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A Brief History of Peppers

Probably indigenous to western South America, the chile pepper eventually made its way to Mexico, where evidence of its cultivation dates from at least 3500 BCE. Columbus was likely responsible for bringing the pepper to Europe. The Spanish and the Portuguese then spread the fruit to formerly chile-deprived areas (like India and Southeast Asia) in the early 16th century.

In 1912, Wilbur Scoville developed what would become the Scoville scale, a measure of chile pepper “hotness.” The scale basically measures the amount of capsaicin, a chemical compound found in peppers that stimulates nerve endings, especially in the mucous membranes (read: your mouth). The Scoville scale ranges from 0 (e.g., sweet bell peppers) to 16 billion (e.g., a capsaicin-like toxin found in a Moroccan shrub). Tabasco sauce falls at between 3,500 and 8,000 on the Scoville scale.



Factual Nibbles

- There is some evidence that the ancient Mayans used the chile as a remedy for various bacterial infections. Modern laboratory studies have backed up these ancient claims — chile-derived compounds do, indeed, exhibit anti-bacterial properties.
- As of February 2012, the Trinidad Moruga Scorpion pepper usurped the Naga Bhut Jolokia pepper (a.k.a., ghost pepper) as the world’s hottest, clocking in at up to 2 million on the Scoville scale. To put that number in perspective, most police-grade pepper spray rates about the same on the Scoville scale.
- New Mexico State University has a [Chile Pepper Institute](#), where research on chiles and other peppers is conducted.
- The chile pepper’s heat developed as an evolutionary method to discourage mammals from ingesting the fruit - pepper seeds are destroyed in the mammalian digestive tract. Birds, on the other hand, cannot feel the chile burn, plus the seeds of the fruit pass through their digestive system whole, making our avian friends effective chile pepper distributors.
- Red, orange and yellow bell peppers are actually ripened (mature) green bell peppers.

How to Cook Peppers

Sweet and hot varieties of peppers are staple vegetables (um...fruits) in many diverse cuisines, including Mexican, Indian, South East Asian and Italian. Peppers can be used raw in salads and as toppings for various dishes (think: tacos). They equally lovely roasted, stewed, pureed, stuffed (jalapeño poppers!) and grilled. Peppers also pair well with their tomato, potato and eggplant cousins. Dried chiles, important in Mexican cuisine, have a depth of flavor very different from their fresh versions. (Dried chiles are usually toasted over a flame, and then soaked in water before using in a dish.) Various types of dried peppers are also ground into powder and used as a spice, the most common of which are paprika (usually made from milder chile varieties) and cayenne (usually made from hotter chile varieties).

Pro Tips

To diminish the intensity of chiles’ fiery burn in your dish, remove the ribs (a.k.a., the “placenta”) and the seeds of the pepper with a very sharp knife before cooking or eating raw. Wear gloves when working with hot peppers to avoid skin burns from the oils found in chiles. Be sure to wash cutting boards and knives that have come into contact with hot peppers with warm, soapy water to avoid a capsaicin-derived kitchen disaster.

How to Quench the Burn?

The capsaicin in hot peppers is actually made up of a number of different chemical components, each with its own special way to burn. That’s why some chiles’ heat is long-lasting, while others go out in a quick-but-memorable blaze of glory. Some swear that consuming dairy (like a glass of milk) can diminish a chile’s burn; others recommend a spoonful of sugar or something sweet. Rice and ice water are still other common remedies. Whatever you do, do not down a carbonated beverage to relieve the pain — the bubbles enhance the burning. Alcoholic beverages are also ineffective at quenching the fire.

Recipe: Homemade Hot Sauce

This recipe [from Bon Appetit](#) is a great way to use up an abundance of chile peppers. (Plus, it’s dead simple.) Use one variety for color uniformity, or mix-and-match. The sauce can be kept in the refrigerator for up to four months.

Ingredients:

- 1 pound stemmed fresh chiles (such as jalapeño, serrano, or habanero; use one variety or mix and match)
- 2 tablespoons kosher salt
- 1 1/2 cups distilled white vinegar

Method:

1. Pulse chiles and kosher salt in a food processor until a coarse purée forms. Transfer to a 1-qt. glass jar, loosely screw on lid, and let stand at room temperature for 12 hours to ferment slightly.
2. Stir in vinegar and loosely screw on lid. Let chile mixture stand at room temperature for at least 1 day and up to 7 days. (Taste it daily; the longer it sits, the deeper the flavor becomes.)
3. Purée mixture in a food processor or blender until smooth, about 1 minute.
4. Place a fine-mesh sieve inside a funnel. Strain mixture through sieve into a clean glass bottle. (Hot sauce will become thinner and may separate after you strain it; shake vigorously before each use.)