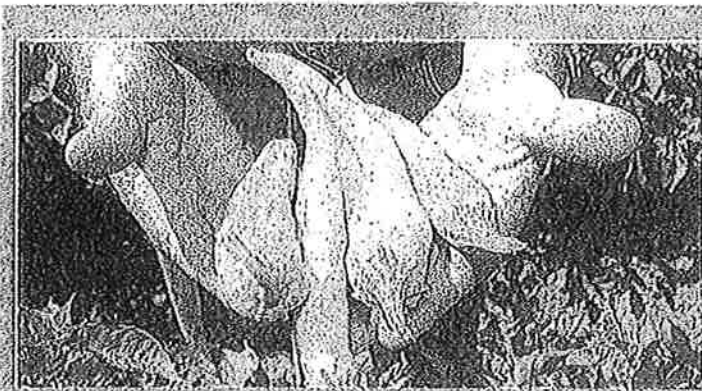


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From New Mexico growing conditions often difficult to get out of season, and because it is highly palatable, much of the imported (75 percent) comes from Mexico and some Central and South American countries.

RED, GREEN OR IMPORTED?

Locals Say N.M. Chile is the Best,
But More Is Coming From Outside U.S.

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Albuquerque Journal

BY RICK NATHANSON
Journal Staff Writer

The official state question "Red or Green?" should be accompanied by a second question: "Locally grown or foreign?"

Fifteen or 20 years ago, you might have been able to walk into a restaurant or grocery store in New Mexico and safely assume that fresh green or dried red chile products were grown here in New Mexico.

That's no longer the case. More than 80 percent of all chile currently consumed in the United States is imported,

according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Most fresh green chiles come from Mexico and some Central and South American countries, while the majority of dried red chile products come from India, China and other Asian countries.

There is no way to accurately track how much foreign chile is consumed in New Mexico, but a fair amount winds up here, says Carol Wight, chief executive officer of the New Mexico Restaurant Association.

"Most New Mexico restaurants try to use New Mexico grown chile, but I don't think there's enough grown in New Mexico to supply even all our restaurants," she says. And,

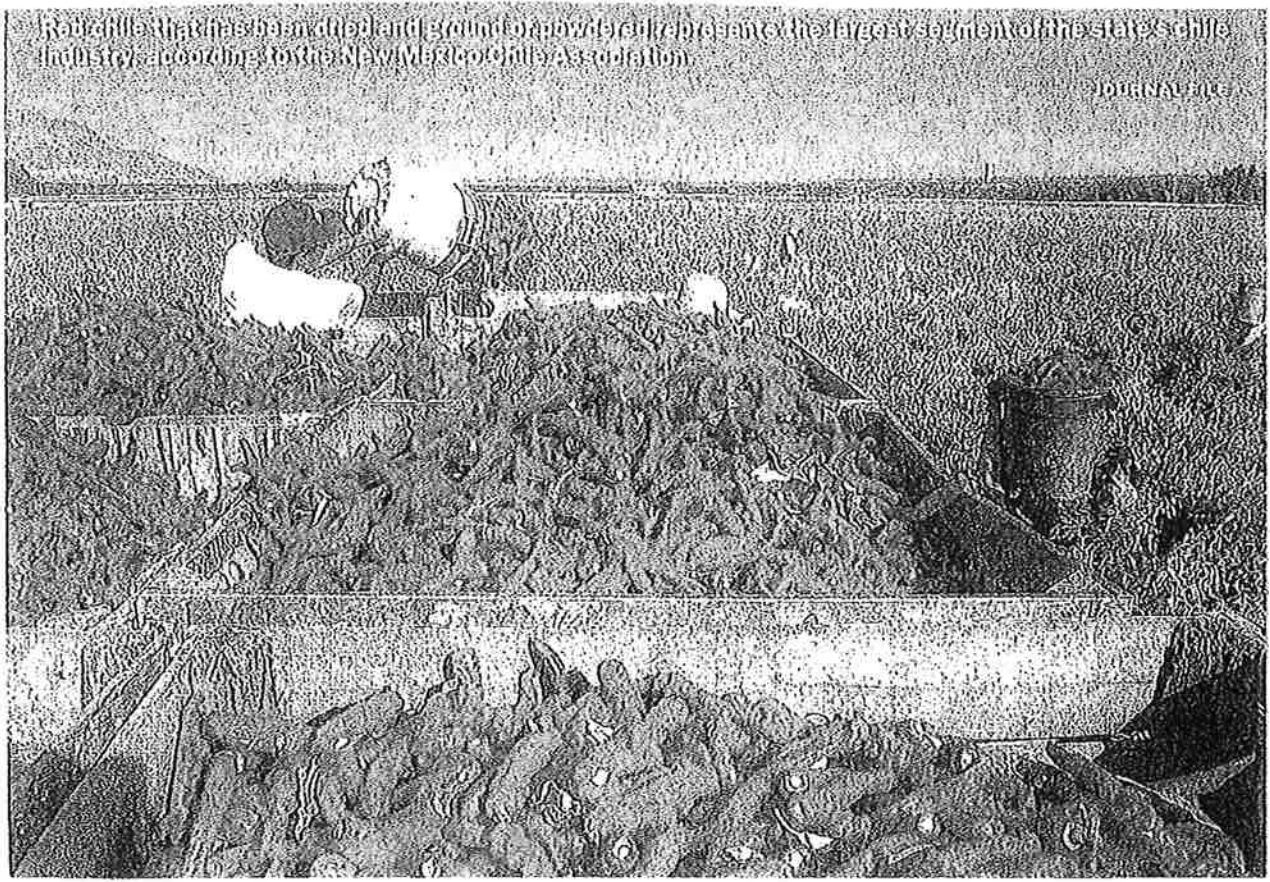
"green chile is seasonal so it's not always possible to get it from local sources out of season."

As for taste, New Mexico beats the competition hands down, says Danise Coon, program coordinator at the Chile Pepper Institute, New Mexico State University.

"It's our environment and soil and the way people grow them around here that makes them different, and the chiles we produce have been grown here for hundreds of years and have adapted to the climate," she says. Restaurants' "dishes won't taste the same if they're using chiles that are not from New Mexico."

Rainfall that has been reduced and ground now water-logged has caused the biggest segment of the state's cattle industry to go online to the National Cattle Association.

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More Chile From Outside The U.S.

Even as U.S. consumption of chile has been rising, New Mexico's chile acreage has been declining. The New Mexico Chile Association, a consortium of growers and processors, says planted acreage has dropped by 75 percent from its 1992 peak of about 35,000 acres to a 2010 low of 8,700 acres.

The industry made a slight comeback last year with 9,500 acres planted, says Dino Cervantes, president of the association and managing vice president of Cervantes Enterprises, a farming and chile processing business in La Mesa.

"If we eventually get back to half of where we were in the early '90s, that would be great, but ... we have some huge hurdles to overcome."

The biggest of them is a shrinking labor force and the cost of that labor, Cervantes says.

Chile has traditionally been harvested by hand, a job provided largely in the past by migrant farm workers from Mexico. Tightened border patrols and animosity surrounding immigration issues have shrunk the pool of migrant workers; meanwhile, U.S. workers haven't been inclined to do this kind of work, even in a bad economy and where the jobs pay more than minimum wage, he says.

"The labor force we do have is older and dwindling. We're seeing people in their late 50s and early 60s, and we don't see a lot of younger people moving in to take their place."

One thing that may revive the industry, Cervantes suggests, is increased mechanization.

The value of the state's chile crop last year was about \$46.8 million, up a little from 2010, according to Longino Bustillos, deputy director of the USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service in Las Cruces.

Because fresh green chile is highly perishable, it can't be shipped too far. That's why most imported green chile has been coming from Mexico, says Cervantes. Red chile that has been dried and ground or powdered represents the largest segment of the state's chile industry, he says.

So how can customers who prefer New Mexico chile be sure that's what they're getting in restaurants and stores?

Quite simply, read labels and ask. Buy products that clearly state New Mexico grown; and at restaurants, ask where the chiles come from. By doing these things, says Ana Baca, a vice president for Albuquerque-based Bueno Foods, a person "can be part of the solution to help save New Mexico's cultural heritage."

Bueno Foods buys all its chile products from New Mexico farmers, "because we believe New Mexico grown chile is the best in the world," she says.

Likewise, Jim Thomas, a co-owner of El Pinto Restaurant in Albuquerque, says the restaurant buys its chile from growers in Hatch, N.M.

"Customers who eat chiles from Mexico or China or India and then taste ours will immediately know the difference," he says. "You simply can not replicate the flavors of New Mexico chiles."