



Enchanting dishes from the land of chile

by Sandy Swarcz • photography by Eduardo Fuss



Hatch, in the heart of southern New Mexico's chile country.

New Mexico is the land of chile. As the oldest chile growing area in the country, we continue to produce more chile than any other state. Our chile farmers bear the wisdom of thousands of years of experience and grow hundreds of different types. But only one is considered real New Mexico chile. What is it?

The New Mexico chile pepper is our own special breed and is found nowhere else in the world. It should never be confused with the Habanero, Chipotle, Jalapeño, Serrano or Tabasco. When natives refer to "chile," they're referring only to the New Mexico chile pepper or the sauces made from it. And, New Mexico chile is entirely different from the spicy Texas dish with meat, tomatoes and beans called "chili." Notice the spelling, too. Here, natives are picky about spelling it with an "e" on the end, from the Spanish spelling.

You've probably already guessed this, but New Mexicans are pretty passionate about chile. In fact, we could be called connoisseurs of chile. We hotly debate

the merits of various peppers, much as others debate the vintages of fine wine. You might be surprised to learn that these debates are justified, too. The taste of chile varies not only by the type, but the soil and climate where it's grown and even the year of harvest. Our peculiar sandy alkaline soils, irrigated by sweet water from the Río Grande, and our hot dry climate present perfect conditions for growing flavorful varieties of chile.

The New Mexico chile is large, six to seven inches long, with a distinctively robust and earthy flavor. Many varieties can be found within this breed and everyone has their favorite. The enthusiasm shown for various types depends on if the chiles are green or red. What's the difference? Not only their color, but where they were grown, when they are picked and how they are processed.

The heart of the state's largest chile growing area is from Hatch to Las Cruces in the southern counties of Luna and Doña Ana. This is green chile country. Chiles from this region are usually picked in the early



Top—Jalapeño harvesting in Hatch. Above—Roasting drums have simplified the once-arduous task of preparing chile pods for cooking.

fall months while they're green. Before being eaten, green chiles must be roasted and peeled.

During the harvest period, the sharp smokey aroma of roasting green chiles fills neighborhoods throughout the state. It serves as a call to action for chile lovers. They flock to major street corners or markets where farmers' trailers are filled with 40-pound burlap bags of fresh green chiles for sale. Nearby will be large metal cages that revolve over gas flames. In the hands of a competent roaster, an entire bag will be roasted in five minutes. After roasting, the charred chiles are placed in plastic bags, which makes them sweat as they cool, loosening the outer skins. After they've cooled, natives will rub their hands with grease or shortening, or wear rubber gloves for protection from the burning chiles and slip the skins off. Then, they're ready to eat.

Among green chiles, "the medium-hot Sandía chile is the workhorse here," according to Javier Vargas with New Mexico State University and on the board of directors for the International Chile Institute. Big



Cooks like to use the Big Jim chile, at left, for rellenos because of its size and symmetrical shape.

Jims are also favored because of their enormous size and thick flesh. They're perfect for stuffing and using in the popular dish called *chile rellenos* (reh-yen'-ohs). But, Big Jims are seldom seen outside of our state because processors find their large size difficult to work with and their variability of heat impossible to control. In fact, New Mexicans consume almost 90 percent of all the fresh green chiles grown here.

The smaller growing area north of Santa Fe produces the generally smaller, thinner-fleshed chile varieties which are frequently hotter. These are often left on the plant to continue to ripen, much as bell peppers do, until they become red. Unlike green chiles, red usually aren't eaten fresh. They are strung together to form bundles called *ristras* and hung outside to dry. When traveling across New Mexico, you'll frequently spot *ristras* hanging from *vigas* in front of homes. Once dried, red chiles are used whenever they're needed throughout the year to make red chile sauce. They may also be crushed into flakes called *chile caribe* or ground into chile powder.



The Chimayó chile, a variety commonly grown in northern New Mexico.



Top—The competition is usually fierce at the state's many chile cook-offs. Above—A colorful sampling of the chiles grown in New Mexico.

The most popular red chiles are the hot Barker, the Española and the Chimayó. But these, too, are seldom found outside New Mexico.

Red or green? That's the question you'll hear echoed across New Mexico at virtually any meal of the day. Each color has a strong following, but, green chile is preferred two to one by native New Mexicans, according to the New Mexico Agricultural Statistics Department. This figure is born out at most traditional New Mexico restaurants such as El Pinto in Albuquerque. According to the owner, John Thomas, for 32 years patrons have enjoyed his grandmother's recipes, with natives showing a clear preference for green chile.

New Mexicans love chiles not only for their flavor but also for their heat. We eat hotter chile than other Americans. But, not all parts of the chile are equally hot. It's the capsaicin which gives a chile its hotness. Capsaicin is concentrated around the stems, inner membranes and seeds. The hotness of a chile can range from sweet and mild to painfully hot. A general

rule of thumb is, the smaller the chile variety, the hotter it is, but this isn't reliable. So, never assume that red chile will always be hotter than green, or vice versa.

The hotness of chiles is unpredictable, even within varieties. Where the chiles were grown, even from field to field, as well as the temperatures and rainfall during the growing season all play a role. What's going on here? Older New Mexicans have their own theory, of course. They believe that the mood of the farmer will determine a chile's hotness. So, an angry farmer will grow fiery hot chiles.

But, to get to the bottom of the hotness debate, I went to the world's foremost authority on chile, Dr. Paul Bosland, director of the International Chile Institute and professor of Agronomy and Horticulture at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces. He explained that the "hotness of chile is simply a matter of stress to the chile plant, stress in any form." Chile grows optimally at "temperatures of 69 to 72 degrees that remain constant day and night, in loamy soil and



Douglas Merriam

Chile Jam'n Kebabs

when receiving a gentle deep rain every two to three days." He estimates that 40 percent of chile's heat variability can be explained by imbalances to these conditions.

Water stress appears to be the biggest factor in increasing pungency. Our chiles are "certainly hotter than those grown in California, Colorado and Texas." Thank goodness, exclaim most New Mexicans.

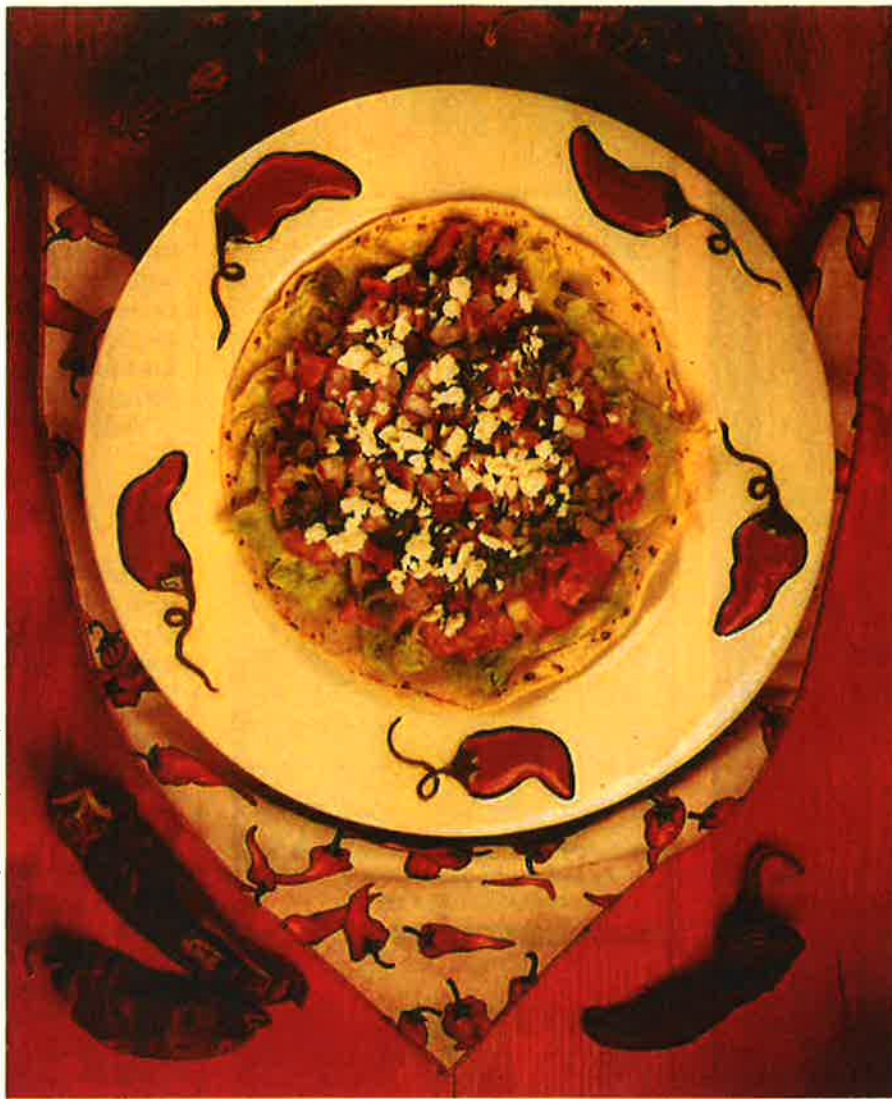
Many people accuse New Mexicans of being addicted to chile. We certainly consume more chiles per capita than residents of any other state. The national average of only six and one-half pounds of fresh chile per year wouldn't come close to giving native residents their regular "chile fix."

New Mexicans are uniquely obsessed with chile. Whereas most Americans use chile as a condiment, here it's a food, the soul of our traditional cooking. Green and red chile sauces are the cornerstones for every real New Mexican cook. Culinary reputations stand or fall on one's chile alone. That's because chile is literally served at every meal of the day. At break-

fast, it's spooned over egg and potato dishes. At lunch or dinner, it appears again with burritos, enchiladas and grilled meats and seafoods. Green chile sauce is usually made fresh daily, whereas red chile sauce can be made in large batches and frozen. Red chile, slowly simmered with meat, also makes the popular dish called *carne adovada*. Used like red chile, *carne adovada* is used as the filling for traditional tamales made at Christmastime. Red chile sauce has a coarser and more earthy flavor than green.

Despite the popularity of traditional dishes, chile is making its way into modern dishes in exciting new ways. You'll find chile in pestos, fondues, fruit salsas, soups and chowders, quiches, salads, omelets, risottos, pastas, burgers, pizzas, bagels and breads, muffins, cakes, jams, cookies and even candy. My original recipes serve as an introduction to contemporary chile cooking.

New Mexicans even love chile in drinks. Perhaps one of the most original uses of our red and green chile is in the chile wines made by Sandía Shadows



Sheep Herder's Nachos

Winery in Albuquerque. These manage to capture not only the color, fragrance and taste of our chiles, but their heat as well. Equally successful are the green chile beers being made by two New Mexico micro-breweries, Eske's Brewery Pub in Taos and Embudo Station Brewery in Embudo.

The greatest gathering of chile lovers might be the annual National Fiery Foods Show in Albuquerque, where chile can be found in every type of edible product imaginable.

There may be something "magical about chile . . . that draws people here," as Dr. John Owens, dean of the College of Agriculture and Home Economics at NMSU believes. New Mexico is certainly the land of enchantment. Maybe it's our chile.

Sheep Herder's Nachos

These original nachos combine some of the finest native New Mexico ingredients into a main dish tortilla "pizza."

- 2 teaspoons canola oil
- 3 cups lean lamb meat, julienned
- 3 tomatoes, finely chopped
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 2 garlic cloves, crushed
- 2 teaspoons New Mexico red chile powder
- ¼ cup smooth or chunky peanut butter
- 4-6 flour tortillas
- 3 cups torn lettuce leaves
- ⅓ cup diced roasted and peeled New Mexico green chiles (about 4 large chiles)
- ½ cup minced red onion
- 6-8 ounces soft goat cheese (or any mild cheese), crumbled

In a large skillet, fry the lamb in the oil over medium high heat for 3 minutes, stirring. Add the tomatoes and spices and continue to fry until the meat is no longer pink, about 5 minutes. Stir in the peanut butter, with enough water to make a smooth sauce.