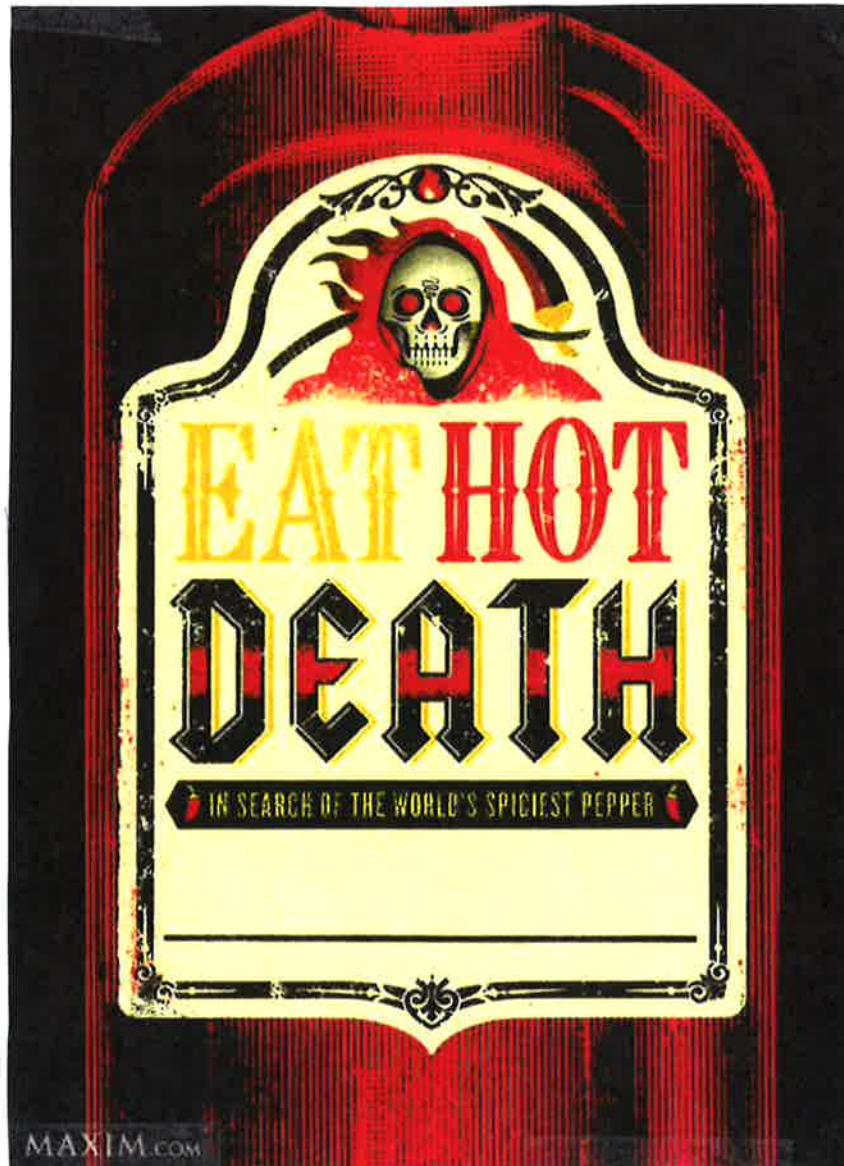


In Search Of the World's Spiciest Pepper

October 28, 2013

By: Steven Leckart



All hell just broke loose inside my mouth. My tongue is burning. My upper lip is stinging. My eyes are bloodshot. It's like being face-fucked by Satan himself. "There's no shame in throwing up, brother," says Ed Currie, a soft-spoken 50-year-old who fed me a new variety of superhot chili pepper he's developed called the Carolina Reaper.

Three minutes ago I popped the bright-red, gumball-size pepper into my mouth, chewed thoroughly, and swallowed. Without warning a numbness shoots through my right pinkie, then up into my biceps. Strangely, a mellow head rush sets in. My pupils dilate as a tear trickles down my cheek.

"It looks like you blew a blood vessel in your eye!" says Currie.

We're at ZestFest Midwest, a fiery-foods show in Columbus, Ohio, where Currie is selling sauces and snacks made by his PuckerButt Pepper Company. Outside the 5,000-capacity Ohio Expo Center, the parking lot is dotted with vanity plates: 2spicee, habanero, and saucy rv. Inside, an eclectic crowd of frat brothers, beer-bellied dads,

and silver-haired grannies walk the floor among die-hard "chiliheads" sporting pepper-patterned Hawaiian shirts and chili-themed tattoos.

Each year tens of thousands of chiliheads buy tickets to expos like this all across the U.S. to experience a plethora of sauces, glazes, jams, candies, and beef jerky with punishing heat levels and names like Instant Regret, Sudden Death, Edible Lava, Colon Blow, and Satan's Flaming Hemorrhoids. During ZestFest there will be a jalapeño-eating contest, a spicy-wing-eating contest, and an impromptu battle between Steve "the Machine" Smallwood and Chuck "the Biz" Cook, two thirtysomething pro pepper eaters who each finish 10 superhots in under two minutes.

Like connoisseurs of craft beer, fine wine, and "medicinal" marijuana, pepper people talk shop with a geeky enthusiasm and specificity: There are flavor profiles, experimental strains, and body highs like the one I'm getting from that furious little Reaper.



"I've had about 25 today. I'm high as a kite, brother!" laughs Currie. "More dopamine receptors get filled than using morphine or heroin. It's mean stuff."

Today at ZestFest, 19 showgoers will attempt to eat an entire Carolina Reaper; 17 will vomit. After 20 minutes, I too exorcise my demon. I'm told the next probable side effects include ring sting, "fire-rhea," and capsaicin cramps, named for the chemical compound that produces a pepper's heat. (Capsaicin is used to manufacture everything from pepper spray and arthritis cream to anti-barnacle nautical paint.) The higher a pepper's capsaicin concentration, the higher its heat rating on the Scoville scale. Jalapeños peak at 10,000 Scoville heat units (SHU); the hottest habaneros hit 350,000; anything classified as superhot, like the Carolina Reaper, must register above one million.

To date only six superhots have been discovered. The first was the Ghost Pepper (a.k.a. the Bhut Jolokia), which didn't become widely known until 2007, when its 1.001 million SHU rating landed it in Guinness World Records. From 2007 to 2012, Guinness fielded 25 different claims of "world's hottest."

Since 2012 several new contenders have cropped up, including hybrids like the Jigsaw, Infinity X, and the Carolina Reaper. The most hyped of these is the Trinidad Moruga Scorpion, which became the first pepper to break the two million SHU mark last year, shattering the record of 1.4637 million set by the Butch T. Scorpion pepper in 2011. Nevertheless, Guinness has not changed its record book.

The race to grow the next "world's hottest pepper" has ignited a heated debate among chiliheads, one that raises deep questions about science, ethics, and honor. Economics aren't the only incentive, but that's a big part of it. Hot sauce is one of the 10 fastest-growing industries in the U.S.—worth an estimated \$1 billion. Claiming the record can make or break a new product. After the Naga Viper took the title in 2010, its grower says he made \$40,000 in one month selling sauces and seeds.

"It's critical for Ed to get that record," says John "CaJohn" Hard, the CEO of CaJohns Fiery Foods. "But there are educated chiliheads who doubt his pepper is different from anything else out there."



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Which is to say, I didn't travel to Columbus just to burn my face off. I came here to meet the men vying for the throne.

So tell me about this stash," says Guns n' Roses guitarist Ron "Bumblefoot" Thal. It's 11 p.m. on Saturday, and Thal has just walked into Currie's hotel room with Brimstone, the professional wrestler. They're in town to promote their branded sauces at ZestFest.

Currie is holding a gallon-size Ziploc filled with red, yellow, orange, and dark purple superhots you can't buy anywhere. Most of them don't even have names, just cryptic labels like HP26. Currie says many of his "unstable strains" are testing way hotter than the current Guinness record. Nevertheless, he won't release numbers until the crossbreeds reach stability, meaning that their seeds will reliably grow matching offspring. (Stability takes seven generations, a minimum of three and a half years.)

Currie does have one tentative name for his HP48 strain: Death. In his YouTube review, Ted "the Fire-Breathing Idiot," a bald 39-year-old with an uncanny tolerance for pepper pain, simply said, "Never again."

As Thal takes teeny bites of the frankenpeppers, Currie turns to me and grins. "When in your life did you think you were gonna be sitting with a wrestling star, a rock star, and a

mad scientist?" A similar question could be asked of him.

Growing up in Michigan, Currie was a bit of a prodigy. In elementary school, he took high school classes, and by 14 he'd taught himself how to cook LSD in the school chemistry lab. "That was the '70s, brother," laughs Currie. "There were the freaks and the jocks. I was a freak, man!"



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By the 1990s he'd settled down with a wife, a job in finance, and a condo in Rochester Hills, Michigan, where he kept a modest backyard pepper garden. On paper life was good, but in reality Currie was in trouble: He weighed 360 pounds, drank heavily, and frequently cut work. His marriage imploded.

Then one night during a blizzard, Currie was alone at home, naked, when the door blew open and an angel appeared. "You need to go to Brighton Hospital," the angel said. "Where's Brighton Hospital?" Currie murmured in shock as the angel turned around and left.

When Currie looked it up, he discovered Brighton is a rehab facility. He checked in, cleaned up, and focused on his health. As he dropped down to 160 pounds, he pondered his family history of heart disease and cancer. He'd read that indigenous cultures along the equator have far lower rates of both conditions, and Currie had a hunch this might be the result of their pepper-heavy diet. Through the years he'd collected notes but never pursued his theory seriously until 2002, when he crossed a Pakistani Naga with a red habanero.

"God gave me a gift," says Currie, who developed a special capsaicin-boosting nutrient regimen for his plants. "I can take a jalapeño and make it one million Scoville. But I can't make it repeat."

That wasn't the case for a new hybrid, the HP22B. After three years, Currie says, the seeds were growing hotter peppers without chemical assistance. He'd permanently altered their DNA.

In 2005 Currie began selecting seeds to stabilize the strain. But he wasn't posting in online forums, where hobbyists typically show off new hybrids, so when news of the HP22B first appeared in late 2011, the chilihead community went nuts. Just a few months earlier, the Butch T. had taken the Guinness record. Now here was an unknown grower with some mysterious new strain—and a claim of 1.5 million Scoville?!

Currie had no idea what was coming.

"Jim Duffy called me a liar on every Facebook forum out there and told me I'm not taking his crown," says Currie. "I'm doing it for the science. The only reason we're going after the record is because he pissed me off!"

Jim Duffy steps onto the field at San Diego's Petco Park and points to left field. The Padres are taking batting practice before tonight's game against the Phillies. Duffy's here to do some coaching. "I'm a little worried about them," confesses Luke Yoder, director of field operations, leading us through a door in the bullpen. In the bullpen is an 18'x6' garden with 18 pepper varieties.



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Yoder started growing exotic peppers at Petco Park in August 2012. Soon thereafter a few relief pitchers ended a dismal losing streak after eating some of the Black Cobras (50,000 SHU). Last May, when the team renovated its bullpen, the pitchers campaigned for more peppers. That's where Duffy came in.

Duffy, whose day job is as a welder, runs an online side business selling exotic pepper plants and seeds. He fantasizes that one Padre will try his hottest pepper, the Moruga Scorpion, and kick off a league-wide craze: "It'll frickin' light his ass up! And then they'll go on the road and they'll be telling that story," quips the fast-talking 53-year-old in his New York accent.

In 2008 Duffy supplied some of the seeds used by the Chile Pepper Institute (CPI) at New Mexico State University to conduct a study on superhots. The results rocked the chilihead world: One Moruga Scorpion hit 2.009231 million SHU.

In February 2012 the CPI issued a press release declaring it the "hottest pepper on the planet." The news got picked up by the Associated Press, *USA Today*, and CBS.

Duffy made \$10,000 in two days selling Moruga seeds to frenzied chiliheads. The CPI submitted its results to Guinness, which asked for more data verified by an impartial third party. It didn't matter. Record or not, Duffy's business kept booming. "Only thing that makes more money than selling seeds is illicit narcotics and fireworks," says Duffy, who's also peddled time shares, vitamins, and exotic reptiles.

By the end of 2012, Duffy had grossed \$220,000—four times his annual welder's salary. But just as he was posting record profits, hype for Currie's Carolina Reaper began building. Duffy went on the defensive.

"Is it truly a new variety?" Duffy asked in a 1,094-word takedown of the Reaper, citing Currie's techniques to chemically "juice" his peppers.

"The answer is no."



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Currie hopped online to introduce himself and emphasize his goal of furthering cancer research. He and Duffy agreed to bury the hatchet. Still, Currie didn't take too kindly to being called a liar. Since he'd already committed thousands of dollars to nabbing the record, he vowed to go on.

Duffy stands by his point: The playing field isn't level. To some the Carolina Reaper is nothing more than a Barry Bonds. "Steroids in baseball is a perfect example. Is it fair?" says Hard, who manufactures CaJohns sauces with Carolina Reapers and Moruga Scorpions.

"No, it's not. It's just not natural."

Measuring capsaicin is a simple, exact science. The pepper is dehydrated, ground down, mixed into a solvent, and then run through a four-foot-tall machine that measures the number of capsaicinoids per million. Plugging that total into a formula determines a Scoville rating.

What's less simple is agreeing on what constitutes the hottest pepper.

Peppers are the result of nature and nurture. The amounts of sunshine, humidity, moisture, and, yes, nutrients all contribute. But pick two jalapeños off the exact same plant at the exact same time and there's little chance they've got the same amount of capsaicin.

Duffy's Moruga Scorpion that registered above two million SHU? It was an outlier—one superhot pepper out of 100 Moruga Scorpions that averaged 1.207764 million.

"Anybody can get a peak," says Currie. "That's whose swinging dick is bigger. Good science doesn't report anomalies."

Currie says he has Reaper data showing an average of 1.52 million but that Guinness keeps moving the goalposts.

"As we receive more and more applications and more records are verified, our guidelines must be adjusted to accommodate new information and technology," says Sara Wilcox, a PR and marketing executive with Guinness.

Nothing better encapsulates the complicated friendship between Currie and Duffy than an old adage: "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." Feeling dicked over by Guinness has helped them bond. At ZestFest I watch these two onetime rivals hug and cheerily dine together in the restaurant of our hotel. They're even doing business: Duffy signed a deal to become one of Currie's four licensed growers of the Carolina Reaper.

It's the final hours of ZestFest, and I'm holding a Moruga Scorpion the size of a golf ball. Yesterday, after barfing up the Reaper, I promised Duffy I'd try one of his peppers.

At the time it seemed only fair. But late last night Currie told me a dark secret: Some growers use hypodermic needles to inject liquid capsaicin into peppers before giving them to reviewers, using a flavorless extract called Pure Evil that tests at 1.56 million SHU.

"Jim will tell you he doesn't want the record," I remembered Currie telling me. "He wants the record so bad, it's unbelievable."

Does that mean he'd also burn my face off with a doctored pepper? When I confront him, Duffy denies ever having laced peppers. As I sit down across from him and Currie, they each pull out cameras and begin filming. I bite into the Moruga and begin chewing. It's sweet. Perhaps sweeter than the Reaper. I can't decide, mainly because of the gnarly burning in my throat. It's ruthless. Worse than the Reaper? Kind of. Mostly, it's just...different. Every time I breathe, it hurts.

Ten minutes in and there's no numbing in my hand. Zero tingling. And I don't feel any urge to vomit. I do get a head rush, but it's not as intense as what I felt with the Reaper.



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Aha! The Reaper wins!

Not necessarily. Duffy and Currie remind me that one species of pepper grown in San Diego versus South Carolina isn't a fair comparison. Ultimately, the CPI will settle the debate. Last summer it planted Reaper seeds alongside the same five superhots from its 2012 study, including the Moruga Scorpion. In January 2014, the CPI will have results.

For now the question lingers. Will the Reaper seize the Guinness record? Or at least trump the Moruga? "Some people live in a fantasy world," Duffy says of Currie. "Is that the case? I guess we'll find out."

For now my gut tells me that the Reaper had more capsaicin. But that's totally subjective. I'm not a machine. I'm just another dude with indigestion, and an escalating case of ring-sting.