

Health benefits of chile — The hot stuff is good for you

By Derrickson Moore / dmoore@lcsun-news.com @DerricksonMoore on Twitter

LAS CRUCES — They're hot. They're spicy. They're in season right now. And they're very good for you.

"Chile peppers are like fine wine to be enjoyed at meals," said New Mexico State University Regents Professor of Horticulture Paul Bosland, director of NMSU's Chile Pepper Institute, who adds that chiles "are better than wine because you can start consuming them at breakfast! Because chile peppers are healthy and there are so many shapes, sizes, flavors and heat levels, everybody should be eating them."

Studies are showing that the official New Mexico state vegetable (there's still some quibbling over the fruit vs. veggie issue) is a miracle food that can both whet and curb your appetite, deliver mega vitamins, cheer you up, ease aches and pains, clear your sinuses, rev up your metabolism and lots more.

If chiles are dear to your heart, you're doing right by your ticker.

"Dr. Zhen-Yu Chen, professor of food and nutritional science at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, found that the capsaicinoids (heat compounds) in chile were beneficial in improving a range of factors related to heart and blood-vessel health. In addition to reducing total cholesterol levels in the blood, capsaicinoids reduced levels of the so-called "bad" cholesterol (which deposits into blood vessels), but did not affect levels of so-called "good" cholesterol. The team found indications that capsaicinoids may reduce the size of deposits that already have formed in blood vessels, narrowing arteries in ways that can lead to heart attacks or strokes," Bosland said.

"The hotter the pepper, the higher the antioxidant level," according to Malena Pedermo, Metropolitan State College of Denver affiliate professor of nutrition and the American Dietetic Association's Latino Nutrition spokesperson.

Dr. David Heber and his University of California-Los Angeles colleagues, Bosland notes, "recently reported that obese patients on a low-calorie diet had their metabolic rates go up by adding chile peppers to their meals. They found obese patients taking the chile peppers burned, on average, an extra 80 calories a day, twice that of those taking a placebo."

Chiles have been helping us for thousands of years.

"The Aztecs used chile pepper to reduce tooth pain," said Bosland,

He had some exciting new research findings to announce at the 2013 Chile Pepper Institute's New Mexico Chile Leaders dinner.

NMSU Chile Pepper Institute researchers, working with researchers in South Korea, mapped the chile genome.

"We've now determined that the chile pepper has approximately 3.5 billion base pairs, which are the building blocks that make up the DNA double helix, compared to tomatoes, which have 950 million," Bosland announced. (We humans have a mere 3 billion, half a billion less than our chile amigos.)

Want to do some research of your own? Chow down as the new crop comes in.

If you'd like more information on the wonderful chile, visit the Chile Pepper Institute for Chile Education, from 8 a.m. to noon and 1 to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday in room 265 at NMSU's Gerald Thomas Hall at the corner of College and Knox streets. The institute offers information, seeds, posters, books, CDs, guides, research articles, chile plants, packaged chile food products, chile themes clothing and other merchandise. For information, call 575-646-3028 or visit online at chilepepperinstitute.org.

The NMSU/Doña Ana Cooperative Extension office, 530 N. Church St., offers free information, including pamphlets on making ristras, chile recipes, and chile cultivation and preservation. Hours are 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. For information, call 575-525-6649 or visit online at donaanaextension.nmsu.edu.

S. Derrickson Moore may be reached at 575-541-5450.