

New Mexico green chiles headed to Bay Area

Tilde Herrera, Special to The Chronicle
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His cravings for New Mexico green chile began when he attended college in Santa Fe.

Trevor Logan relocated to San Francisco but the cravings followed him and his friends, a group of New Mexico transplants who'd return from visits with green chile tucked in their suitcases.

Logan's quest to find a green chile source led him to open Green Chile Kitchen in San Francisco, but local enthusiasts won't have to go to such extremes to get their fix. New Mexico green chiles should hit Bay Area stores, including Bristol Farms in San Francisco and some Nob Hill Foods, Raley's, Safeways and Whole Foods, in the coming weeks, if they haven't already made an appearance. Green Chile Kitchen also sells them in 5-pound blocks, roasted, peeled and frozen.

Look like anaheims

New Mexico green chiles resemble Anaheims, but their flavor and heat have captivated many who, like Logan, go to great lengths to find them. Once they do, the challenges are simple: How many pounds should they buy? Do they have enough space in their freezer?

"The fresh green chile is coveted by expatriates all over the world," says James Ditmore, international marketing specialist with the New Mexico Department of Agriculture. "They do not care how much it costs to get it."

New Mexicans add green chile to everything.

"It's used on eggs at breakfast, burritos at lunch and enchiladas at dinner," says Paul Bosland, director of New Mexico State University's Chile Pepper Institute.

"It's used at every meal, and we even have some people who are sticking it in wine and beer. I don't know if that's a good use of chile, but we do have people doing that."

Its short season in August and September marks what cookbook author Cheryl Jamison calls "the most fragrant time of the year." People line up on street corners to collect their annual supply near large metal roasters.

"You could smell the green chile throughout the city," says executive sous chef Justin Baade of Waterbar in San Francisco, who grew up in Albuquerque. "It's one of my earliest food memories."

Fruit, veggie, spice

Chile is the state vegetable, but is really a fruit while on the plant, a vegetable after picked, and a spice once dried. Chiles are either plucked green or allowed to mature before they're dehydrated, sold as pods or ground into powder. Both are made into sauces, inspiring the official state question: Green or red?

About 2,400 U.S. stores will sell green chiles this year as part of a state of New Mexico campaign. Ditmore emphasizes the chiles' flavor, rather than heat, but for Jamison, the marriage of the two is the chiles' most endearing quality.

"The taste of it is so purely of the earth, the terroir," Jamison says. "It's such a beautiful combination of flavor and heat. Rarely do you have that in a chile."

NMSU researcher Fabian Garcia developed the New Mexico chile pod family by intercrossing negro, colorado and pasilla chiles in the 1880s. A smitten cowboy took the seeds to California where they were named Anaheim, after the location where they were grown.

Anaheims lack the punch and character found in their New Mexico cousins due to the unique terroir, including soil and weather.

"If they are stressed for any reason, they get hotter, so you can grow the same variety in a coastal region versus New Mexico and that same variety will be a little milder," Bosland says.

High in antioxidants

Capsaicinoids, the chemicals in chiles that cause the heat sensation, also boost the immune system and are said to trigger the production of endorphins, causing the "runners high" effect. Chiles are also high in antioxidants, fiber and vitamins - one medium green chile contains as much as six times the vitamin C of an orange, Bosland says.

New Mexico green chiles have a unique heat profile. "It comes on not real fast, but not delayed, and it'll linger somewhere in the mid-range," Bosland says. "It's broad, mid-palate, and of course, depending on the cultivar, it could be mild, medium or hot."

The chiles grown in the Hatch region of southern New Mexico are revered but somewhat misunderstood and, at times, misrepresented.

"It's really been the biggest thing we're trying to clarify with our company," says Chris Biad, owner of Biad Chili Products. "You have the New Mexico chile, then you have what's famous and popular, the Hatch chile; but there really is no such thing as a Hatch chile, per se. It's just chile varieties that are grown in Hatch."

Farmer Jimmy Lytle worries some are taking advantage of the Hatch name.

"What's happening is a lot of these guys from Mexico and other places are calling them Hatch, but they're not," says Lytle, whose father first grew the Big Jim variety and inspired its name. "It's kind of a black eye for us here in Hatch."

Other industry challenges include offshore competition and shrinking acreage. New Mexico farmers harvested 72,700 tons of chiles on 12,300 acres in 2009, a 35 percent decline in acreage since 2000, and a far cry from 1992, when acreage reached 34,500.

Key to cuisine

Difficulties aside, chile never fails to give New Mexicans a sense of place, says Nicole Ammerman of the Santa Fe School of Cooking. "Our whole cuisine was founded on chile, corn, beans and squash. We take a lot of pride in those things."

Logan chose his restaurant name because he believes green chile is the most distinctive hallmark of New Mexican food.

"There is something about the farming of them, the roasting of them, and how it unites families and the culture that is just magical."

Using green chiles

How to choose: Choose chiles that are heavy, smooth and crisp, without any soft spots, bruises or signs of mold. Avoid misshapen chiles in favor of symmetrical chiles that will blister evenly.

Roasting: Chiles are roasted over a direct heat source to blister and remove their thick skin, such as an open flame or broiler. Roasted chiles should be refrigerated within two hours of exposure to heat, and used or frozen within three days, but the sooner the better.

To grill: Place chiles on grill roughly 5-6 inches from coals or flame. Carefully turn chiles often to ensure skin blisters evenly on all sides.

To broil: Pierce chiles to allow steam to escape. Place rack about 6 inches from the heating element. Broil for 6-8 minutes, keeping door open to monitor chiles and turning them often so skin blisters on all sides.

On the stovetop: Pierce chiles to allow steam to escape. Put chiles on a wire mesh set over a hot electric or gas burner. Carefully turn chiles often to ensure skin blisters evenly on all sides.

After roasting: Let chiles sweat in a paper or plastic bag for five minutes. Put on gloves and give the chiles a wipe with a towel before pulling away remaining skin. A sharp knife or vegetable peeler can be used for areas where the skin didn't blister. Some advise avoiding using water to clean chiles because you'll wash away important flavor and oils.

Remove seeds and inner ribs with finger or a knife, taking care to keep chile intact if you plan to make rellenos.

How to store: You do not have to peel chiles if you plan to freeze them; some say the skin comes off easier once it is thawed. To freeze, cool chiles completely and add to heavy plastic freezer bags, squeeze out the air and lay flat in the freezer. Do not over-stack chiles in order to cool and freeze them as quickly as possible. Chiles can be stored in the freezer for up to 12 months.

How to use: Roasted and cleaned green chiles often aren't subjected to additional cooking - they are simply added to burgers, sandwiches and wrapped into tortillas, or chopped and used as a condiment. If you cook it, don't overdo it; my Aunt Viola Herrera believes green chiles are delicate, and she only adds them to stews and sauces during the last 10-20 minutes of cooking.

The flavor doesn't need a lot to shine, maybe just a little garlic, onion and salt. "What I always say in the restaurant is don't mess with it," says George Gundrey, owner of Santa Fe's Atrisco Cafe and Bar. "Green chile is about the flavor of the chile."

Sources: New Mexico State University, Santa Fe School of Cooking

Green chile pork stew

Serves 4

There are many variations of this famous dish, but this is a chunky one; add a little broth, if you like. Although it's not traditional, you may want to serve some sour cream on the side if the dish turns out very spicy.

- 1 tablespoon canola oil + additional, if needed
- 2 tablespoons flour
- 1 tablespoon kosher salt
- 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper,
- 1 1/4 pounds boneless pork shoulder, cut in 1/2- to 3/4-inch cubes
- 1/2 medium white onion, diced
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 4 cups low-sodium chicken broth
- 1 pound waxy potatoes, peeled and diced into 1/2-inch cubes
- 3 cups roasted, peeled and chopped New Mexico green chiles

Instructions: Add 1 tablespoon oil to a Dutch oven or other large heavy-bottom pot, and heat over medium-high heat. Combine flour, salt and pepper in a bowl. Add pork cubes and toss until lightly coated.

When the oil is hot, add half of the pork in a single layer, without crowding. Cook, undisturbed, until pork takes on a heavy sear, about 2-3 minutes. Turn and cook an additional 2-3 minutes. Use a slotted spoon to transfer the pork to a plate. Repeat with remaining pork.

Add onions and garlic to the oil remaining in the pot, adding more oil if the pot is dry. Season with a pinch of salt and pepper, and saute until onions are translucent.

Pour in 1 cup of chicken broth, bring to a boil, and scrape the bottom of the pot to remove the browned bits stuck to the bottom. Once all the bits have been incorporated, add the meat and remaining broth. Bring to a boil, reduce to a simmer, and cover and cook for about 30 minutes or until the meat can be easily pierced with a fork. Stir occasionally.

Add the potatoes, return heat to a simmer and cook for about 10 minutes. Add chiles and simmer, gently, about 5-10 minutes, until potatoes are tender. Serve with flour tortillas or crusty bread.

Per serving: 526 calories, 36 g protein, 40 g carbohydrate, 26 g fat (8 g saturated), 99 mg cholesterol, 967 mg sodium, 4 g fiber.

Wine pairing: Beer is a no-brainer, but you could also try the 2009 Fetzer California Gewurztraminer (\$9), which has some sweetness to quell the chile heat.

Homestyle green chile chicken enchiladas

Serves 8-12

San Francisco's Green Chile Kitchen owner Trevor Logan says this dish helped him "build the business." The sauce, which can be made 1 or 2 days ahead, can also be used to garnish meats or added to eggs or burritos. If you want more texture, fry the tortillas briefly in hot oil to crisp them before assembling the dish.

- Green chile sauce
- 3 tablespoons canola or vegetable oil
- 1 small onion, chopped
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 3 tablespoons flour
- 3 cups low-sodium chicken broth
- 3 cups roasted, peeled and chopped green chiles (see Note)
- -- Kosher salt
- Assembly
- 18 corn tortillas
- 1 poached or rotisserie chicken (about 3 pounds), skin and bones removed, meat chopped
- 1 pound shredded Monterey Jack cheese

For the sauce: Pour oil into a saucepan, and heat over medium heat. Add onions and garlic and saute until soft, about 5 minutes. Add the flour, stir to combine and cook briefly. Whisk in the broth slowly to ensure no lumps. Add the chile. Bring to a boil, cover and simmer over low heat for 10-15 minutes. If the sauce seems too runny, add a little more flour or simmer longer to thicken. Season to taste with salt. If made ahead, cover and refrigerate until ready to use.

To assemble: Preheat the oven to 325°. Pour the sauce into a wide shallow bowl or pie pan. Ladle some sauce onto the bottom of a 9- by 13-inch baking dish, then dip 6 tortillas into the sauce and arrange them on the bottom of the dish.

Top the tortillas with half the chopped chicken, 1/3 of the sauce and 1/3 of the shredded cheese. Dip another 6 tortillas into the sauce, then lay on top of the cheese. Top with the remaining chicken, then 1/3 of the sauce and 1/3 of the shredded cheese. Dip remaining 6 tortillas in the sauce, and lay on top of the cheese. Top with the remaining sauce and cheese.

Cover the dish with aluminum foil and bake for 30-40 minutes, until bubbly. If you'd like a crust, remove the foil and broil briefly until the cheese topping turns golden brown.

Note: Use fresh roasted chiles, or frozen or canned ones.

Per serving: 396 calories, 31 g protein, 20 g carbohydrate, 22 g fat (9 g saturated), 89 mg cholesterol, 316 mg sodium, 2 g fiber.

Wine pairing: Try the 2009 Vina Torres Esmerelda Catalunya Moscato-Gewurztraminer (\$16).

Tilde Herrera is a journalist living in San Francisco. Her family is originally from the Taos region of New Mexico.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2010/08/22/FDM61ERI3B.DTL>

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