

## CountryPlace.

# A Hunk, a Hunk of Burnin' Love

*What makes chile fans so crazy about a peck of peppers? No one knows. But peppers add zest to the lives of those who love them.*

It's almost like a cult. Followers participate in rituals of passion and fire. Not one but two societies honor it and officiate over its disciples.

Are you . . . a chile head?

The chile pepper, that vitamin-packed, podded vegetable that Peter Piper picked a peck of, is the favorite nourishment of a chile head.

Recipe titles like "Hot Pants Chili" give away the pepper's main attraction—its ability to do the dance of the devil in one's mouth.

Actually, only some of the 200 varieties of peppers deserve their fiery reputation. One such is the popular jalapeño.

Others, like the bell pepper, have zero heat but are still peppers, although mild or sweet. A pepper by any other name is still a pepper, so to speak.

As usual, however, it's the "bad boys" in the pepper lineup that get all the adulation.

Take the Charleston, S.C., joint

that offers chili in varying degrees of spiced heat: mild, hot, and, for the really brave, death.

Or consider this gauntlet thrown down by John and Linda Zechmann of Waycross, Ga.: "Are you hot or wimpy?"

That's the taunt the Zechmanns greet guests with as they arrive for the couple's annual chilifest. (That's "chili" as in "chili con carne," the dish that's made with "chiles," the plants or pods.)

The Zechmanns' gathering of friendly foes is relatively small, compared with the chili cookoffs sanctioned by the Chili Appreciation Society International, based in Houston, Tex., or the International Chili Society, headquartered in Newport Beach, Calif.

Hundreds vie for cash prizes at these cookoffs. Tom Tyler of Mesquite, Tex., is one of them. He has won some, too, including the Men's Texas Cookoff Championship.

"It's kind of like a family reunion every weekend," he explains.

Tyler and his chili-cooking friends have donated their proceeds to veterans' groups, hospitals, and volunteer fire departments.

The Mesquite native figures he has attended between 400 and 500 chilifests. "I guess you could say I'm ad-

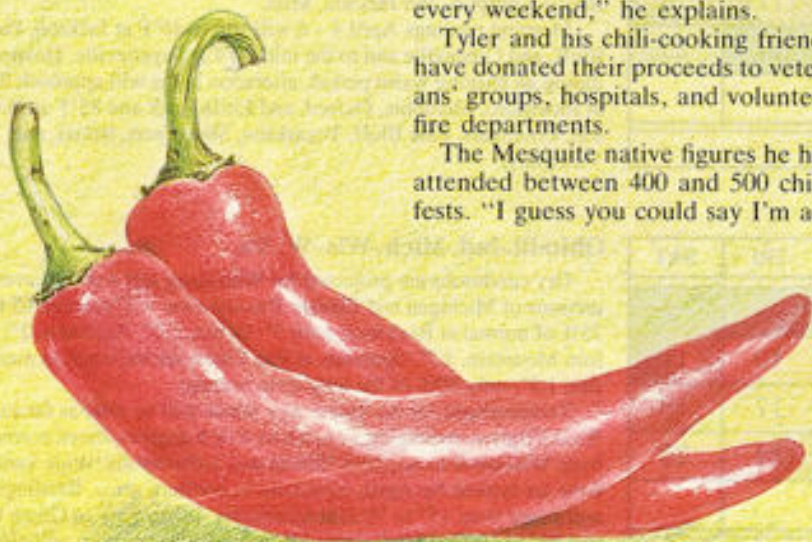
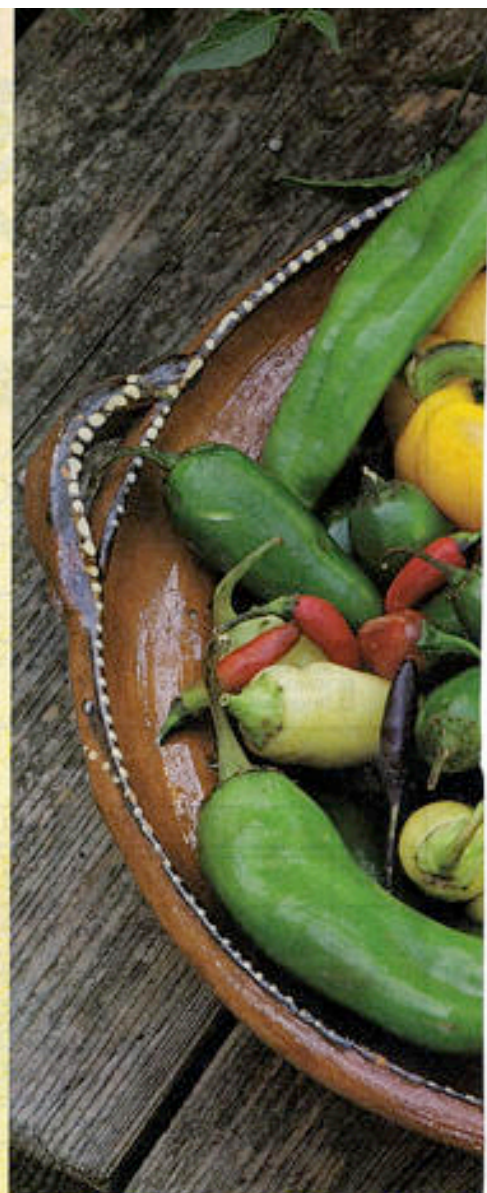


ILLUSTRATION: RAY E. WATKINS, JR.

dicted to it," he says, and laughs.

It is a culinary addiction that has become a national phenomenon.

What else could explain the existence of a magazine devoted solely to the peerless pod? Six times a year, *The Chile Pepper* presses its blistered tongue firmly in its cheek as it publishes such fare as "Pungent Press" and "Hot Flashes."

"Does Rambo Know About This?" one headline in the magazine queries. The article outlines how hot chiles have been banned in California prisons.

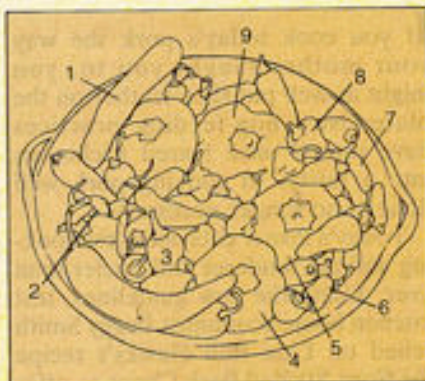
Prison officials feared that inmates might put out each other's eyes with hot chile peppers. So they outlawed the volatile vegetable along with guns and knives. (Imagine the defending cry of loyal chile heads: "But peppers don't put out eyes; people do.")

In a review of *Sleaze*, a book by Robert Morse, *The Chile Pepper* magazine quotes the protagonist, pri-



1. Anaheim 2. Red serrano 3. Yellow wax  
4. Yellow bell 5. Red bell 6. Red jalapeño  
7. Green jalapeño 8. Rocotillo 9. Green bell

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ange placental tissue, or inner veins, where the seed are.

When you eat a hot pepper, pain receptors in the tongue and mouth are triggered. The brain makes the mouth salivate and the nose run, and you sweat.

In 1912, Wilbur L. Scoville, a pharmacologist who worked for Parke-Davis, invented a method for measuring the heat of various chiles. Scoville heat units are expressed in ranges because they vary with growing conditions.

Sweet bells and paprikas measure zero because they have no heat, while mild Anaheims measure only 1,000. Jalapeño and cayenne peppers typically fall within the range of 2,500 to 4,000, and tabasco peppers burn at 60,000 to 80,000 units.

The hottest chile known is the Habanero, which measures 80,000 to 300,000 Scoville units. The Scoville method uses human taste-testers, however, and is subject to varying interpretations.

A more exact method called high-pressure liquid chromatography was developed by James Woodbury in 1980. It measures capsaicin levels in parts per million, which are then converted to Scoville Units, still the industry standard.

If you haven't discovered the virtues of this versatile vegetable, reconsider. Wouldn't you rather be a pepper too?

## A Peek at Peppers

**Anaheim**—First grown in Anaheim, Calif., about 1899. May be red or green. Often mild.

**Bell**—Predominantly sweet. Both green and yellow available. Green ones turn red upon maturity.

**Cayenne**—Very hot. Often called finger peppers.

**Cherry**—Red pods, globose. Mostly sweet, but a few are hot.

**Cubanelle**—Has a thick, sweet flesh. Can be used like a bell.

**Fips**—Perhaps one of the first peppers grown by Spaniards. Extremely hot. Edible but used mostly as an ornamental.

**Jalapeño**—The best known hot pepper. Not as hot if harvested young and veins and seeds removed.

**Rocotillo**—A novel type often used as a garnish. Can vary in shape and color.

**Serrano**—Also called *chile verde*. Very popular in the Southwest. Strains may be hot or "mild," but even the mildest varieties are rather hot.

**Tabasco**—A very hot pepper whose different strains are used to make Louisiana-style hot sauce.

**Yellow wax**—Sweet ones are called banana peppers; hot ones are called Hungarian wax peppers.

vate eye and chile head Sam Hunter.

"I'd just put away a couple of soft tacos piled with carnitas—little bits of roast pork covered with chopped radishes, cilantro, and a killer green sauce hot enough to make my forehead sweat and my eyes blur," the hero says.

Hunter's physical reactions are not fictitious.

Hot chile peppers are hot because of capsaicin, a chemical compound that attacks tender tissue such as the tongue.

The chemical is found mostly in the pepper's white or sometimes or-

By NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON with photo by MARY GRAY-HUNTER