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Scorching chilis are hot

by Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco/For The Star-Ledger

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JUST IN

As far as food is concerned, for some it just can't get hot enough.

"A lot more Americans are eating spicier food," said John Livera, executive chef at the Montville Inn in Montville, where Thai chilis flavor the braised short-ribs and hot cherry peppers add a kick to the fried calamari's lemon-butter dressing.

At Cross Country Nurseries in Rosemont, which specializes in chili and sweet pepper plants, "the hottest of the hots are the number-one best-sellers," said Janie Lamson, who operates the nursery with her husband, Fernando Villegas. The top-selling varieties this year were Bhut Jolokia, an elongated Indian pepper that's ranked the world's hottest variety; Habanero Red Savina, the second-hottest pepper; Habanero Chocolate, a brown hot pepper; Fatalii, an elongated yellow hot pepper from Africa; and Biker Billy Hybrid, a jumbo green jalapeno.

Statewide, the pepper fields are still overwhelmingly dominated by sweet bell peppers, which account for about 80 percent of commercial production, said Wes Kline, an agricultural specialist with the Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Cumberland County. "There is some increase in acres in jalapenos, long hots and habaneros," he said, and smaller farms that operate roadside stands and participate in tailgate markets certainly are expanding their production of hot peppers. "We can grow almost any pepper here if there's a market for it," said Kline.





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Last year, Rick Van Vranken, a Rutgers agricultural agent for Atlantic County, conducted a variety trial of several hot pepper varieties, including various types of jalapenos, serranos, poblanos and aji dulces, "which are like habaneros in flavor, but without the heat," he said. Yields were outstanding, he reported, but he and his colleagues are still trying to determine what makes some varieties hotter than others, and which would be most marketable.

"The mainstream grocery markets want perfect-looking peppers and associate cracks with defects," he said. But in Latin American communities that rely heavily on hot peppers in cooking, jalapenos that don't show any evidence of cracking -- properly called "corking," according to Lamson -- are considered immature and less flavorful.

Which hot peppers are best for a particular use -- stuffing or roasting, for example -- is hotly debated among those who love them best, and practices vary according to national and even regional tradition.

It's important "to think of peppers as more than heat," advised Maricel Presilla, who grows several varieties of peppers at her home garden in Weehawken for use at her two Latin American restaurants in Hoboken, Zafra and Cucharamama. Habaneros, for example, lend an herbal flavor along with their characteristic heat.

"For Zafra, I use tropical fresh peppers like habanero chilis and Scotch bonnets, the Caribbean aji dulce or cachuca and the Mexican serrano, jalapenos and poblano chiles," explained Presilla. "At Cucharamama, we use lots of habaneros and also serve Spanish Padron peppers, which we buy from a Palo Alto source (www.happyquailfarms.com). We cook them with serrano ham in our wood-burning oven.

"The food of both of our restaurants is pepper-driven, since we both season our foods with peppers and make lots of table salsas with hot peppers. For us the peppers are not an accent, but an intrinsic part of the food. I can't conceive of not using them," she said.

Those who are timid about cooking with the fiery ingredients should start with milder varieties. "I would suggest the poblano; it's a very forgiving pepper," said Livera. Sauteing peppers in oil at a high temperature will bring out their heat, he noted. To tame it, saute them in butter at low heat instead.

Another way to gently introduce the spicy flavor of hot peppers into meals is to make a pepper-based sauce that can be spooned onto a dish as desired, said Presilla. If you're worried about the sauce itself being too spicy, she offers a trick that she learned in Mexico: Make an x at the tip of a hot pepper and dip it into and out of a simmering sauce, allowing it to release just as much flavor and heat as you like.

Different treatments will yield different flavors, even when using the same type of pepper. Frying jalapenos, for example, "gives them a particular taste. If they're grilled, you get something completely different; if you boil them, you get something completely different," said Presilla. "Start experimenting by adding peppers judiciously to a number of things. You'll be surprised at how nuanced the food will be."

With the wide array of hot peppers out there, recipes that call for "chili peppers" can be frustratingly vague. In that case, suggested Presilla use

does not tell you that you need to use much less of the habanero or Scotch bonnet pepper as they are infinitely hotter than the jalapeno." So proceed with care. You are, after all, playing with fire.

Fun fact: Peppers, which are native to Latin America, were introduced to Europe by Columbus, who named them pimiento, after pimienta -- black pepper, the spice that was one of the main objectives of his voyage across the Atlantic.

Handle with care: Capsaicin, the alkaloid that gives chilis their heat, can irritate and burn skin and delicate tissue. When handling hot peppers, wear disposable gloves or coat your hands with salt or oil. Never touch your face, particularly your eyes, or other sensitive body parts while handling chilis.

Nutrition notes: Rich in antioxidants, peppers are an excellent source of vitamins A and C. Red peppers have twice as much vitamin C and nine times more vitamin A than green peppers. Peppers block the formation of nitrosamines, a group of more than 400 carcinogens. Capsaicin releases mood-boosting beta-endorphins in the brain.

Get 'em while they're hot: Chili peppers are readily available at area farmers' markets. Through early October, they also are available by mail order from Cross Country Nurseries for \$6 per half-pint (minimum order of six half-pints, plus shipping). For details: www.chileplants.com; (908) 996-4646.

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