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FIRE-EATERS

The search for the hottest chili.

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In mid-December of 2011, Brady Bennett went out drinking at Adobe Gila's at the Greene, a Mexican restaurant in Dayton, Ohio. After two beers, the bartender offered him a free shot. Bennett chose Patrón tequila with apple schnapps. Soon, he recalled, his throat began to swell. He struggled to breathe, and his nose, mouth, and lungs "felt as though they were on fire." He called for an ambulance, moaning, and was taken to the hospital. A year later, Bennett filed a lawsuit against Adobe Gila's, claiming that the bartender had spiked his drink with extract of the bhut jolokia, or ghost chili. (Adobe Gila's denies the allegations.) "It wasn't as if they gave him a little Tabasco," Jeff McQuiston, Bennett's lawyer, told the Dayton *Daily News*. "This stuff is lethal." The bhut jolokia is a hundred and fifty times hotter than a jalapeño.

New varieties of "superhots" provide near-death experiences in a bowl of guacamole. Photograph by Grant Cornett.

Gastromasochists have likened it to molten lava, burning needles, and "the tip of my tongue

being branded by a fine point of heated steel." Yet, at more than a million Scoville heat units—the Scoville scale, developed by the pharmacist Wilbur Scoville in 1912, measures the pungency of foods—the bhut jolokia is at least 462,400 SHU short of being the world's hottest chili pepper.

"Chili pepper" is a confusing term, another of Christopher Columbus's deathless misnomers. (Columbus and his men classified the spicy plant they had heard being referred to in Hispaniola as *aji*—farther north, in Mexico, it was known by the Nahuatl word *chilli*—as a relative of black pepper.) Chilis belong to *Capsicum*, a genus of the nightshade family. Horticulturists consider them fruits, and grocers stock them near the limes and cilantro. Most chilis contain capsaicin, an alkaloid compound that binds to pain receptors on the tongue, producing a sensation of burning. Sweet banana peppers are usually neutral. Pepperoncini (approximately 300 SHU) produce just a flicker of heat, while cayennes (40,000) are to Scotch bonnets (200,000) as matches are to blowtorches. Capsaicin is meant to deter predators, but for humans it can be too little of a bad thing. Because capsaicin causes the body to release endorphins, acting as a sort of neural fire hose, many people experience chilis as the ideal fulcrum of pain and pleasure.

In recent years, "superhots"—chilis that score above 500,000 on the Scoville scale—have consumed the attention of chiliheads, who debate grow lights on Facebook ("You can overwinter with a few well-placed T-8s"), swap seeds in flat-rate boxes (Australian customs is their nemesis), and show up in droves at fiery-foods events (wares range from Kiss My Bhut hot sauce to Vanilla Heat coffee creamer). Chilis, in general, are beautiful. There is a reason no one makes Christmas lights in the shape of rutabagas. Superhots come in the brightest colors and the craziest shapes. Their names, evoking travel and conquest—Armageddon, Borg 9, Naga Morich, Brain Strain—sound as though they were made up by the evil twins of the people who brand body lotions. Trinidad 7-Pots are so called because it's said that one of them is enough to season seven pots of stew.

Like computers, superhots are evolving at a rate that embarrasses the phenomena of just a few years ago. In 1992, Jane and Michael Stern observed, in this magazine, that five thousand Scoville units "would be considered very hot by most people, but even that is piddling compared with the blistering fury of the habanero pepper, which can reach three hundred thousand." (The Scoville test originally measured how many drops of sugar water it would take to dilute the heat of a chili; pungency is now determined more reliably by high-performance liquid chromatography, whose results can still be reported in Scoville units.) From 1994 to 2007, the Red Savina—a scarlet, heart-shaped pod rating 570,000 SHU—held the Guinness World Record for hottest chili pepper. Then the bhut jolokia, the existence of which had been whispered about for years among chiliheads, as though it were a vegetable Loch Ness monster,

surfaced on the international scene. In 2000, R. K. R. Singh, a scientist at a Ministry of Defense research laboratory in Assam, India, where the bhut jolokia is widely grown, submitted some samples for analysis. The test results, which indicated that it was significantly more powerful than the Red Savina, made their way to Paul Bosland, a professor of horticulture and former sauerkraut expert who, for the past twenty-two years, has run the Chile Pepper Institute, at New Mexico State University. Bosland was skeptical of the Indian scientists' numbers, but he managed to obtain some bhut jolokia seeds, which he grew into plants. In January of 2007, he filed with Guinness, which awarded the C.P.I.'s bhut jolokia (1,001,300 SHU) the new world record.

In February of 2011, Guinness confirmed that the Infinity chili, grown in Lincolnshire, England, by a former R.A.F. security guard, had surpassed the bhut jolokia by more than sixty-five thousand SHU. Only two weeks later, a Cumbrian farmer named Gerald Fowler introduced the Naga Viper. At 1,382,118 SHU, it was, Fowler said, "hot enough to strip paint." He told reporters, "We're absolutely, absolutely chuffed. Everyone complains about the weather and rain here in Cumbria, but we think it helped us breed the hottest chili." He posed for the *Daily Mail* wearing a sombrero.

Chiliheads are mostly American, British, and Australian guys. (There is also a valiant Scandinavian contingent.) Chili growing is to gardening as grilling is to cooking, allowing men to enter, and dominate, a domestic sphere without sacrificing their bluster. "I can't remember eating anything spicy before the parrot came along," Fowler, a big man with a brushy mustache, told me, in July. The chili world is full of garrulous, confiding, erratic narrators who say things like "before the parrot came along." In Fowler's case, the parrot belonged to his father's brother. "Uncle Jim wanted another parrot, and his wife said, 'Nope, you've got a parrot, and that's it.' So he made up this story that my dad wanted a parrot, and next time he visited us he brought one." The parrot, named Murphy, came with a chili plant. (Birds can't taste capsaicin.) Fowler quit fishing and started growing habaneros in his bedroom. Soon, he had left his job as a Web designer and founded the Chili Pepper Company, through which he sells seeds, sauces, powders, and products such as Kiss the Devil, a mouth spray made with chili-infused alcohol. "You can have just a little bit before you go to the gym, to get your endorphins up," Fowler told me.

Chilis have become an attractive business. According to a report by IBISWorld, a market-research firm, hot-sauce production is one of America's ten fastest-growing industries, along with solar-panel manufacturing and online eyeglass sales. Last year, the Los Angeles hot-sauce company Huy Fong Foods sold more than sixty million dollars' worth of sriracha. (Americans bought so much sriracha in 2007 that there was a three-month national shortage.) Chilis are the male equivalent of cupcakes, tempting entrepreneurial amateurs with dreams of a more flavorful

life. Gerald Fowler said, "In the last five years, you find somebody's been made redundant, he likes chili, he'll set up a chili business." The month after the Naga Viper got the Guinness record, Fowler made an extra forty thousand dollars.

At the moment, there is no definitive claimant to the title of world's hottest pepper. Lacking a central authority, the chili community finds itself embroiled in a three-way schism. In June of 2011, a group of Australian growers captured the Guinness record with the Trinidad Scorpion Butch T (1,463,700 SHU). Less than a year later, Bosland's Chile Pepper Institute issued a press release: "When it comes to bringing the heat, there's a new king of the hill." Bosland claimed that a C.P.I. chili called the Trinidad Moruga Scorpion had exceeded two million Scoville units.

Then, in August of last year, Ed Currie, of the PuckerButt Pepper Company, of Fort Mill, South Carolina, unveiled a new contender. Currie announced, "The PuckerButt Pepper Company has raised the bar for hot pepper heat intensity by producing an amazing hot pepper, the Smokin' Ed's Carolina Reaper, which surpasses the current world record holder, the Butch T Trinidad Scorpion." The Carolina Reaper's recommended uses, according to PuckerButt's Web site, included hot sauces, salsa, and "settling old scores." Steven Leckart wrote in *Maxim* that eating one was "like being face-fucked by Satan."

Currie's announcement divided opinion among chiliheads, a fractious lot. His associates—battling trolls (and baiting them, too)—made their allegiances known. Joe (Pepper Joe) Arditi, who runs a seed company in Myrtle Beach and is one of four venders licensed to sell Currie's chili, wrote in his online catalogue, "Do we need a new World's Hottest? I think so. We have the Super Bowl, World Series, Grammy, and Oscar awards for new champs every year." (Pepper Joe, who was offering Carolina Reaper seeds at ten dollars a pack, vowed to enforce "a strict 3-pack max" per customer.) He declared the Carolina Reaper "now the reigning King."

On GardenWeb.com, a commenter wrote of Pepper Joe:

> He has disrespected Guinness and the creator of the CURRENT world record holder by putting ED's pepper at #1 WITHOUT SUBSTANTIATION, abusing the Guinness name for PERSONAL GAIN. That is misrepresentation and THEFT.
>
> But he knows, there is one born every minute. My two cents? Don't be the one born in the next minute! . . . Welcome to the circus.

Eating, more than breathing or sleeping, lends itself to competition. There are bake-offs, wing wars, contests to see who can eat the most hot dogs, bratwurst, Twinkies, tamales, cannoli, apple pies, buffalo wings, ribs, oysters, pastrami, sweet corn, deep-fried asparagus, ice cream, pancakes, pepperoni rolls, and boiled eggs. Superhots are the most accessible of thrills—fugu straight from the garden. For the culinary extremist, or exhibitionist, they provide an outlet

for impulses that might have compelled his adolescent self to drink a concoction or try to swallow a teaspoonful of cinnamon. (A recent study found a positive correlation between chili-eating and "sensation-seeking" behavior.) As a leisure activity, superhots offer some of the pleasures of mild drugs and extreme sports without requiring one to break the law or work out. They are near-death experiences in a bowl of guacamole.

Chief among the chilihead's occupational hazards is getting burnt up. In layman's terms, this means eating a chili that causes one to experience profuse sweating, redness, nausea, ear-popping, abdominal cramps, vomiting, or all of the above. Getting burnt up can happen by accident (underestimation, misidentification) or on purpose (dares, pranks, curry). At the Engine Inn, a pub a short walk from Gerald Fowler's house in Cumbria, I sampled the Naga Viper Curry, "made with officially the world's hottest chili pepper and served with pilau rice, mango chutney and a giant poppadum." "Tastes like heaven, Burns like hell," a chalkboard read. "594 curries sold, 397 finished." Though the waitress had warned, "We do it almost inedible," I made 398. Never has a runny nose been so enjoyable.

Chilis are believed to have health benefits. Four show jumpers were disqualified from the 2008 Olympics for having treated their horses with creams containing capsaicin, which can act as a stimulant. Traffic cops in China hand out chilis to keep drivers alert. In 2008, when Katie Couric asked Hillary Clinton how she kept her stamina up on the campaign trail, she replied, "I eat a lot of hot peppers." But, according to Paul Rozin, of the University of Pennsylvania, who studies the psychology of taste, the salutary effects of chilis aren't substantial enough to account for their appeal to humans, the only mammals that eat them. With his theory of "benign masochism," Rozin frames the allure of chilis as an emotional phenomenon. He writes, "We may come to enjoy our body's negative responses to situations when we realize that there is no, or minimal, actual danger. In the case of the roller coaster, our body is scared, and sympathetically activated, but we know we are safe. Similarly for our crying in sad movies, and the burn we feel with chili pepper." Chilis, in other words, are slasher flicks we can eat, bite-size Cyclones.

Ted Barrus, a custodian from Hammond, Oregon, has made a second career as Ted the Fire-Breathing Idiot, a friendly jackass and "chili reviewer." Barrus started rating chilis because he liked the attention. "I still don't really eat spicy food except when I'm doing reviews," he said. "A typical meal for me is a regular old American meal—a burger and fries. Very rarely do I eat salad. You know, I'm a fat guy. I like fat-guy food."

Barrus consumes whatever people send him, from raspberry-chipotle fudge to ranch-dressing soda. Armed with a jar of peanut butter and gallons of milk (casein, a protein in dairy products, can alleviate the effects of capsaicin), he regularly sets himself such stunts as eating twenty-one of the world's hottest peppers: seven bhut jolokia, five Trinidad Scorpion Butch Ts,

four Douglah 7-Pots, three Trinidad Moruga Scorpions, two Jonah 7-Pots. (He made it through eleven of them.) Last June, he and a friend decided to try the Carolina Reaper.

In the video that Barrus posted on YouTube (41,960 views), the camera homes in on a pair of pods, positioned starkly on a tabletop as though they were hand grenades seized by sheriffs' deputies in a weapons bust.

"It looks like something from 'The Simpsons' or some horror movie," Barrus says. "It's very, very heavy and dense."

Each of the two, Barrus and his sidekick, stuffs a whole chili into his mouth and begins to chew.

"It's the most immediate tongue burn I've ever had," Barrus says. "It's immediately frying my tongue."

A few seconds go by.

"Wow. My gums are on fire."

"Urrgh, the gut burn is intense!"

"That was hell, boy. Hell in my mouth."

When I asked Barrus, over the phone, what he thought was the world's hottest chili, he replied, "I always say, 'Guinness says the Butch T, New Mexico says the Trinidad Moruga Scorpion, and Ed Currie says the Carolina Reaper.' " He continued, "It's very complicated. It's not cut-and-dried."

The chili industry is rife with conflicts of interest—Currie, for instance, recently flew Barrus to a convention—but Barrus insisted that he was a reliable gauge of heat. "I go by my own burn," he said.

According to Barrus, "most chiliheads feel you have to respect Guinness," even though its authority is less than absolute. Guinness doesn't perform tests itself; it just certifies results that conform to its requirements. In Barrus's opinion, growers have reason to be secretive about their methods. He said, "The problem is that you have so many people who test who are affiliated with venders. Some people who create these crosses are afraid venders are going to get the seeds, grow them out, rename it, and call it their own cross."

He was unconvinced by the claims of the Chile Pepper Institute, saying, "You know, I've eaten Moruga Scorpions that were no hotter than a habanero." As for the Carolina Reaper, he acknowledged that Currie's association with Pepper Joe, who had a reputation for slick salesmanship, had "hurt his credibility." (Pepper Joe, for his part, said, "I'm a marketer—that's my DNA." He added, "We positively have the data. We took a new pepper and in fourteen months made it a household recognizable name, and to me that's just short of astonishing.") Barrus said, "Ed partnered up with him for the release of the Carolina Reaper. So some people look at Ed like, how much can you trust Ed Currie?"

Several weeks later, I was in South Carolina, standing in the middle of a field with Ed Currie. Currie had picked me up at my hotel in a GMC van. I had immediately started coughing—chili fumes. Currie rolled down a window.

Currie has a beard and an excitable yet downbeat manner. He was dressed in jean shorts, a T-shirt that said "Tree Hugger: I Will Cling to the Old Rugged Cross," and a gold-and-silver Tag Heuer watch. He surveyed his plants, which were shoulder-high and stretched in lush rows back to a spring-fed pond. "Less talking, more working!" he yelled to some bare-chested workers who were picking pods under the sun. He turned to me and said, "I don't really care much for the spotlight, but God's doing it, and I've just got to keep on going."

Being a North Carolina native, I asked Currie if he was from the area. He explained that he had grown up in West Bloomfield, Michigan, where his father was the chief financial officer of a division of the John Hancock insurance company. Currie continued, "I went to the University of Michigan, and I got kicked out. Before that I was at Eastern Michigan. I never went to one class—I just took the tests, which I could do because I'm a genius. My family had a history of heart disease and cancer, and all this time I'm studying how not to die, never quite correlating that the amount of drinking and drugs I was doing might lead to premature death. I was just reading, looking at places where they had low incidences of illness." Currie developed a theory that spicy food might be good for you. "In 1982, I went to a Vietnamese restaurant in Orchard Lake, Michigan, and I said, 'I want to eat hot chilis. What's the hottest you've got?' And they said, 'No, no, no,' and I said, 'Yes, yes, yes.' " He smiled. "I got high as crap!"

Currie started making hot sauces. "When you're bored, you're bored," he said. He went to seven different schools and eventually graduated from Central Michigan. Meanwhile, he was drinking and doing drugs. He got a D.W.I., lost his driver's license, went to jail, got married and divorced. By 1999, he said, "I had five different liquor stores delivering to my house. I was a big fat sloppy drunk pig, and I decided I wanted to die. It was winter, and I left the door open—snow was coming in the house—and then an angel came in and said, 'You've got to get to the hospital.' " Currie waved a forearm in front of me and rolled up his sleeve. "See? Goosebumps."

We got into the van. Currie, who has been clean for fourteen years, worked in the trust department at Wells Fargo until January, when he turned full time to chilis. He fielded a flurry of calls on his iPhone as we drove to his house. Eventually, we parked next to a modest white A-frame with an extravagantly landscaped garden: palm trees, cattails, a seven-foot-tall cosmos. "Look, palms are only supposed to bloom in the springtime," Currie said. "I get them to bloom all year long." He added, "I know about nutrients, I know about plant reproductive cycles—I grew pot in Michigan in the middle of wintertime!"

There was something strange about the street Currie lived on: while the front yards on the block, except for Currie's, were largely barren, many of the back yards appeared to be as lush as tropical jungles. Currie, it turned out, had turned the neighborhood into an extended chili farm. "I might or might not have about thirty-five yards that I lease out for the summer every year," he said. "It's all camouflaged," he continued, slipping behind a house to check up on a test plot. "No one knows where it is. People have come into my yard and tried to steal stuff."

Currie first suspected that he had a very hot chili on his hands in 2002, when he crossed a habanero (he got the seeds, he says, from a former co-worker who was from St. Vincent) with a Pakistani Naga (these came from a Michigan friend—"a Pakistani prince" whom he used to babysit, and whom he says he can't say more about "because of his job"). Horticultural protocol requires that a new chili self-pollinate for five to eight generations before it can be considered stable and, therefore, a distinct variety. Currie says he grew his plant to five generations and then took it to nearby Winthrop University for tests. In 2010, Cliff Calloway, a chemistry professor at Winthrop, certified that the chili, which was then called the HP22B, averaged a heat of 1,474,000 SHU. The next year, the report somehow came to the attention of the local media. "It went viral," Currie said. "People were trashing me on every forum. Ted Barrus called and said, 'You've got to get on here and defend yourself.' Apparently, I didn't ask the pepper gods if it was all right for me to be cross-breeding chilis."

In June of 2011, Currie wrote to Guinness:

> Hello, my name is Ed Currie and I own the PuckerButt Pepper Company. We have been testing a pepper I hybrided at Winthrop University for the last several years and have a pepper that's weighted average over the years is 1,474,000 scoville. I have attached a chart one of the grad students used for her part of the project. I actually have a pepper that is closer to two million consistently, but I am waiting on the results from this year and making sure the seed is consistent. How should I proceed and what data do I need to provide. . . . It would be great to have the US on the map for heat.
>
> Thanks for your help.
>
> Sincerely
> Smokin Ed

Currie paid six hundred and fifty dollars to Guinness to "fast-track" the application, but, for one reason or another, the proceedings stalled. Guinness says that it has never received the proper paperwork from Currie. "We keep asking for documentation and he says he'll send it, but we still haven't got anything," Sara Wilcox, a spokesperson for Guinness, told me. Currie argues that Guinness has failed to keep track of the documentation he's sent—when the person he was originally dealing with left the company, in 2012, he was forced to start afresh—and that Guinness keeps changing the rules for the category.

"I don't think they want to give the record to an American," Currie said. "That's just my personal opinion."

Given the stalemate with Guinness, Currie decided late last year to declare the chili the world's hottest on his own authority. First, he changed the HP22B's name to the Carolina Reaper. "God brought a couple of guys into my life who used to work at Pepsi," he told me. "They're all about the corporate marketing thing."

Currie's critics question the long-term viability of the Carolina Reaper. Ted Barrus explained, "There's a lot of controversy over Ed Currie's chili because in Europe some people got the Reaper, they grew out the seeds, and their chilis don't look like anybody else's. They're saying it's no longer stable." Currie acknowledged that some customers had got weird results, but the problem, he said, stemmed from a few contaminated seed packs. (Currie has recently furnished Guinness with a letter from a biology professor at Winthrop attesting that his plants are stable.) Besides, he said, the Carolina Reaper was, at this point, almost an anachronism, and he was persisting in trying to win recognition for it merely as a point of pride. "The Carolina Reaper's the mildest of the peppers I've crossed," he said, looking me in the eye. He had goosebumps again. "We have one hundred and sixty-two hotter ones yet to come."

"For over 1 year now, the Reaper has been so close to getting a record," Jim Duffy wrote to me recently. "Do you think people in the Industry are tired of hearing about it almost getting it over and over again? Is it the 'Boy Who Cried Wolf' and now Industry people are just ignoring it?"

Duffy, of Refining Fire Chiles, in San Diego, is Ed Currie's arch-frenemy and sometime business partner. They pray together on the phone every day, and tend to preface their criticisms of each other by saying, "He's a good friend of mine, but . . ." (As hybrids go, the chili world would make an excellent setting for both a Will Ferrell movie and an adaptation of "Julius Caesar." Among the pejoratives the chiliheads I spoke with used to describe each other were "clown," "joke," "Johnny-come-lately," "whack job," and "palooka.") Duffy says that he's not a record-chaser, but his beef with the Carolina Reaper may owe something to the fact that he gave Paul Bosland and the Chile Pepper Institute the seeds they used to grow the Trinidad Moruga Scorpion, which they proclaimed "the hottest pepper on the planet" in February of 2012. Duffy said of it, to the Associated Press, "Like Cabbage Patch dolls right before Christmas or Beanie Babies, it's, like, the hot item."

According to C.P.I. data, the Trinidad Moruga Scorpion averages only 1.2 million Scoville units, but its heat peaks at more than two million. To assert its primacy, its boosters have devised a novel argument: the chili record should be determined by maximum, rather than mean (the scariest wolf ever, rather than the scariest wolf most of the time). To some chiliheads, this constitutes a curious reversal of methodology—only six years ago, the C.P.I. claimed the Guinness World Record by citing the bhut jolokia's mean heat.

"It drives me nuts!" Alex de Wit, an Australian grower who is part of the team that holds the current Guinness record for the Trinidad Scorpion Butch T, told me. "I think if you want a world record, you have to do it according to the rules." De Wit e-mailed me later, "If they would beat me and did it exactly as supposed to do, well done and good on them. I am the first to applaud and clap my hands. . . . Anything else is just loose sand to my opinion, and not based upon facts but fiction." De Wit was equally upset by Ed Currie's claims about the Carolina Reaper: "I really do not have the time or energy for dicks (excusez le mot)." He closed his e-mail, "I wish you a spicy day."

Jim Duffy dismissed such criticism. "Does a runner win a race on the average, or does he win it by being the fastest?" he said, when we spoke on the phone, his voice gaining Scovilles by the second. "Is any record won by the fastest, the hottest, the tallest, the biggest, or are records given for the average? Who cares about the average?" He concluded, "Every record in the history of man has been based on the high."

Duffy and Bosland have yet to secure independent recognition for the Trinidad Moruga. I asked Duffy if the use of maximum numbers amounted to, as some chiliheads had complained, a misleading focus on outliers.

"Well, I'll tell you, dear, you can come out here to San Diego, and you can walk in my field, and you can bite into a Reaper and you can bite into a Moruga, and we'll see which one you walk away from," he said. "My grower Daniel, he's got Reapers in his dehydrator, and he eats them like potato chips."

After we got off the phone, Duffy sent me an e-mail that contained a list of ten questions to ponder. The ninth suggested that some of his competitors might be using substances that artificially inflate the capsaicin content of their chilis. "There is no test out there that can detect the use of these nutrients in the pepper," Duffy wrote. "Yes, Virginia! Peppers can be juiced!"

Butch T, of the Trinidad Scorpion Butch T, is Butch Taylor, a plumber in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. In 2005, Taylor got some Trinidad Scorpion seeds from a guy named Mark in New Jersey, who had got them from a local nursery. Taylor recalled, "When I grew them down here, they just grew unbelievable. I got three plants out of five seeds, and every plant I grew was dedicated to seeds. The first time I tasted it, I just thought, This is the hottest thing I've ever seen."

Taylor kept growing the plants, selecting at each generation for the hottest specimens. He gave the seeds away to chiliheads all over the world, sticking a little label that said "Butch T" at the bottom of each packet, so that absent-minded recipients would be able to keep track of where they had come from. Besides that, he didn't think much of it. "I didn't have any money to pay for testing—I didn't even know how to have them tested at the time," he told me. "And since I was growing the seeds, not selling them, I couldn't see the purpose of setting the

record." He learned that his namesake chili was the hottest chili in the world, according to Guinness, the day that the record was announced. The Australians who developed Taylor's strain into a winner had named it after him. "It took me a while to get my head around it, because I'm a little more shy, unless I've been drinking or something," he recalled. "I thought that was very decent of them."

Butch Taylor is spoken of in reverent tones in the chili community. A human bhut jolokia, he doesn't travel often to chili conventions, and his Web site is dormant. He can be a little hard to find, but, in recent years, he has maintained a steady presence on Facebook, advising fellow-enthusiasts on how to deal with fire ants or sharing observations about pod phenotypes. In January, he posted his "2013 (incomplete) grow list," a document that included sixty-one types of chili and was pored over as though it were a Vatican encyclical. Christopher Phillips, another veteran chilihead, wrote, "Congratulations Butch. You have now officially set yourself up for 52,390 seed requests come harvest time? LOL. Nice list!!" Taylor likes blues piano and L.S.U. football. He misses the taste of glue on stamps. He even has his own groupie—a woman who sends him pictures of herself posing next to plants grown from his seeds.

A few years ago, Taylor and his wife, Shirley, whom he met when he was thirteen, were living in a farmhouse that they built with their own hands on some land that Taylor's family has owned for years. The farm is about an hour north of Baton Rouge, in Wilkinson County, Mississippi. When the economic crisis hit, gas cost too much for them to make the commute every day, so they started spending the week in a travel trailer that they park in the driveway of their daughter's house. On weekends, they drive out to the country.

One day in September, Butch and Shirley picked me up at the Baton Rouge airport. Taylor did not look exactly like the picture he had sent—it was of Brad Pitt—but he welcomed me warmly. His eyes are bright blue. He was wearing shorts and a blue polo shirt with white stripes. "Hush, baby!" Shirley, who has strawberry-blond hair and a deep, honeyed voice, said to their shih tzu, Laila Habanero, as I climbed into their truck. A chili-pepper ornament dangled from the rearview mirror.

A couple of hours later, Taylor was standing in the kitchen of the farmhouse, softening shallots in butter for a crawfish étouffée. "I've cooked since the time I could lift a skillet," he said. Taylor had his first chili by accident. "I ate a tepín that I found growing in a flower bed when I was eleven," he said. "It burnt me up." As an adult, he started growing tomatoes; chilis followed. "This is based on an old recipe I came across in a preserving book from the eighteen-hundreds," Taylor said, picking up a jar of pepper brandy that was sitting on the counter. Chilis take on a metaphysical dimension in Taylor's telling. "I don't find peppers," he said. "Peppers find me."

The following morning, Taylor put on his boots and went outside. Next door, his mother's chickens were clucking in a pen. Hummingbirds darted past a pecan tree. Taylor unplugged a homemade electrical fence and stepped into his chili field. "This used to be a dog yard," he said. "My stepfather ran the hounds at Angola State Penitentiary. He used to feed them deer carcasses. The grass grew so thick that you could barely run a motor over it, so I thought it would be a good place to put a garden."

Taylor walked through rows of plants, gathering ripe pods in a wooden basket. His plants hadn't done particularly well this season—they were smaller than usual, and their leaves were a sickly yellow. (He thought he had got a bad batch of fertilizer.) Still, even in early fall, they were yielding chilis galore: chilis in the shape of bugles; chilis that glowed like Chinese lanterns; chilis that, Taylor pointed out, resembled pit bulls' teeth. When I asked him the big question, he hedged. "What I believe is the hottest pepper? I don't know," he said.

Still, he couldn't resist a tiny dig. "This is a Trinidad Scorpion from Australia," he said, fingering a bumpy bright-red pod. He handed it to me. "Notice a resemblance to Ed's?"

Taylor allowed that chiliheads were a competitive bunch. "Of course, I have an unfair advantage," he said, indicating the sun beating down overhead. "It's kind of like bringing a Ferrari to a Volkswagen race."

Taylor led me to a white outbuilding that serves as a dedicated hot-sauce kitchen: eight-gallon pots, nitrile gloves, face mask, radio, a de-seeding stool embellished, like a hot rod, with flames. Every year, he makes a few sauces, which he sells mostly to his plumbing buddies. "I've been trying to convince myself that I have to sell more stuff to pay for all the different stuff I want to do," he said. "I just can't get into it." Taylor has a theory about the economics of chilis: like hemlines, they rise when times are tough. "The deal with the hot sauce is that nobody has the money to eat out, so they stay home and start cooking again. After a while, you think, Well, there's got to be something different I can do with this." The only problem, Taylor said, is that nobody ever buys a bottle of superhot sauce twice.

Eventually, we walked back to the house.

"How were they lookin', baby?" Shirley asked.

"I've got a lot of peppers out there to pick this weekend," Butch replied.

He had brought a Trinidad Scorpion Butch T in from the field. The pod had a bulbous cap and a tapering tail that recalled the stinger of a wasp. Its skin was pebbly, like the nose of a drinker. It looked as though it had been made of melted wax from the candles at an Italian restaurant.

Taylor took a knife and whittled off a flake no larger than a clove. I put it in my mouth and chewed. The capsaicin hit loud and fast, a cymbal clang of heat. My face flushed. My eyes

glassed over and I started pacing the kitchen, as though I could walk off the burn. It took twenty minutes and a can of Dr Pepper to banish the sensation of having a sort of tinnitus of the mouth.

Before we came inside, Taylor had shown me his greenhouse, where he tends his most precious plants. A single bush dominated the small hut. Hanging from its branches were an assortment of pods, some of them deep red and some of them a faint green. The plant, which was not yet stable, was the third generation of an accidental cross of a 7-Pot Jonah and, most likely, a Trinidad Scorpion Butch T. Taylor was calling it the WAL—the Wicked-Ass Little 7-Pot. He shook a branch, unleashing a swarm of flies, and picked a pod from the stem. "Just off the top of my head, the first one I tasted, I'd say two million Scovilles," he said. "But it may just be a freak of nature. You get those now and then." ♦