

THE SPICE OF



Temperatures rise as chefs and diners seek out the ingredients that set dishes and taste buds ablaze.

BY BRET LOVE



KREMER JOHNSON PHOTOGRAPHY

Chefs like Brian Huskey (pictured) are blending flavors from around the world to create dishes that are spicier and more flavorful than ever before.

Last year, a batch of hybrid chili peppers called Carolina Reapers, grown by South Carolina-based Ed Currie, were deemed the world's hottest by Guinness World Records. While the average jalapeno registers anywhere between 2,500 and 5,000 Scoville heat units (the Scoville scale being the measuring stick of the spicy heat of peppers), the Carolina Reaper topped out at more than 1.5 million.

Modern fascination with locating the spiciest ingredients and foods isn't exactly a novel concept. Dating back to antiquity, spice routes spread from Southeast Asia all the way to Europe and North Africa; Greco-Romans pioneered journeys to India to find pepper and ginger; and legendary explorers such as Christopher Columbus, Vasco da Gama and Ferdinand Magellan all sailed in search of spices. While spicy foods have been integral to many countries' dishes throughout the centuries, the late 20th century brought profound developments in technology (namely the Internet) and entertainment (film, cable television) that helped open American eyes—and palates—up to a wide world

of new culinary options. Only in recent years, however, has the obsession with heat reached a fever pitch.

Drawn to the Flame

"People seek out heat in their food much like we seek out adrenaline rushes in life and play," Montage Deer Valley Executive Chef Shawn Armstrong says of the public's growing interest in fiery dishes. "[It] reminds us that we're alive, and there's something rudimentary and exhilarating about the experience that keeps us coming back for more."

While reality TV series including the Travel Channel's "Man v. Food" and the Cooking Channel's "Heat Seekers" continue to fuel the public's appetite for the hottest in culinary concoctions, more and more chefs seem to be flexing their creative muscles in an attempt to bring the heat in the kitchen. Celebrity chefs such as Emeril Lagasse, Jean-Georges Vongerichten (whose Thai-influenced restaurant, Vong, famously used more than 150 herbs and spices) and Nobu Matsuhisa (who often fuses Japanese and Peruvian elements of cooking) have blazed culinary trails and helped to

further popularize exotic spices and the dishes that harness their heat.

Tory McPhail, executive chef at New Orleans' Commander's Palace—and 2013 James Beard Award winner of the title of Best Chef in the South—suggests that society's growing affinity for spicy foods is the result of both fashion and fitness. "Through modern media, the hipness of ethnic cuisines has made them more popular than ever," he explains. "As people continue to eat more healthily, using more seasonings and spices in traditional foods means that you're not missing out on great flavor."

But for many, a love of spicy dishes has less to do with current trends than nostalgia. Certain flavors have the power to transport diners back to a favorite dish from an exotic destination. And, for those who grew up as descendants of immigrants, the scent of a certain spice can bring back fond memories of childhood.

Such is the case for Korean-American chef Brian Huskey, a "Top Chef" contestant who works in research and development for the Los Angeles-based Zarate Restaurants. "When I was growing up, my mother cooked a lot for my brothers



Padrón

Aji amarillo

Carolina Reaper



went ballistic at the thought of a shortage, people posted bottles of the beloved topping for sale on eBay at sky-high prices, and ABC News even ran a story asking, “Is this the Sriracha apocalypse?”

There’s a thin line that divides fandom from fanaticism, but the situation served to illustrate just how passionate people are about their favorite foods. Still, culinary experts insist that another boundary—between dishes that challenge the taste buds and those that overwhelm them—is one to navigate carefully.

“Each person’s palate is incredibly subjective,” says Asha Gomez, a 2013 James Beard Awards semifinalist and owner of Atlanta’s Cardamom Hill restaurant, which fuses south Indian culinary traditions with the cuisine of the American South. “Some just want just a hint of pungency; others want the spices to linger and play on their palate, while others like to have their taste buds shocked. I strive for balance—I like bold flavors without overwhelming the main ingredient of the dish.”

The menu at Cardamom Hill is sprinkled with spicy options that reflect Gomez’s Kerala heritage. Pork vindaloo is a staple of the appetizer list and remains one of the chef’s favorite uses

and I,” he says. “‘Gochugaru,’ or Korean chili powder, was almost always used as heat in my mother’s food including spicy fermented cabbage, soups and marinades. Once you smelled garlic and gochugaru together cooking in oil, you knew it was the start of something ridiculously tasty.”

Fuel to the Fire

Regardless of the reasons behind society’s foodie fascination with spice, the mainstream love affair with dishes that sizzle definitely seems to be growing more serious. Toward the close of 2013, the city of Irwindale, Calif., sued Huy Fong Foods, the maker of Sriracha hot sauce—a move that resulted in a public outcry. Devotees of the spicy sauce

Clockwise from top left: Cardamom Hill’s pork vindaloo; Korean chili powder; papaya salad; Sriracha

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—SHAWN ARMSTRONG



HOT COUPLINGS

With more than 15 years of sommelier experience, Montage Laguna Beach Beverage Manager Troy Smith is an expert on matching foods with wines that complement their flavors. He acknowledges the unique challenges that accompany pairing wines with spicy dishes, avoiding varietals with high levels of alcohol or tannin. Instead, he recommends wines with high acidity, soft textures or residual sugars. He suggests the following pairings:

“Thai dishes such as ‘tom yum’ [a hot and sour soup] have a spicy, sweet and sour intensity, which makes them a natural match for riesling, specifically from the Mosel in Germany. The sweet flavors of green apple, peach and apple blossom help to balance the dish’s spice beautifully, while the razor’s-edge acidity mirrors the sourness in the soup.”

“Sommeliers often recommend Champagne with spicy foods, but Vietti’s Moscato d’Asti from Piedmont, Italy, is even more suited to the task. With its low alcohol, gentle effervescence and irresistibly floral, peachy nose, this wine is a great counterpoint to the earthy heat of Cajun spices in jambalaya.”

“Zinfandel’s inherently higher alcohol would seem to eliminate it as a candidate for pairing with spicy food. But when matched with the right dish, it can be brilliant. T-Vine Cellars’ zinfandel from the Black Sears vineyards on Napa Valley’s Howell Mountain is archetypal California zinfandel, with a brooding, jammy intensity that stands up nicely to spicy lamb and tomato ragu with fresh ricotta and mint over pasta.”



Tom yum soup pairs well with riesling.

BRANDON FLINT



Shawn Armstrong of Montage Deer Valley works with some of his favorite spicy ingredients.

of heat. “Pork vindaloo was introduced to India around 1510 by Portuguese sailors, who used red-wine vinegar and garlic as a preservation agent for meat on seafaring travels,” she explains. “The Kerala version I grew up with is less fiery but has a beautiful balance of flavors: smoky, tangy, with a tinge of sweetness accenting buttery chunks of slow-cooked pork shoulder. The heat comes from garlic and vinegar teasing out the pungent flavors of black pepper, cinnamon and cloves.”

Also a lover of Asian food, Armstrong has mastered the art of balancing heat and other flavors at Montage Deer Valley. With 10 years of professional experience at high-profile dining venues in Asia, the chef was even named Global Chef of the Year by Singapore’s premier culinary academy, At-Sunrice. His love of heat followed him back to the U.S., where he regularly prepares one of Thailand’s traditional spicy plates at home.

“I spent a good amount of my career in Singapore and had the opportunity to visit Thailand on a few occasions,” he says. “One day, while shopping, my wife and I tried out the street food. While many things I ate were delicious, the ‘som tom’ [green papaya salad] was the most memorable because of the burst of flavors and textures. ... The key ingredients to making this dish authentic are a great-quality fish sauce, fresh Thai basil, dried shrimp and Thai bird’s-eye chili.”

On the opposite side of the Pacific, Peru embraces heat with its native aji amarillo peppers, which are used in almost all dishes cooked in Peruvian kitchens. Huskey, who’s known to blend influences from his Korean background with Peruvian flavors and, of course, California flair, explains that one of his favorite uses of spice

is as a complement to the traditional Peruvian ceviche sauce, “leche de tigre,” or tiger’s milk. “By blending aji amarillo, onion, celery, garlic, ginger, lime juice and fish trimmings, a flavorful ceviche sauce is created,” he explains. “It’s simple, spicy and unique. And since the ceviche sauce is blended, it creates a nice, refreshing experience.”

The U.S. has also earned its place in the spice conversation, not only for the country’s uniquely diverse culinary offerings but also for a region known for its ability to take the heat: the South. Straddling the intersections of many different cultures, Southern cooking has long been at the forefront of the movement to spice up the American palate. Commander’s Palace, now more than a century old, serves shrimp and tasso Henican, a dinner favorite that incorporates a five-pepper jelly. “Shrimp and tasso Henican is not only an amazing dish, it’s also the first dish I learned to prepare when I started at Commander’s Palace when I was 19,” McPhail explains. “The dish features spice prominently, but the spice really helps to keep the four other parts of flavor—salt, sugar, bitter and acid—properly balanced. This dish features wild Louisiana white shrimp, tasso ham, pickled okra, sweet onions, five-pepper jelly and Crystal hot sauce beurre blanc.”

Whatever your preferred level of spice, perhaps the greatest thing about the 21st-century food scene is the widespread availability of cuisines from across the globe. From the habanero peppers of Mexico and the curries of India to the berbere powder of Ethiopia and the bird’s-eye chili of Thailand, it’s never been easier for spice-lovers to get their fixes. As world-class chefs continue to craft wondrous new fusions of fascinating flavors, we can expect to see the buzz on exotic spices burn hotter and hotter. **M**