

NEW MEXICO'S FAMOUS PEPPERS

Western art, wide open spaces and chile peppers are all part of any true New Mexico experience. In the "Land of Enchantment," this delectable commodity has become such a culinary staple that it is a key ingredient, whether the meal is breakfast, lunch or dinner. Whispered recipes are passed down by *tias* and *abuelas*, (aunts and grandmothers) as closely guarded family secrets, and touting as native chiles not raised on the sun-drenched farms of New Mexico has become a sin akin to blasphemy.

The state is even defensive about how the word is spelled. Danise Coon, Program Coordinator of the Chile Pepper Institute in Las Cruces, New Mexico, clarifies that in New Mexico **chile** refers to the "fruit" of the pepper plants while **chili** is the Texas dish which combines chiles with meat and beans.

In a variety of forms, chile peppers have been part of the human diet dating as far back as 7500 BC and were probably one of the first crops to be cultivated in central and South America. Columbus named the exotic plant "pepper" because the flavor of its spicy pods resembled that of black peppercorns. Imported to Europe, chiles were found by monks to be a good substitute for the tiny black seeds, which were so costly they were often used for currency. Today chiles are incorporated into local cuisines worldwide.

Red or green, the chile has a kaleidoscope of uses. Fresh green chiles are absolutely essential to Southwestern cuisine such as chile verde, chiles rellenos, and of course, chile con queso. Conversely, left on the plant, the dried chiles turn red and are ground into the powder which is the basis for taco and enchilada sauces and paprika. Strung and hung to dry, they become décor pieces known as *ristras*. More unusual uses include being added to boat paint to retard barnacles, and since birds do not detect the heat in chiles, the red ones are fed to flamingos in zoos to keep them pink.



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This mix of four of the five domesticated species shows the immense diversity in chile peppers. In addition, just one green pepper, hot or sweet, has as much Vitamin C as six oranges.



This is one of the research fields at the Chile Pepper Institute in Las Cruces, New Mexico. The farthest right row is covered in cloth to prevent cross-pollination and create true-to-type seeds. New Mexico also has more than 10 different Land Race chiles that have been grown in the different pueblos around the state for hundreds of years.

For years, the state of New Mexico has ranked as the nation's largest producer of chiles, harvesting some 66,600 tons valued at nearly \$48 million in 2010. To protect and enhance this valuable commodity, in 1992 New Mexico State University created The Chile Pepper Institute (CPI), a breeding and genetics program designed to create healthier and more disease resistant plants.

As a trivia aside, capsaicin, the chemical which gives the peppers their intensity, is measured in Scoville Heat Units (SHU), and in 2007 CPI co-founder and director Paul Bosland discovered the ghost pepper (bhut Jolokla) with a SHU rating of 1,464,700. It led to its listing in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the World's hottest pepper.

In fact, learning the how and why of chile production is such a unique opportunity that the CPI was named a "must see" destination in the *Rand McNally 2010 Road Atlas*. Located just south of Interstate 10 in the town of Las Cruces, facility tours



These are red and green Serrano chiles. Adding just one tablespoon of red chile provides your daily requirement of Vitamin A.

are available from the early growing season in mid-June through final harvest in late October. For more information call (575) 646-3028. ■

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Chocolate Chipotle Bars

Frequently served by the Museum's restaurant to guests. (Be sure and look for other special recipes in Dining on Persimmon Hill's new cookbook, appearing on the market this summer.)

Crust:

¼ cup flour
1 cup quick cooking oatmeal
1 cup packed light brown sugar
¼ teaspoon baking powder
¼ teaspoon baking soda
Pinch of salt
8 Tablespoons butter, melted and cooled
½ cup coarsely chopped salted roasted cashews
Mix flour, oatmeal, brown sugar, baking powder, baking soda and salt in bowl. Stir in melted butter and combine. Set ¼ cup mixture aside to use for topping. Press remaining mixture into greased 9" x 9" pan. Bake until lightly browned... about 6 minutes. Remove from oven and cool completely. Stir cashews into remaining mixture.

Filling:

½ cup flour
½ cup packed light brown sugar
1 Tablespoon instant espresso powder
½ teaspoon cinnamon
¼ teaspoon chipotle chili powder
½ teaspoon salt
12 ounces good quality baking chocolate bar, chopped
4 Tablespoons butter
3 eggs
Whisk flour, brown sugar, espresso, cinnamon, chipotle powder and salt in bowl. Melt chocolate and butter in microwave until smooth after stirring. Whisk in eggs; then stir in flour mixture. Pour filling over cooled crust. Sprinkle with reserved crumb mixture. Bake in 325 degree oven for about 30 minutes or until tests done with toothpick.

