

Some like it hot

Andrea Lynn

When Bill Phillips began working for Mark Miller's Red Sage Restaurant in Washington, D.C., he was a newbie to the spicy food scene. Before the restaurant launched, all the employees underwent schooling on the inner workings and varieties of chiles by Miller, chef/owner of Coyote Café in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and the author of *The Great Chile Book*, an illustrated guide to chiles. One day Phillips spied a bottle of El Yucateco Habanero Hot Sauce in Miller's office and swiped a taste. "It was my first awakening to something other than the jalapeño," Phillips said. "I was tearing up, and Mark gave me this look of exasperation at how green I was and how much I had to learn, saying that it wasn't hot at all. He looked almost worried."

Now Chef Phillips, associate professor of culinary arts at the Culinary Institute of America for the past 16 years, can't imagine a day without the burn of chiles on his tongue, living by the motto, "A day without chiles is a day without sunshine." And he's not alone. A recent NPR article proclaimed the United States a far spicier nation than decades before. It cited data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture that Americans' spice consumption has risen from the '70s with a 600 percent increase in chile pepper use.

Phillips attributes chili fever to a few things. First, thanks partly to his former boss, Miller, knowledge of dried chiles is much higher than a decade ago, and with this, the availability to track down such ingredients has increased. "In NYC in 1994, we didn't know what a chipotle chile was," Phillips said. "It is now becoming more mainstream." Another reason is Americans' desire to replicate ethnic foods they sampled while traveling, combined with immigrants in the U.S. importing fiery cuisines.

There are rumors about chile pepper addiction. Is it coincidence that chile peppers are a member of the nightshade plant family, which also includes tobacco? Capsaicin is the ingredient that supplies the heat to the chile pepper. When consumed, it kicks off endorphins to give a warm, fuzzy feeling, increases metabolic rate, and stimulates blood flow and sweat. Some equate this to a runner's high. Chileheads are constantly getting their fix from these endorphins, and then searching out more spicy things for their next fix.



Spicy food addicts bring their own passion to the mix. Joe Lipman, CEO of Summit Management Services in New Jersey, stashes a mini bottle of Tabasco in carry-on luggage to douse his drab airline meals, much to the envy of fellow passengers, and Aarti Mehta, whose alias is "Spicy in the City," sets up hot sauce tastings for friends. Her Halloween costume? Sriracha, the Asian chile condiment that *Bon*

Appétit named "Ingredient of the Year" in 2009.

Lifelong friends Jason Owen and Trey Muhlhauser wanted to tap into this passionate spicy network. They merged their talents and love for hot sauce to create the website Hot Sauce Planet, where they sell a variety of spicy condiments such as hot sauce, salsa, wing sauce, Bloody Mary mix and more.

"The producers are so passionate about their products, and yet the whole industry has a pretty laid-back attitude and that combination is intoxicating," said Muhlhauser, who takes his work seriously. "If you can introduce someone to a new hot sauce, and they love it, you could legitimately improve thousands and thousands of meals that they will enjoy the rest of their lives — that is pretty amazing."

It burns! It burns! Why?

Andrea Lynn

The active compound that fuels the fire of chile peppers is called capsaicin and it's produced in the chile pepper's placenta, the white membrane that holds the seeds. The concentration of capsaicin in a chile pepper depends on three factors: genetics, growing conditions and ripeness. As a word of caution, capsaicin can burn eyes and other body parts as well as your tongue. It's a good idea to wear gloves when tackling a large amount of chiles or particularly hot chiles in the kitchen.

Bite into a chile and the capsaicin triggers pain receptors throughout the mouth and throat. This, in turn, transmits a pain signal to the brain. The brain responds by releasing endorphins, which provide the body with a natural high. Chef Bill Phillips, instructor at the Culinary Institute of America, equates the chile high with the one he gets from cycling. "Physiologically, there's a release of opiates into the body. It relaxes you after the initial pain," he said. (As a side, only mammals are affected by capsaicin. Birds are immune.)

If the chile high isn't incentive enough, the peppers also have health benefits. Seema Vora, an integrative health practitioner in New York City, advises her clients to add a little spice to their diet when possible. Spicy food stimulates metabolic rate, reduces inflammation, lowers blood pressure and clears congestion.

"Chiles also help me to feel a little more energetic; instead of going for the candy bar around 3 p.m., I go for something spicy," said Vora. "Recently, researchers at Harvard University announced that they believe capsaicin can be used to target pain receptors, without affecting nerve cells and causing the side effects. If you want to see the benefits immediately, try having something spicy when you feel congested. You will see and feel the results immediately."



For pepper virgins who want to begin incorporating spice into their meals, Vora advises starting with black pepper or crushed red pepper flakes. After that, add a little Tabasco to ketchup and then slowly graduate to the flesh of chiles.

Overindulgence is always a risk so it's best to know how to beat the heat.

Steer clear of water, which just spreads capsaicin around the mouth. Since capsaicin is fat-soluble, take relief with dairy products like sour cream and milk. Starches like bread and crackers can absorb the heat from the capsicum too.

Making your own hot sauce:

Andrea Lynn



Let your taste buds take the lead on the hot sauce-making journey. Chef Bill Phillips of the Culinary Institute of America advises experimentation. Take advantage of the wide world of chiles out there, using a variety of fresh and dried ones. Phillips also says everything in the habanero family lends a tropical quality, nicely pairing with oranges, mangos and pineapples. Dried chiles work well with prunes, dried apricots and dried cherries. While creativity is key to homemade hot sauce, don't underestimate the importance of a well-ventilated kitchen. (Your sinuses will thank you.)

When guitar player Anand Bhatt set about making his own hot sauce, he combined traces of passion fruit, garlic and habanero chiles with a splash of vinegar for a flavorful combo with a homemade feel. He offers two tips: "Try to use lemon or lime juice instead of vinegar if you don't need it to shelf it for a long time. Also, be creative. Try things out. I didn't know that mango, ginger and habanero were a good combo until giving it a shot."

To make hot sauce, it's best to remove the seeds from the chiles to extract as much of the chile essence as possible. The heat will still be there, don't worry. The chiles do a small stint in simmering water before being transferred to a food processor, where they are combined with other flavorings, salt and vinegar. Purée, taste and tinker until the hot sauce is to your liking. Just remember to keep track of the proportions, so you can whip up another batch again.

Here's one recipe:

Jalapeño Hot Sauce

Yield: Approximately 1½ cups

2 Roma tomatoes

8 to 10 jalapeños, stemmed, seeded and halved

2 serrano chiles, stemmed, seeded and halved

3 medium garlic cloves, peeled

juice of ½ lemon

1 tablespoon white vinegar

½ teaspoon kosher salt

In a medium saucepot, fill halfway with water and bring to a boil over high heat. When the water comes to a boil, add tomatoes and briefly cook 30 seconds to 1 minute. Remove tomatoes from the water, and transfer to a bowl. When cool, remove tomato skins and discard.

Meanwhile, add jalapeños, serranos and garlic to the boiling water. Lower the heat to medium so the water continues at a rolling simmer. Cook the chiles and garlic for 8 to 10 minutes.

Transfer the chiles and garlic to a food processor (but do not discard cooking liquid). Add tomatoes, lemon juice, vinegar and kosher salt to food processor too, along with 1/3 cup cooking liquid leftover from cooking the chiles. Purée the mixture about 30 seconds until ingredients are liquefied. Taste, and adjust vinegar or salt, if necessary. Keep in refrigerator for up to two weeks.