

# HOT HEADS

**F**ood has the power to soothe. But for chileheads—lovers of the fruit of the capsicum plant—the best comfort food causes discomfort. For chileheads, spiciness is next to godliness. Heat equals happiness. New Mexico is the epicenter of all things chile in America. Almost half of the U.S. chile pepper crop is grown in New Mexico, most in the Rio Grande Valley. When the crop is harvested each August, many New Mexicans make a pilgrimage to their favorite produce stands and buy an annual supply of roasted green chiles. They fill their freezers with bags of chiles so they can make *tellenos* and green-chile stew all year.



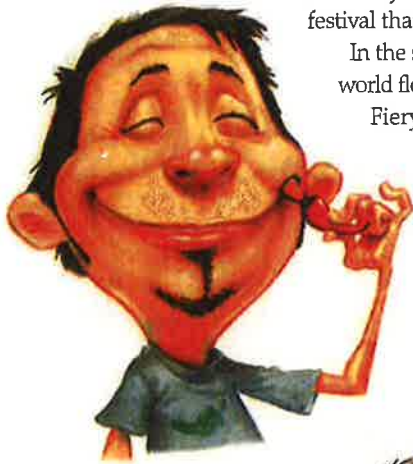
## CHILE CENTRAL

Hatch, a southern New Mexico farming town with fewer than 2,000 residents, has declared itself the Chile Capital of the World. And the claim isn't just hype; Hatch is surrounded by chile fields, and each

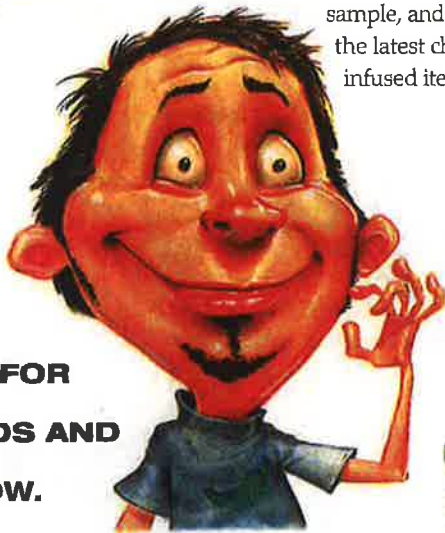
Labor Day weekend the town hosts a chile festival that draws thousands.

In the spring, chile lovers from around the world flock to Albuquerque for the National Fiery Foods and Barbecue Show. The three-day extravaganza, first organized nearly two decades ago by Dave DeWitt, an Albuquerque resident and author of more than 30 books on chiles and spicy foods, has become for chileheads what Memphis's Death Week is to Elvis fans. The show is a gathering point, a mecca for those who want to see,

sample, and buy the latest chile-infused items.



**IN THE SPRING, CHILE LOVERS FROM AROUND THE WORLD FLOCK TO ALBUQUERQUE FOR THE FIERY FOODS AND BARBECUE SHOW.**



Las Cruces is home to New Mexico State University's Chile Pepper Institute, a nonprofit education and research facility where the motto is Educating the World About Chiles. The institute has a teaching and demonstration garden with more than 150 varieties of chiles.

## SPICE OF LIFE

Chile is such a cultural fixture here in New Mexico that the official state question is "Red or green?" It's not a question of whether we want chile on our food, but which kind of chile we prefer. Immersed in this level of chile fanaticism, it's easy to forget that chilehead culture exists beyond our state's borders.

But chile is a global phenomenon.

The cuisine of India is laden with peppers, as are the foods of Israel, Central America, Southern Italy, regions of France and Africa, and a slew of countries in East Asia. People



GERBANT SMITH

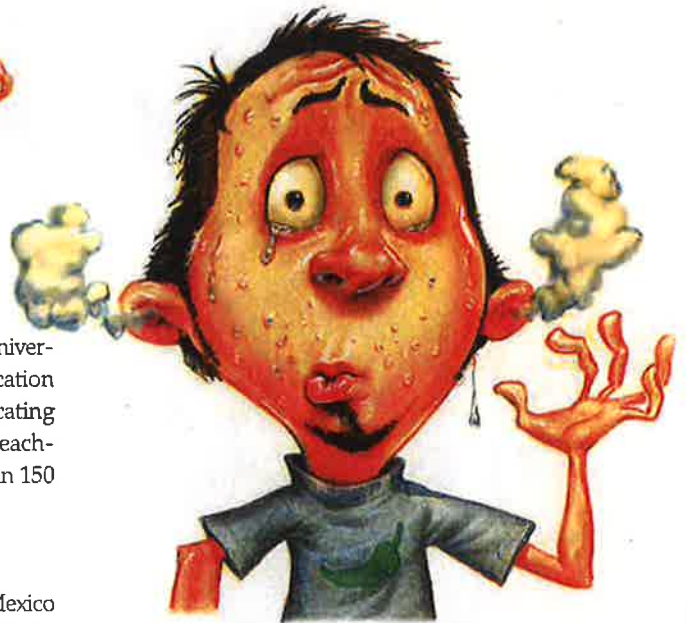
have been eating peppers throughout history. A fossilized chile pod was unearthed in the ruins of a 7,000-year-old Indian village in present day Peru, indicating mankind's love for heat dates to the Stone Age.

Despite the chile's ancient roots, America's fascination with this pepper was concentrated in the Southwest until a generation ago when the rest of the country discovered spice in the form of salsa. In his book *The Hot Sauce Bible*, chile guru DeWitt writes that U.S. sales of salsa increased by a whopping 79 percent between 1985 and 1990. By the early 1990s, sales (in dollars) of salsa surpassed those of ketchup.

Today, the average American eats almost six pounds of chile peppers per year, says the U.S. Department of Agriculture, an increase of 38 percent since 1995. Last year, the average American ate only 2.1 pounds of cauliflower and 3.3 pounds of peas.

## HOT TRENDS

So what's causing the "chilefication" of America? DeWitt contends America's increased taste for chile is a result of the nation's growing ethnic diversity, the availability of peppers and spices in mainstream supermarkets, and the increased interest in cooking as a hobby.



Technology has played a role, too, says DeWitt, who runs Fiery-Foods.com, a website visited by more than 2 million people each year. "The Internet has seen the biggest boom. You can find recipes and information [online] and you can buy chile products that might not be for sale locally."

Chile-related blogs are popping up on the Internet, giving chileheads a forum to review hot sauces and salsas, chat about chile-eating experiences, and share recipes and restaurant recommendations. One New York-based blog has about 300 registered

members from around the world who chat about chile on the site's message boards.

"I know that a habañero on average is roughly 300,000 to 500,000 Scoville units," wrote one member. "Does that mean you have to eat the entire habañero to get all 300,000 Scoville?" (A Scoville unit is a measure of heat in chiles. To give some perspective, a bell pepper measures zero Scoville units, whereas a jalapeño measures 2,500 to 5,000.) A chilehead from Indiana answered the question: "Eating a piece of a hab versus the whole hab is the difference between brushing the light socket and sticking your tongue into it."

Old-school chileheads live for the endorphin rush of heat, but the craze for finding the hottest sauce has subsided in recent years. "The novelty of sauce so hot it will blow Uncle Fred's head off is over," says DeWitt. There are now hot sauces on the market that are almost pure capsaicin, the natural compound in peppers that produces heat, so the quest for the biggest burn is history.

The latest trend among chileheads is sauces that combine exotic fruit with peppers, DeWitt says. "We're seeing a lot of papaya, mango, blackberry, and passion fruit." As chileheads have become more sophisticated, inventive food makers have looked to keep them interested by switching from heat to sweet. "Heat is easy," DeWitt says. "Anyone can make hot sauce. Flavor—complex flavor—is hard."

## FEEL THE BURN

Don't tell Tom Stepanski Jr. that the novelty of the hottest chile has worn off. This real estate broker drove nearly 10 hours from his home in Oklahoma City to attend the Fiery Foods show in Albuquerque last March. He came for heat, period.

"It's a physical feeling. I get a rush when I eat [chile]," said Stepanski, who wore a chile pepper-print Hawaiian shirt and towed a wheeled suitcase into which he put the bottles of chile-infused products he'd bought at the show.

Booths displayed items only a chilehead could love, such as chocolate-covered habañeros and chile-flavored sugar. Adventurous sorts drawn to humorous images of danger and suffering bought chile-themed T-shirts emblazoned with such slogans as Give Me Chile or Give Me Death and products with goofy, look-at-me names, including Salsa de la Muerte, Firecracker Glitter, and Betrayed Hot Sauce.

Stepanski showed off his latest load of condiments. He had green and red chile hot sauces and a few jars of salsa, but the Slap Ya Mama Cajun seafood seasoning he'd bought at a booth manned by a seller from Louisiana was his favorite purchase of the day. "It is so hot, it made me sweat," he said with a grin. "Look, I'm still sweating." (Continue the quest on next page.)



**The Hatch Valley Chile Festival** will be held in Hatch September 2-3, 2006. For information, call 267-5050 or visit [www.hatchchilefest.com](http://www.hatchchilefest.com).

**The National Fiery Foods and Barbecue Show** will be held in Albuquerque March 2-4, 2007. For information, call 873-8680 or visit [www.fiery-foods.com](http://www.fiery-foods.com).

**The Chile Pepper Institute at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces** is open to the public year-round. For information, call 646-3028 or visit [www.chilepepperinstitute.org](http://www.chilepepperinstitute.org). —L.P.





## A MATTER OF DEGREE

The National Fiery Foods and Barbecue Show in Albuquerque is a chance for the world to come to New Mexico to honor all things chile. Our writer, Leanne Potts, bought a sack of chile-infused products made in various places around North America and conducted a taste test with a native New Mexican and a transplant New Mexican. These two willingly sacrificed their tongues for your benefit, and picked their five favorite products from the show.

### EBESSE ZOZO HOT SAUCE, Medium

This habañero sauce is based on a recipe from the African nation of Togo. At the show, the company owner was dancing to African pop music blaring from an old-school boom box as he handed out samples. How could we not buy a bottle?



*Awassi, 509 W. Houston St., Nelson, British Columbia, Canada V1L 6C9; (250) 352-9441, www.awassi.net.*

**NATIVE:** Starts out smooth, with a smoky flavor that's complex and not too sweet. Not the hottest of sauces, but one of the most original and most flavorful.

**TRANSPLANT:** This stuff is fantastic! It's got heat, but it's also got a sophisticated flavor. And where can I get a fez like the one the company owner was wearing?



### FROG RANCH CHIPOTLE SALSA, Medium

This chunky salsa has a naturally smoky flavor from mesquite-smoked jalapeño peppers. *Frog Ranch, 5 S. High St., Glouster, OH 45732; (800) RIBBITT [742-2488]; www.frog ranch.com.*

**NATIVE:** It's a great salsa that makes no bones about being for the hardcore pepper lover. Its pepper mix is a nice change from standard tomato-based salsas.

**TRANSPLANT:** Mmmm, the smoky chiles stick to the taste buds.



### GATOR HAMMOCK HOG WALLOW, Hot

This tomato-based barbecue sauce is blended with mustard, maple syrup, honey, and sour orange juice.

*Gator Hammock Corp., 25 US Hwy. 29, Felda, FL 33930, (863) 675-0687; www.gatorhammock.com.*

**NATIVE:** Sweet as honey, but it brings some serious heat. Put this on pork and have a *matanza!*

**TRANSPLANT:** Sugary, but not in a Kraft Barbecue Sauce way. There's a sophisticated heat behind the sweet.



### PEPPERS BLUE CRAB SALSA, Zesty

This salsa is mixed with horseradish, chile, and chunks of blue crab meat.

*Peppers, 36445 Seaside Outlet Dr., Suite 1815, Rehoboth Beach, DE 19971; (800) 998-FIRE [3473]; www.peppers.com.*

**NATIVE:** The earthy flavor of the crab and the sweetness of the tomato make this one of the best salsas to go with chips. It starts off as a smooth seafood appetizer, and finishes as a hot salsa.

Very complex and long-lasting flavor. I couldn't get enough of the stuff.

**TRANSPLANT:** Forget the chips, I'd eat this stuff with a spoon!



### STRAWBERRY HORSE BITE

This horseradish-based cocktail sauce is spiked with the surprising taste of strawberry. *Klamath River Barbeque Company, PO Box 711, Montague, CA 96064; (530) 459-5629; klamathbbq@aol.com; www.bbqonline.net.*

**NATIVE:** Starts out fruity and finishes with a pop of heat. It clings to the shrimp, and it makes the best shrimp cocktail I've ever eaten.

**TRANSPLANT:** This is so fabulous. It reminds me of Red Hots candies—sweet, hot, and kinky. ☺



*LEANNE POTTS is a freelance writer who has spent 12 years in the Southwest desert, eating chile almost daily.*