

Las Cruces Style

New Mexico chile: It's all love, all the time



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LAS CRUCES - With apologies to Alfred, Lord Tennyson and his poem about love and spring, February is the month when my fancy lightly turns to thoughts of chile

peppers.

There's a lot of competition for my passionate and engaged attention: For the Love of Art Month (FLAM) and lots of birthday fiestas for my Aquarius and Pisces friends and me. Then there's Valentine's Day, Clyde Tombaugh/Pluto celebrations and every four years, the Anthony, Texas/N.M. Leap Year Birthday Bash, one of my all-time favorite inter-

nationally renowned little town fiestas.

I love it all, but if I am forced to pick a favorite, somehow the chiles always win out. The Chile Pepper Institute's (CPI) annual conference comes at just the right time, directly after I've gathered my tax info together in late January during my most dreaded weekend of the year, and following assembly of all the facts I can find to report about the ever-burgeoning FLAM festivities. I love FLAM a lot, but after all these years, I know that hard as we all try, somebody is going to feel left out or disappointed in the amount of coverage allotted to their particular passion.

After all the hard work, comes the CPI Conference in general, and the CPI Development Leadership Council Dinner in

particular.

I've been fortunate enough to be a guest for the past few years, and it's something I always make time for, even on a school night.

I've thought about what's become my favorite event in a month of spectacular fun, and this year I decided it's more than the endorphin rush of a capsaicin-loaded gourmet dinner with several courses, all of which involve some sort of delectable chile components.

I think it's because it exemplifies everything I love about Las Cruces, the enchanting blend of the crucial three As (arts, academia and agriculture). The event brings together all three ele-

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ments in synergistic and creative combos. There are farmers and growers and producers of great chile products from throughout the United States. Dr. Paul Bosland and his students and associates offer revelations from the worlds of science and applied agriculture.

We have learned about the hottest peppers, and chiles' use in medicine and haute cuisine. One year we heard about the successful mapping of the entire chile genome, with tantalizing indications that chiles might be right up there with cetaceans and humans in terms of intriguing complexities. (This was not an official pronouncement, I hasten to stress, but my own theory, perhaps influenced by chile-induced euphoric goodwill toward all of pepperkind.)

Then, of course, there's the food. John Hartley is an assistant professor of New Mexico State University's School of NMSU School of Hotel, Restaurant and Tourism, a chef, culinary lab manager and a chile pepper culinary artist. This year his creations included a savory, spicy squash soup, a Caesar salad with transcendent chile-grilled shrimp, a tender beef filet with a subtly nuanced pepper sauce, a delicate chile sorbet, and a chocolate mousse with a creamy topping that involved more peppery milagros.

I was too busy listening to the spicy dinner conversation and latest CPI news to remember to match specific peppers to each course, but I believe the stars included a few distinctive red and green

chiles, some jalapeños, and some ghost peppers (aka bhut jolokias).

In recent years, it's become increasingly clear that all the really cool kids at the table are more interested in the flavor profile of each pepper than macho competitions based on hotness for the sake of hotness.

It reminded me of my years among wine aficionados.

Chile appreciation has become an almost cosmic adventure in time and space. There are serious conversations about each pepper's initial, secondary and lingering impacts on the pallet, from a first burst of distinctive and sometimes very complex flavors to what can be a very subtle or 20 mule-team "kick." No matter how anticipated, that kick always seems to be a surprise and usually a delight.

Then there's that euphoria. That perfectly-legal-in-every-state, OK-to-drive-under-the-influence, chile endorphin rush. A runner's high without the marathon race. Joie de vivre and a sense of peace, love and goodwill for all humanity. And lots of vitamins and antioxidants and anti-carcinogens and heart-healthy perks.

How do we love thee, chile peppers? Let us begin to count the ways.

Our CPI February celebration is a lovely start to each year, knowing that there's so much more to look forward to: planting, harvest, roasting and discovering new ways to enjoy them all year around, for those of us blessed to live in the chile capital of the universe.

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