

Caution, these peppers bite



Food writer Tim Carman brings a peck of potent peppers for Post staffers to pick on. And fortunately he brings milk, too.

By Tim Carman

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The bright red pepper has a shriveled appearance, as if a bulbous clown nose had somehow wilted into a long, twisted witch's beak. Between its wrinkly complexion and its nasty reputation, the Bhut Jolokia, better known as the ghost pepper, generates fear and fascination. YouTube is littered with videos of bros pumped up enough to eat a whole one — only to crumple to the floor, pounding down milk.

When I cut into my first ghost pepper recently — while wearing food-safe gloves, at the urging of practically everyone who has an opinion on the subject — I was first struck by the aroma. My kitchen was filled with the sweet, tropical fragrance of passion fruit. You quickly learn that the aroma is a trap, designed to entice the innocent and ignorant into tasting the pepper. You will almost certainly regret any attempt to eat the fiery fruit straight up, with seeds and ribs.

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(Deb Lindsey/FOR THE WASHINGTON POST) - Hot peppers left to right: Jamaican Hot Chocolate, Naga Bhut Jolokia (aka ghost pepper), Fatalii and Hot Mama (yellows) Dorset Naga Jolokia, Caribbean Red.

I tried a small seedless dice of the pepper, approximately the size of a pea, and within seconds, my right eye was streaming tears down my cheek, my nostrils were dripping and, worst

of all, I began to hiccup uncontrollably. It was as if my head had become a wood-burning oven, lighting up my tongue and the interior of my skull. Milk provided little relief, until the burn began to subside on its own some 10 minutes later.

The Bhut Jolokia is one of a rare breed of peppers: The nonprofit Chile Pepper Institute in Las Cruces, N.M., calls them, without any whiff of comedic hyperbole, “super-hot” peppers. Believe it or not, these freak-show specimens are slowly creeping into local farmers markets. I’ve seen super-hot chilies at the FreshFarm Silver Spring Market and the Takoma Park Farmers Market, where heat seekers sometimes treat the peppers more like schoolyard dares than take-home produce — just the latest example of that seemingly never-ending human desire to try to eat fire.

Lana Edelen, co-owner of Homestead Farm in Faulkner, Md., once had a customer approach her stand at the Takoma Park market and stare at the colorful carnival of hot peppers for sale — not just Bhut Jolokias, but their cousin, the similarly piquant Dorset Naga, as well as Trinidad Scorpions, Jamaican Hot Chocolates and Habanero Caribbean Reds. “He said nothing was hotter than a habanero,” Edelen recalls. You can almost hear her sigh over the phone at the man’s arrogance.

So Edelen cut open one of her flame throwers and offered a piece to the man, but with a neighborly warning. “It’s hot,” she told him. “I’m telling you beforehand.” He popped a piece into his mouth and told Edelen, “It ain’t too bad. There ain’t no heat yet,” she remembers.

“Then all of a sudden he was looking for something to eat,” she adds. An hour later, she spotted him again and “his teeth and lips were still on fire.”

To some, Edelen’s anecdote would be a cautionary tale. To others, it’s a come-hither “Body Heat” signal of seduction, much like those hot sauces with the orifice-oriented names (think: Sphincter Shrinker XXX , Colon Cleaner) were in the 1990s and 2000s. But before anyone attempts this new daredevil stunt, they should know something important: Some of these super-hot peppers can be twice as fiery as the habaneros and Scotch bonnets often used in hot sauces.

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To join the elite class of super-hots, peppers must register an average level of 1 million Scoville heat units in replicated, scientifically controlled trials. To give you some point of comparison, a common jalapeno tops out, depending on what source is cited, at 10,000 SHUs. Habaneros and Scotch bonnets can range from 100,000 to 350,000 SHUs.

At present, only a handful of peppers are members of the super-hot class. Aside from the ghost pepper (an average of 1,019,687 SHUs), the other ultra-hotties include the Trinidad Scorpion (1,029,271 SHUs); Trinidad 7-Pot Jonah (1,066,882 SHUs); Douglah Trinidad Chocolate (1,169,058 SHUs); and the mother of all tongue-destroying peppers, the Trinidad Moruga Scorpion (1,207,764 SHUs), according to a recently published Chile Pepper Institute scientific study. Two Trinidad Moruga Scorpion plants in the study topped 2 million SHUs.

The reigning Guinness World Record holder, the Trinidad Scorpion Butch T, grown by the Chilli Factory in Australia, was not included in the Chile Pepper Institute study, despite being tested at 1.46 million SHUs in March 2011. There's a simple reason for that, explains Danise Coon, a senior research specialist for New Mexico State University and program coordinator for the institute. The owners "would not send us seed," Coon says. "We'd like to be nice and say they didn't have any more seed. I really can't draw any conclusions."

But without the ability to test the Butch T pepper under scientifically controlled conditions, the Chile Pepper Institute noted in its study that the Trinidad Moruga Scorpion "can be considered the world's hottest known measured chile pepper." Still, as the organization points out on its site, "the Bhut Jolokia pepper remains the hottest pepper that is commercially available." It was the first pepper to reach 1 million SHUs and was once the Guinness record holder.

This desperate chase for the world's hottest pepper — and whatever commercial applications it may hold for the record holder — is a separate issue, of course, from the people who want to consume them. You might be shocked to learn that not all consumers are heat junkies looking for their next starring role as a human test dummy in a YouTube video.

The reason Homestead Farm entered the hot pepper market was pure and simple consumer demand, which is interesting because other area farmers have said they're not so hot about these plants, given that customer interest is marginal at best. "They're very hard to make any profit on, because people don't buy very many of them," co-owner Moie Kimball Crawford says about the hot peppers grown at New Morning Farm in Hustontown, Pa. Zach Lester, co-owner of Tree and Leaf Farm in Unionville, Va., says flat-out that super-hot peppers "don't mix in with the food I'm selling and the recipes."

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But since 1992, Homestead Farm has tapped into an African market that desires many of the foods from back home. Almost every day, Edelen says, customers come to pick their own sweet potato leaves, “garden egg” fruits, jute leaves or hot peppers. At first, Lana and her husband, Joseph, started planting more moderately spicy varieties, such as cayenne and jalapenos, before graduating to Scotch bonnets. Nothing was hot enough for their African customers, however, until the couple began planting ghost peppers and Jamaican Hot Chocolates and even Trinidad Scorpions.

“I have people from Africa who buy them,” she says. “I have people from Jamaica who buy them.” Even some chefs are searching out Homestead Farm’s peppers, though Lana Edelen is hard-pressed to recall a name. She sells ghost peppers for \$1 apiece and the other bombs for 75 cents each, but for customers who want more than a single conversation piece or a brief flirtation with capsaicin pain, she’ll also sell the peppers for \$9 a pound.

Which brings us back to an issue that Lester raised: Do these carpet bombs for the mouth fit into dishes that are actually consumed by people with functioning palates? Coon with the Chile Pepper Institute thinks “some of these are completely inedible. . . . They’re not for food consumption, that’s for sure.” Then again, Coon notes that the institute sells a brownie mix, Dr. B’s Bhut-Kickin’ Brownies, made with ghost peppers. You can buy the product online.

Coon says the brownie mix includes only about a teaspoon of ground Bhut Jolokia powder, which is key. To use these peppers in the kitchen, you have to temper their heat and find a way to emphasize their other qualities, like the floral, fruity aromas of the ghost pepper.

My instinct was to push the ghost in the same sweet direction: as a heat and flavoring agent in a pear jam. The resulting spread was chunky and slightly sweet, with a long, hot and strangely cooling finish that tasted as though someone had crossed passion fruit with Sichuan peppercorns. It was, I’d say, about 1.019 million times better than eating a ghost pepper raw.