

THE SPICE OF NEW MEXICO LIFE: ONE SMALL PEPPER, ONE GIANT FLAVOR

BY MEL A. JAMES

It's here — put your nose to the wind and inhale. You might detect a scent unlike any other: the smell of thousands of freshly picked green chile peppers, spinning in cage barrels over an open flame, their skins gently crisping to release the magical roasted flavor of our state vegetable, the heavenly chile.



There are many things in Taos that elicit our collective excitement: the mighty mountains, the dramatic sunsets, the festivals and the art. Chile roasting season stands among all of these as being worthy of our praises. Even though it heralds the waning of summer, we still welcome it, because it means we can finally restock our freezers, which at this point are running dangerously low on our chile caches. Beginning in August and lasting through early September, you'll see Taoseños lined up outside nearly every market and grocery store, their carts proudly sporting this season's crop, ready to sustain our cravings for the year ahead. This is the best of New Mexican cuisine, the ingredient at the heart: the revered and, nay, worshipped chile (always spelled with an "e").

The New Mexico chile isn't just one particular pepper, but rather a group of cultivars similar in appearance but spicier than the Anaheim chile (whose seeds originated in New Mexico), grown in many areas of New Mexico, each providing its own subtle differences in flavor, depending on the altitude, soil, and water where the plant is grown. Hatch chile, probably the most famous strain, is grown in an area of Hatch Valley. Chimayó red chile is highly sought after and must be certified as grown in the area of Chimayó. But while some may claim one chile's superiority over another, the fact remains that any of the chiles grown in New Mexico is going to be delicious, distinctive and addictive.

Our state's obsession with this pepper is evidenced by the fact that it is officially our state vegetable—and is also the basis for our official state question: Red or Green? Whether your preference is *verde* or *roja*, the pepper is the same—the red version is simply the ripened version, much like a bell pepper changes color in various stages. And contrary to popular belief, there is not much difference in the heat level between the colors—rather, the heat levels come from different pepper strains, and whether or not the chile was grown during a wet or dry season. Peppers that are grown in a dry season usually end up hotter while wetter seasons produce milder chiles. However, there are subtle differences in the flavor between red and green—and the uses change, as well. While the green is frequently served diced or whole, the red is mostly dried, and then ground or powdered.

Chimayó red chile is highly revered for its complex flavor, and due to some vendors taking liberties with the term "Chimayó chile," only peppers grown in this area are now certified as "Chimayó," thanks to the work of the Chimayó Chile Farmers, Inc., who applied for certification from the

U.S. Patent Office in 2009. I have purchased what I thought was Chimayó chile before, but this time I went straight to the source: Chimayó, New Mexico. Located right across the street from the famous Santuario de Chimayó (where pilgrims flock every Easter), is a gallery tucked into an old adobe, with a shady courtyard out front. Here you'll find someone they call "The Chile Man." His table is covered with plastic bags, each holding precious dried and ground chile, in assorted flavors and blends, from which he voluntarily offers samples. While I drool over the rainbow on the table in front of me, he reaches into a bag of pistachios, separates one from its shell and flips the nut from one hand to the other while retaining his grip on the shell. He hands me the nut while carefully dipping the shell into whatever blend he thinks I should try. The powdered chile gets a sprinkling of salt before being handed over. I am instructed to put the nut in my mouth first, moisten it, and then dump the chile in to sample the flavors, which happen to be out of this world. I ask the gentleman, "Are you from Chimayó?" After all, I'm looking for the most authentic chile I can find—to which he responds, "I AM Chimayó." Ah, I think I've found it. The self-described Chile Man is the real deal, having been born-and-raised here. But even if I had my doubts, the chile speaks for itself in an explosion of smoky flavors on my tongue. I end up buying multiple bags.

The locals have been cooking with this spectacular pepper for generations and you can see evidence of its influence everywhere. Have you noticed the dark red chile ristras hanging outside people's homes and from the eaves of restaurants? While they enhance the beauty of adobe architecture, they're not purely decorative. Traditionally, this is how the chiles were dried, hanging outside in the hot sun. It also provided convenience for the cook, who could just step outside, pluck off a pepper, grind it up, and turn it into a delicious sauce, or sprinkle it on any number of foods, like pasta. The green version, while occasionally dried, is usually served roasted and then diced and either turned into a sauce or added to a hearty stew, or slapped onto a burger with some cheddar cheese.

So if you find yourself fortunate to be in Taos during harvest season, turn your nose to the wind and seek out some of that freshly roasted green chile. Whether you like it mild or hot, sampling this unassuming pepper is an experience that is inextricably linked to the culture and heritage of New Mexico. But do not be surprised if you find yourself suddenly obsessed—the chile is one of the many ways the Land of Enchantment can ensnare you. ■