

In Las Cruces, it's all about the chile pepper

By Robin Soslow, For the Washington Post

Updated 3:25 pm, Friday, May 31, 2013



The Las Cruces Farmers and Crafts Market is a good place to find chile-related foods and décor, such as these ristras. Photo: Robin Soslow / For The Washington Post

Green chile strips, chile soup, chile lasagna, chile margaritas and chile-tinis pepper the menus. Chile ristras, chile wreaths, chile earrings, chile trail mix, chile brittle and chile 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.

Chile 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, chiles had become a culinary hit after explorers carried them back from

the Caribbean. 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 chile-related item (fiery sauces, cookware, home décor, activewear, chile-shaped flash drives), I learn how to blister pods 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 chile 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 chile. It's among 150 varieties, mild bells to superhots, in the institute's roadside demonstration garden. By the way, chiles begin green, then turn red at maturity. And the famous Hatch chiles 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.

On my way downtown, a mammoth red chile 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 chile-centric wares. Ristras thick with dried, red chile pods, chile pepper wreaths, sculptures, salsas, fresh-ground spices, candies. Chile pepper trail mix quiets my hunger as I pet shoppers' dogs and cadge recipes for green chile hummus and chile/black-eyed pea salsa.

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

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

Las Cruces is surrounded by places to work off chile-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.

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](#) was the site of the world's first atomic-bomb explosion, but nowadays the park is closed during brief tests at the range.) 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.

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 chile-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 re-enactments. It's ringed by cheerily cluttered shops selling silver, gemstones, kachina dolls, chimes and, of course, chile goods.

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

The chile-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.

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