excited about people discovering our secret treasure, something that always has been a cultural practice among mostly Indians and Hispanics," says Emma Jean Cervantes, a third-generation Mesilla Valley chile grower and executive secretary of the Chile Institute. "Now it's up to this center to spread the word."

Dave DeWitt, an institute founder and editor of Albuquerque-based *Chile Pepper Magazine*, says the group desperately needs a proper setting to operate. Currently, the institute headquarters is a 10-foot by 10-foot room upstairs in NMSU's agriculture department building, Gerald Thomas Hall.

DeWitt envisions a 12,000-foot center with a walk-through greenhouse, history and science exhibits and a computer-equipped archive and library. Plans also call for a gift shop and a small cafe that serves spicy food from around the world. A second phase of the project would include a theater-auditorium and a children's museum.

"It's a dream, our goal," DeWitt says. "It would be very good for New Mexico and Texas, but we still have a ways to go. We need

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SYMPTOMS OF A CHILEHEAD

Are you a chilehead?

If your most difficult daily decision is "red or green" you might be a chilehead.

If every plastic storage container in your kitchen is stained red, you might be a chilehead.

If you have more than one jar of hot sauce in your glove compartment, you might be a chilehead.

But if you spell it, chili, forget it, you'll never be a chilehead.

Thick cayenne chile peppers are among the many varieties grown at the New Mexico State University Chile Institute in Las Cruces.





Eduardo Fuss

Dr. Paul Bosland, director of the five-year-old Chile Institute, spends a lot of time studying crops in the field.

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 money . . . and we have to prove ourselves to the industry. We haven't done that, yet."

The institute also needs to catch the interest of New Mexicans. Although chile is the No. 1 vegetable crop in the state, a \$56 million a

year industry and a staple of almost every New Mexican's diet, the institute only has 11 members
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RESEARCHERS TAP CHILE'S HOT POTENTIAL

Researchers are constantly discovering and rediscovering uses for chile other than the obvious culinary delights. Among them:

- **Color:** Capsicum chiles in their non-pungent form, often called paprika, are used as the No. 1 food-coloring agent in the United States. Chile-based coloring also is used in paints, cosmetics and clothing dyes.

- **In the pink:** Zoos often feed flamingos chile so the birds will retain their distinctive pink color, which they lose when deprived of their natural food of calcium-rich crustaceans. Without dye in their diet, the birds turn white. Aquariums also feed chile to goldfish to help them keep their bright

orange coloring.

- **Repellent:** Chile has become a widespread alternative to tear gas and mace to repel muggers and ornery bears. Capsaicin also has been used to discourage rodents from chewing on electrical cables in Alaska, and to keep pesky barnacles at bay when added to boat hull paint. And, as some parents know, one dab of chile will discourage even the most stubborn young thumb-sucker.

- **Pain relief:** Capsaicin, the ingredient in chile that makes it hot, or pungent, has been used very successfully for pain relief. As a liniment (Fleet, Sloan's and some prescription creams) it is used for treatment of arthritis,

shingles, contact allergies and phantom limb pain amputees often experience. Rubbing some capsaicin cream on the temples also reportedly has eased the pain of cluster headache sufferers.

- **Preventative medicine:** Some studies indicate chile might have cancer-preventative properties. Others suggest it prevents colon cancer by acting like dietary fiber, keeping things moving quickly through the digestive system.

- **Vitamins:** The red color in chiles is beta carotene. A half-tablespoon a day will give you your daily requirement of vitamin A. One New Mexico long green chile pod contains six times as much vitamin C as one orange.



Victor Espinoza

INSIDE THE CHILE INSTITUTE

The Chile Institute, formed in February 1991, is an international organization of chile pepper lovers, from plant breeders, farmers and distributors to people who are just crazy and curious about capsicum, the genus of almost every variety of chile peppers.

- **Headquarters:** In the agriculture department at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces.
- **Mission:** To become an inter-

national clearinghouse for information about chiles, supporting research, promoting awareness and generally spreading the good word about one of the oldest domesticated crops known. And to build a \$2.5 million International Center for Chile in Las Cruces, the heart of chile country.

- **Members:** About 250 in 39 states and 13 foreign countries.
- **Publications, events:** Bi-

monthly newsletter; host of the annual New Mexico Chile Conference.

- **Memberships:** \$25 a year gets you a newsletter, a decal, occasional free packets of seeds and other goodies. The institute also is accepting donations for its center.

- **Information:** Box 30003, Dept. 3Q, New Mexico State University, Las Cruces, N.M. 88003; (505) 646-3028.

Above—Employees of the Bjad Chile Plant north of Las Cruces busily sort the mounds of red chile. Right—This red chile is afflicted with anthracnose fruit rot, a dreaded disease during the harvest season.



Victor Espinoza