

Spice up your summer and pep up your menus with a variety of Mexican chili peppers

By ANNE HARVEY

If you're running out of ways to keep those Indian summer meals satisfying, turn to the chili pepper, with its flavor, heat and nutrients as a welcomed treat. Originally cultivated in what is now known as Mexico, the chili pepper has become the most popular flavoring throughout the world. Well over 100 varieties of chili are grown in Mexico alone, and several other varieties thrive in the American Southwest, Southeast Asia, China, India, North Africa, Spain and South America.

While the tongue-searing heat of chilies plays a starring role in Tex-Mex salads, Thai nam prik sauce, Szechuan dishes, Indian curries, Tunisian harissa, Spanish tapas and a variety of South American dishes, chilies also offer a rich store of nutrients that the rest of your body will thank you for: lots of vitamin C (more than bell peppers), vitamin A, folic acid, vitamin E and potassium. And some research suggests that eating hot foods such as chilies may even help to keep the good ol' metabolism healthfully high. In any case, chilies provide good nutrition as well as good flavor, so feel free to experiment with the varieties in your cooking and get ready to enjoy their heat.

The word 'peppers' can bring to mind several images. On one end of the spectrum is the *sweet bell pepper*. On the other is the hottest of the hot peppers, the *habanero chili pepper*. One has virtually no heat while the other will feel as if your taste buds have been seared off.

The one thing that all chili peppers share

is the common name 'capsicum' (pronounced KAP-sih-kuhm). Capsicum, from the Greek *kapto* meaning 'to bite,' is the botanical genus of the pepper, which belongs to the Solanaceae, or nightshade family; same as the tomato, potato and eggplant.

The five main species of chili peppers are:
Capsicum annuum – including most of the common varieties like the jalapeno and bell peppers

Capsicum baccatum – including the berry-like South American chili peppers, aji

Capsicum chinense – including the fiery habanero

Capsicum frutescens – including the

bushy pepper plants like Tabasco

Capsicum pubescens – including the South American rocoto peppers.

Chili pepper heat is measured in *Scoville Units*. Developed by Wilbur Scoville in 1912, Scoville Units measure chili pepper heat in multiples of 100, with the bell peppers at 0 and the habanero at over 300,000 Scoville Units. Originally, the Scoville Unit rating of a pepper was determined by a dilution taste test. Pure ground chili peppers were blended with a sugar-water solution. A panel of testers sips the mixture in increasingly diluted concentrations until it no longer burns the mouth. The Scoville Unit


number was based on how much the ground chili needed to be diluted before no heat was detected. Now, liquid chromatography, rather than Scoville's dilution taste test, is used to evaluate the heat of chili peppers.

Capsicum is also known for its ability to improve one's health by increasing blood circulation and metabolism. Capsicum peppers contain the compound capsaicin which in turn contain several components called capsaicinoids. Pure capsaicin comes in at over 16 million Scoville Units! Capsaicin is found in its highest concentrations (about 80 percent of the total amount) in the ribs of the pepper, and because of their proximity, the seeds are also highly concentrated. Removing the ribs and seeds will reduce the heat of the chili pepper. Capsaicin is also distributed in smaller amounts throughout the flesh of the chili pepper, and because it's distributed unevenly it's common for some areas of a pepper to be hotter than others.

When hot peppers or sauce touch your mouth, the burning sensation is caused by an irritation of a particular cell called the trigeminal cell. These cells detect pain, pressure and temperature. This irritation causes them to release something called substance P (no joke). This is what tells your brain, "Ouch!" When there is a regular exposure of hot stuff, the nerve endings become somewhat depleted of this substance P. This is called desensitization. This is the tolerance that becomes built up after eating peppers for some time. If the chili diet is discontinued, the substance P stores will re-build to normal. It would take quite a bit of capsaicin to kill any taste buds. Taste buds replace themselves every couple



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