

The time is ripe for New Mexican green chile

The state's obsession with its pepper has crossed borders along with its expats.



Chiles are roasted at a festival sponsored by the University of New Mexico in 2012 in Ventura. (Ringo H.W. Chiu, For the Times / August 26, 2012)

By Kate Linthicum

September 25, 2013 | 4:44 p.m.

In New Mexico, you know autumn is coming when you smell the chile roasting.

The bitter aroma rises from street corners and grocery store parking lots, where spicy green peppers plucked during the September harvest are blistered to perfection in cages cranked over an open flame.

We buy them by the sack and put them in or on nearly everything we eat: burritos and tamales, of course, but also hamburgers, pizzas, pastas and pies.

When I left Albuquerque for college on the East Coast, it was the food back home that I missed as much as the family cat or the yawning desert sky. Each time I visited, my mom would have a pan of enchiladas waiting in the oven.

All families have their comfort food, and all regions have their trademark cuisine. But New Mexican green chile inspires a unique obsession, even among outsiders.

A colleague who vacations in Santa Fe recently told me that he views my home state "as one vast restaurant." Every trip, he ships a big box of chile back to Southern California.

The mania is most fervent among those of us who grew up on the stuff, who were told to sip green chile stew — not chicken soup — when we got sick. So when an art gallery in Echo Park announced it was hosting a green-chile potluck this month, the invitation quickly circulated among my expat friends.

The email from Ken Ehrlich, who was raised in Santa Fe and now teaches at CalArts, read like an artist's statement: "Elsewhere in the world, the passing of the seasons is marked by changes in the weather. In Los Angeles, we need ritual reminders that summer is turning into fall."

Ehrlich often collaborates with Machine Project, the art collective that hosted the potluck in its space just north of Sunset Boulevard. The gallery gave out chile and asked people to bring them back, cooked in dishes. He was there when I went to pick up my batch.

Immediately our conversation turned to food, which he said bonds New Mexicans together like a "weird tribal identity."

I asked his favorite dish.

"Green-chile stew with a tortilla and grated cheese on top," he said. "And also just enchiladas smothered in green chile. A giant plate. It comes out and it's just like, a big chile cheesy mess."

By the time I left, I was starving.

I was also curious: What makes our habit-forming peppers different from those you find in Southern California grocery stores? I dialed up the Chile Pepper Institute at New Mexico State University to find out.

Researcher Danise Coon said the variety I grew up on, known for its meaty texture and smoky flavor, was developed by a scientist named Fabian Garcia 100 years ago, specifically for the state's dry summers and loamy soil.

New Mexico's pueblo Indians had been farming chiles for centuries, but Garcia hybridized their peppers with less spicy varieties "to develop a chile that the gringos could eat," Coon said.

Green chile is one of New Mexico's top crops and an integral part of its culture. We put the peppers in mashed potatoes on Thanksgiving and on top of posole on New Year's Day.

In 1996, the Legislature passed a bill declaring "Red or green?" the official state question. That's what waiters ask in restaurants, where diners are given a choice of sauce made with green chile or red chile, which is the same pepper, only riper. Many argue that red is more delicious.

As the product of a mixed marriage — my mom swears by red, but my dad prefers green — I usually order my meals "Christmas," with both.

In recent years, international foodie culture has awakened to the wonders of New Mexico chiles. A few years ago, I ordered a red chile Bloody Mary off the menu at a restaurant in Chicago.