

# New Mexico State University's Chile Institute is a smokin' hot success

BY RACHEL CHRISTIANSEN

You may not need welding masks and gloves to eat some of the world's hottest chile, but it might be a good idea to always have a glass of milk handy.

Travelers to different corners of the world may come across what some would call the "hottest chile in the world." But can they prove it?

The folks at the Chile Pepper Institute at New Mexico State University sure can.

Since its inception in 1992, the Chile Pepper Institute has dedicated its mission to the education and scientific research of a delicacy very near and dear to the hearts of New Mexicans: the chile pepper.

"We're the ones who do the scientific testing and experiments so we can honestly and definitively say if something is hotter than something else," said Paul Bosland, director and co-founder of the Chile Pepper Institute.

In 2004, word came from across the ocean in Assam, India, that the hottest chile pepper, crowned the Bhut Jolokia, had been found.

"It was the first chile pepper to breach 1 million Scoville heat units," Bosland said. "Scoville heat units are how we measure the heat in the chiles, starting with the bell pepper – which is zero."

Compare that with the well-known habanero pepper – previously the hottest chile pepper on record – which reaches a mere 150,000 Scoville heat units.

In technical terms, the number of Scoville heat units measures the amount of capsaicin, the chemical compound in the nerve endings of chile.

Using proven scientific methods and extensive research, Bosland and his team of scientists proved the power of the Bhut Jolokia to the Guinness Book of World Records in 2006.



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Translated to mean the “ghost pepper,” Bosland said the locals of Assam dubbed the Bhut Jolokia this name because “it was so hot, you died, or ‘gave up your ghost.’”

Still not impressed? In 2011, the institute confirmed the rumored Trinidad Moruga Scorpion chile, from Trinidad, surpassed 2 million Scoville heat units, stealing the “world’s hottest” title from the Bhut Jolokia.

These peppers are so hot, they have been known to blister human skin upon contact. Where do these “super hot” come from?

“Most of these chile plants were just bred by backyard gardeners,” Bosland said. “People always ask if there is a hotter chile out there. I believe some day there will be, just not today.”

Worldwide members of the institute can keep in touch on “what’s hot” through email, web contact and

the institute’s new Facebook page.

With members in all 50 states, Puerto Rico, Guam and 12 different countries, the institute has made a name for itself by discerning one chile fact from another.

“Because we’re a research and public institute, it’s important for us to reach out and make as many relationships as possible,” said Wendy Hamilton, evaluation and accountability specialist.

In addition to the education and research of chile, the institute provides farmers with the seeds and the know-how to make the good stuff.

And it’s not just about the heat, it’s about the flavor. According to Bosland, who developed the “chile flavor wheel,” flavor is created when a specific heat profile combines with flavor components to

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“It’s a small town with big-city amenities. There’s not a lot of that hustle and bustle mentality, and the community support for businesses is fantastic.”

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give each chile pepper its unique flavor.

“Chile peppers are like wine – first you notice the difference in reds and whites, and then you start noticing subtle differences within the specific categories,” Bosland said.

The institute officially patented the moniker NuMex, a seal on chiles, onions and other varieties developed by the institution, guaranteeing consumers are buying the best of the best.

“We’re not only educating about chiles, but also NMSU’s role in establishing the chile industry in New Mexico as well as the United States,” Bosland said.

A trip to the institute, a hidden gem in the halls of NMSU’s agricultural and consumer science home in Gerald Thomas Hall, will transport you to a whole new world of chile.

In 2010, the institute landed on Rand McNally’s Road Atlas “Best of the Road” program.

According to program coordinator Danise Coon, the institute will soon be featured on the Star Destination tour company, making it a tourist stop for travelers, adventurers and of course, chile lovers.

The institute not only yields its own research, but a library of books – both for gardening and cooking – young chile plants, seeds and of course, NuMex green chile.

For the convenience of those daredevils who think there’s no such thing as “too hot,” the heat from both the jolokia and scorpion have been bottled and packaged in salsas, hot sauces and even brownies. ■

