

Scientists build better, bolder chiles

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — Think the bold, sweet scent of roasting green chile is one of the best smells around? Well it's about to smell even better — and taste better too.

Researchers with New Mexico State University's Chile Pepper Institute in Las Cruces used seeds from a Colorado lab to develop two new chile varieties with improved flavor and aroma after essentially "cleaning up" two existing varieties popular with farmers and chile aficionados.

The new varieties — known as NuMex Heritage Big Jim and NuMex Heritage 6-4 — have five times the flavor and aroma of the varieties they were created from — the NuMex Big Jim and New Mexico 6-4.

Paul Bosland, professor of horticulture and director of the Chile Pepper Institute, said researchers created the new varieties because the old Big Jim and 6-4 varieties had "run out," losing their signature flavor after many growing seasons.

"Over the years they lost their identity. They're not true to type anymore. The chile the farmers were growing had a great look and disease resistance, but no taste," Bosland said. "In New Mexico, you have to have chile that tastes good."

And the varieties have had a long time to get mixed up.

New Mexico 6-4 was created in 1957 by Roy Harper. It was a less-hot version of a variety called New Mexico No. 6. The NuMex Big Jim was released by Roy Nakayama in 1975.

Bosland and his colleagues at the institute decided to get the varieties back to their old selves, so to speak.

In 2002, they obtained the original seed of both varieties, frozen in liquid nitrogen, from the USDA's National Seed Storage Lab in Fort Collins. From there, the researchers worked to create breeding lines for new varieties that would capture the original flavor of the chiles while making improvements to help farmers stay competitive.

"With these new guys . . . my mouth is watering just talking about them," said Danise Coon, the Chile Institute's program coordinator.