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Piquant Peak

The 17th Annual Pepper Festival in Bowers, PA draws 10,000 capsaicin connoisseurs each harvest

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHY BY: CINDY KALINOSKI



“Is it safe?” our friends ask me when they come over,” says Shirley Grumbine of Birdsboro, Pennsylvania. “No, it’s not safe!” I tell them.” Grumbine is referring to whatever concoction—this year it’s BBQ capable of sending your sinuses into orbit—that her husband Tom has just made from hot peppers. The Grumbines, like many of the 10,000 visitors who come to the Chile Pepper Festival in Bowers, spend time out in a field, picking peppers.

Every year in September, pepper lovers converge on a tiny town in Southeast Pennsylvania to celebrate this volatile vegetable. It's a surprisingly competitive group, both in conversation and in action. Farmer Jim Weaver, who grows the peppers at Meadow View Farm, says every year he gets requests for more extreme peppers. "Everybody still wants to prove 'I can handle this pepper,'" he observes. "I don't see why it needs to get hotter and hotter. It's got to stop somewhere."



Lately, people are looking for Bhut Jolokia (ghost peppers) and Trinidad Scorpion peppers, but they're also asking for Butch Ts. Trinidad Scorpion Butch T peppers, according to the Guinness Book of World Records, are the hottest peppers in the world—at least this year. The Butch T has off-the-chart fire, with 1,463,700 Scoville heat units of capsaicin. (Habañero peppers range from 100,000 to 350,000 units, plenty hot for most of us.) The more piquance, that is, pungence and pain, the more capsaicin. The more capsaicin, the hotter the pepper, and the higher it ranks on the Scoville scale. The peppers grown at this farm run the full gamut.

Some should come with a warning label. When working with—or just picking—even mildly hot peppers, experts recommend taking precautions like wearing gloves and not touching your eyes. Goggles cover your eyes and a mask goes over your mouth if you're grinding them, because hot peppers can make you cry, sweat, take your voice or your breath away, give you hiccups, or even cause temporary blindness. They are some serious peppers. Which is why growing them has drawn a large base of pepper fans to a town so small your GPS may not be able to find it.

The Rise of the Pepper

The Bowers festival's roots lie in one man's education. With a masters in futurology, Chris Markey interprets trends; he predicted the rise of the pepper in North America back in the 1980s. He talked

Jim into planting a half-dozen varieties, and they were on the cutting edge. “Nobody was doing that then,” recalls Markey, at least in Pennsylvania. At the time Jim wondered whether it was a fad. But Chris’s prophecy proved sound.

Three years later people in the area around Kutztown wanted to buy not just the peppers but also seedlings. They also wanted to know what to do with these hot vegetables technically classified as botanical fruits. Chris decided it was time to educate, so they launched a Field Day. “The rest,” he quips wryly, “is history.”



Today at Meadow View Farm you’ll find over 20,000 tomato plants, most of them heirloom, 25 varieties of eggplants, a plethora of pumpkins, gourds and squash, and 14,000 hot pepper plants. The farm now supplies Wegman’s, Trader Joe’s and several popular restaurants. A contingent of local customers originally from Liberia, Sierra Leone and Nigeria, who grew up on Scotch bonnet peppers, bring Jim seeds, then drive out each summer to buy every single ripe one he has. Jim ships them anywhere. “The word is out that I have them,” he says, grinning. “I just got a call from Arizona.”

Half the fun is going out in this field yourself, where you can trade wicked-hot salsa recipes with other pepper aficionados. Row after row is labeled, and some of the names are actually kind of scary. Halfway down the Inferno Hot Banana row, someone from northern India is talking about curry. A few rows over, near the blistering Red Devil’s Tongue and Explosive Ignite varieties, pickers are debating which is hotter.

Test Your Palate

Back at the festival, people are busily tasting hot stuff. Unlikely signs announce Hot, Hot Smokin’ Chocolate, Hot Peanut Butter Eggs, and Peach Mango Habañero Jam. One says “Gourmet Grilled

Red Pepper Chipotle Cheese Spread Sandwiches on Chipotle Brioche”. Come lunchtime, the only question is where to start.

Look for the crowds and you’re likely to find the festival favorites, but try starting with the less-hot items, in a sort of vertical pepper tasting. Begin with, say, chipotle plum chocolate chip cookies. Move up to hot pepper peanut brittle and then pepper-encrusted corn on the cob. Save the more dangerous fare, chocolate covered cherry peppers or butt kickin’ bhut jolokia dip—which you can identify by the RIP sign—for last. Otherwise, you’ll compromise your palate.



So say “the pepper men,” who judge the salsa contest. John Bixler, Chris Markey and Jim Weaver are the figures behind the pepper movement in the southern end of Maxatawny Township. While Jim sticks to farming, John and Chris run the festival and sample every salsa entry. They check the taste, the texture, the heat and even the appearance.

“Some of them are just too hot,” complains Chris. “By the time you’ve tasted 20 different degrees of heat, the last few are sort of at a disadvantage.” While visitors can’t sample the official entries, there can sample and purchase pepper-related items. Aprons, necklaces, and even baby clothes decorated with chile peppers make for a bright display, and hot sauces abound. Edible or not, everything at the festival is, at the insistence of the founders, pepper-related.

As 4 pm on Saturday rolls around, a new energy is palpable. It’s time for the pepper-eating contest. Festival goers crowd around to watch this group of (possibly crazy) competitors. It’s the kind of spectacle you don’t think you want to witness, like a car wreck,



but you can't help looking. And it is entertaining, in its way.

Ten at a time, in three shifts, this year's batch of pepper-hungry contestants line up in front of paper plates piled with jalapeño peppers. They come armed with their own liquid heat quencher. Rumored to help the most is milk, so regular and chocolate milk put in a strong showing, along with water and the occasional OJ.

The official bell rings and they're off. It's not pretty, watching the contestants' faces contort as they try to swallow each bite quickly. Fortunately the painful scene doesn't last long. Soon the deliberation begins. Last year the winner was a woman. This time, it's a local man by the name of Travis Boyer, who walks away with the official trophy.

Once the contest is over, the crowd begins to disperse on this, the second and final day of the festival. Some amble by cars with dragonfirehot sauce.com stickers or past the table with the spicy red-hot Thai curry orzo. A few join the dwindling line for the last horse-drawn wagon run over to the farm. A red-haired toddler in overalls cries as his stroller gets packed into an SUV. It's time to say goodbye to the peppers for another year. Good thing. It's been a long, hot day.

Mark your calendar!

17th Annual Chile Pepper Festival | September 7 & 8, 2012 | Bowers, PA | www.PepperFestival.com

Hoppin' Jalapeño Carrot Cupcakes

Recipe courtesy of Pierre DeRagon Personal Chef Services, (www.pierrederagonpersonalchef.com)



Makes about 3 dozen cupcakes

Cake

1/2 cup golden raisins
2 cups all purpose flour
2 tsp baking powder
1 tsp baking soda
1 tsp salt
2 tsp cinnamon
1 Tbs ground ginger
3 whole cloves, ground (or 1/2 tsp ground clove)
1/2 tsp whole allspice, ground (or 1 tsp ground allspice)
4 large eggs
1 cup canola oil
1 cup sugar
1 cup dark brown sugar, tightly packed
3 cups grated carrots, tightly packed
1 tsp coarsely grated lime zest
2 tsp coarsely grated orange zest
4 or more fresh jalapeños, seeded & minced
8 ounces unsweetened crushed pineapple, drained
3/4 cup sweet coconut flakes

Preheat oven to 350°. In a large bowl, sift flour, baking powder, soda, salt, and spices; set aside. In another large bowl, beat eggs with mixer until pale yellow, add sugars, and slowly mix in oil. Add dry ingredients on low speed until just blended. Fold in carrots, pineapple, raisins, coconut, and jalapeños.

Spoon the batter into cupcake papers in a cupcake pan (or use bundt, sheet cake or layer cake pan); bake about 20 minutes, or until toothpick comes out clean. While the cupcakes are baking, make the glaze; spoon on while cupcakes are still hot so it sinks into the cake.

Glaze

1/2 cup sugar
3/4 tsp baking soda
1/4 cup buttermilk
1/4 cup butter or margarine
1/2 Tbs light corn syrup
1/2 tsp vanilla extract

Bring first 5 ingredients to a boil in a large Dutch oven or pot over medium-high heat. Boil 4 minutes, stirring often. Remove from heat; stir in vanilla.

Traditionally, carrot cakes have cream cheese frosting; try this classic buttercream for a winning combo.

Frosting

3 cups confectioners' sugar
1 cup butter
1 tsp vanilla extract
1 to 2 Tbs whipping cream

In a standing mixer fitted with a whisk, mix sugar and butter on low speed until well blended. Increase speed to medium; beat for another 3 minutes. Add vanilla and cream; continue to beat on medium for 1 minute, adding more cream if needed for spreading consistency.

Smoked Crabbie Pepper Poppers

*Recipe courtesy of Ry Hartman & Allen B. Dillman, Fleetwood Pepper Company
Makes 36 poppers*



2 lbs crabmeat
1 lb cream cheese
3 dozen jalapeno peppers

Soak wood chips and heat smoker. Slit peppers lengthwise and remove seeds. Combine crabmeat and cream cheese and stuff peppers with mixture. Smoke peppers 2-3 hours with lid closed.

If you don't have a smoker, these may be cooked on a traditional grill; grill on top shelf on low and check doneness every hour.

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