

TRAVEL

Standard-Examiner

HOT, HOT, HOT!

From activities to cuisine, Las Cruces welcomes

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LAS CRUCES, N.M. — Green chili strips, chili soup, chili lasagna, chili margaritas and chili-tinis pepper the menus. Chili ristras, chili wreaths, chili earrings, chili trail mix, chili brittle and chili chocolate spice up the markets. There's even the Chile Pepper Institute, where I learn which pepper recently snatched the "world's hottest" title from the 1,001,304 SHU (Scoville heat unit) Bhut Jolokia.

Cravings for something spicy are amply satisfied in Las Cruces.

Chili peppers, the fruits of plants from the genus *Capsicum*, were brought to this part of southern New Mexico in the late 1500s by Spanish colonial expeditions. In Spain, chilies had become a culinary hit after explorers carried them back from the Caribbean. It's understandable, given their addictive qualities.

Seed packets, being lightweight, colorful and low-priced, make perfect souvenirs. The best selection is at the Chile Pepper Institute, south of downtown at New Mexico State University. In an office stuffed floor to ceiling with every imaginable chili-related item (fiery sauces, cookware, home decor, activewear, chili-shaped flash drives), I learn how to blister



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The Las Cruces Farmers and Crafts Market in New Mexico is a good place to find chile pepper-related foods and decor, such as these ristra wreaths.

peas and how braver cooks work with varieties dubbed "superhots" — they don safety goggles, gloves and long-sleeved shirts. If pepper comes into contact with skin, apply olive oil.

So what recently replaced the Bhut Jolokia (ghost pepper) as the world's hottest? The Trinidad Moruga Scorpion, whose golf-ball-size fruits register up to 2 million SHU, said researcher Danise Coon. "Within a half-hour, the capsaicin penetrated my gloves, burning my hands!"

To detect levels of capsaicinoids, the heat-creating compound, researchers use high-performance liquid chromatography, then convert the data to Scoville heat units.

Turns out that the world's largest chili pepper is a specimen of the "NuMex Big Jim"

developed at the university in 1976. Besides size, this variety boasts five times the flavor of your standard green chili. It's among 150 varieties — mild bells to superhots — in the institute's roadside demonstration garden.

By the way, chilies begin green, then turn red at maturity. And the famous Hatch chilies aren't a cultivar; they hail from Hatch, N.M., 40 miles north of Las Cruces.

After I buy packets of milder seeds such as NuMex Primavera (a flavorful lower-heat jalapeno) and Poblano, I decide that it's time to sate the appetite stoked by all the pepper patter.

Chilies at the market

On my way downtown, a mammoth red chili pepper

appears in front of a motel. The Big Chile Inn's 47-foot concrete pod weighs 50,000 pounds.

But there's more fun ahead with the farmers and crafts market jamming Main Street. Voted America's Favorite Farmers Market in a 2011 American Farmland Trust survey, the year-round Wednesday and Saturday event boasts about 150 booths displaying pottery, gemstones, pecans (another Las Cruces heritage food), organic greens, artisan breads — and chili-centric wares. Ristras thick with red dried chili pods, chili pepper wreaths, sculptures, salsas, fresh-ground spices, candies. Chili pepper trail mix quiets my hunger as I pet shoppers' dogs and cadge recipes for green chili hummus and chili/

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black-eyed pea salsa.

I also gather recommendations for a chili pepper fix. Christmas (red and green) chili enchiladas at Nellie's and Chilitos, the Bean's chili stew, "Corked Bat" pecan-crusted chili strips at The Game sports bar, even green chili pizza (heavens, on a New York-style pie?) at Zeffiro.

I choose De La Vega's Pecan Grill & Brewery after hearing about its Hatch chili teasers, chili pastas made with local-grown ingredients and craft green chili ale infused with whole chilis. The latter has a sweet malt aroma with vegetal notes and hints of heat. Delicious, though my favorite's the pecan ale.

Another diner shares a tip: Local St. Clair Winery sells a Hatch Green Chile wine, a semi-sweet with roasted chili aroma and spicy finish. Winemaking here started in the 1600s, when Franciscan monks planted vines nurtured by the warm, sunny days and cool nights.

Deserts and dunes

Las Cruces is surrounded by places to work off chili-infused feasts. Wispy morning breezes ruffle the sand during my trek in a mountain-edged, cactus-studded pocket of the Chihuahuan Desert. In the afternoon, I thread through dusty foothills of the Organ Mountains, named for rugged spires that resemble organ pipes. At Dripping Springs Natural Area, which hugs the mountains' west side, I spot Indian paintbrush, Mexican buckeye, alligator juniper, desert willow and ocotillo, a delicate waterfall and the remains of a century-old spa. Remarkably, the only other people here are two rock climbers attempting a vertical ascent by the namesake springs.

A drive northeast of town leads to White Sands National Monument, which is billed as the world's largest gypsum dune field at 275 square miles. (Yes, the adjacent White Sands Missile Range as the site of the world's first atomic-bomb explosion, but nowadays the park is used during brief tests in the range.) One marked loop winds around treetops of a wood whose trunks ex-

tend deep into the sparkling sand and sumac that spills over wind-sculpted pedestals like randomly tossed Andy Warhol wigs. The dunes, rippled wavelike by breezes, are imprinted with tracks from kit foxes and pocket mice. The latter evolved white coats to survive intense sun and hungry predators, one of many curiosities revealed at the visitor center's gallery, which mimics a trail.

Using a \$10 plastic saucer from the gift shop, I go dunesledding. Even belly-down, it's slow-motion compared with snow, but you don't get cold or wet. Eventually I stand on the saucer to surf ... at turtle speed. This sport's challenge comes in the repeated climbs up the dune, when your leg muscles burn.

Historic Mesilla

I refuel in Mesilla, just south of Las Cruces, at an old-timey gas station converted into the Bean. The walls vibrate with wild paintings by local artists, but the diners remain intensely focused on their plates. Everything's made in-house, including the bread. My saucy, vegetable-chunked chili-dilla nicely balances flavor and heat.

Energized, I walk the narrow avenues of historic Mesilla, a well-preserved Old West town where Billy the Kid stood trial in 1881. (The town's Gadsden Museum displays the outlaw's jail cell.) Mesilla resembles a colorized Western staged for shopping rather than shootouts. Once the site of a stagecoach stop, gunfights and "necktie parties" — public hangings — Mesilla Plaza now hosts tamer events such as craft markets and historical reenactments. It's ringed by cheerily cluttered shops selling silver, gemstones, kachina dolls, chimes and, of course, chili goods.

Festive sample bowls form a tasty circuit around Solamente de Mesilla's cactus jams, "frog" (fig-raspberry-orange-ginger) salsa, red-and-green chili powder and chili-shaped tchotchkes.

The chili-spiced dark chocolate-covered pecans would make a perfect gift — if only they didn't pair so well with Wild West Express-O at nearby Billy the Kid Gift Shop.

Which suggests another reason seed packets make the ideal souvenirs: I can't eat them.