

Hot stuff!

Local peppers pack punch and add flavor to many dishes

By Gretchen Eichenberg
Photos by Rachel Haferkamp

The red hot chili pepper is an

icon of Texas and the Southwest. And, rightly so. Chili peppers and the people who cultivated them originate in the Americas. Archeological evidence indicates that chili peppers were domesticated more than 6,000 years ago in South America — and later, the fire spread to Mexico and the Southwest United States.

From mild to super hot, chilies add heat and flavor to many dishes. They contain fiber and lots of vitamins and have been known to possess medicinal benefits. And, the hottest of the hot are even used by law enforcement to stop dangerous criminals in their tracks.

Beautiful and colorful, several chilies can be grown prolifically in Central Texas, according to the Texas A&M Agrilife Extension: Anaheim, Cayenne, Habanero, Jalapeno, Poblano and Serrano. The hot summers are perfect for the ripening peppers.

Get to know your hot chilies and how to use them with this guide to local peppers. For recipes that include them, please see story on page 96.



ANAHEIM

These large, mild chilies have a thick skin, and are usually a bright, shiny green. Though available year-round in grocery stores and markets, they're best in the summer. The flavor ranges from mild and sweet to moderately hot and the heat can vary from pepper to pepper. They are perfect for dips, sauces, soups and stews, stuffed with meat and cheese and for topping Mexican or Southwest dishes.

SHU: 2,500



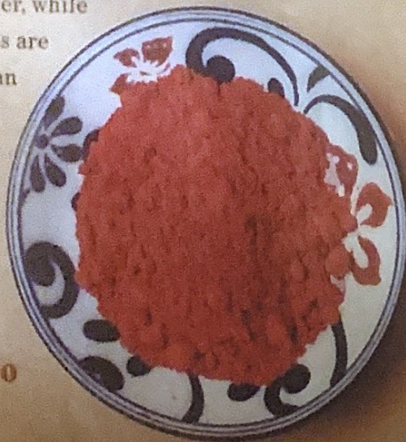
HOW HOT IS HOT?

The Scoville Scale is a measure of the hotness of a chili pepper, as defined by the amount of capsaicin — a chemical compound that stimulates nerve endings in the skin — present. Chili peppers, fruits of the *Capsicum* genus, contain capsaicin, a chemical compound which stimulates chemoreceptor nerve endings in the skin, especially the mucous membranes. The number of Scoville Heat Units (SHU) indicates the amount of capsaicin present. Law enforcement grade (pepper spray) capsaicin levels yield a SHU rating of between 500,000 to 5,300,000.

CAYENNE

Wrinkled, very pungent and thick-fleshed, this pepper is named for the Cayenne district of French Guiana and is often used in Cajun recipes. Green Cayennes appear in the summer, while hotter red Cayennes are ripe in the fall. They can be used for sauces, as a dried seasoning, pickled or in salsas. Cayenne powder is perfect for adding a dash of heat to any dish.

SHU: 60,000

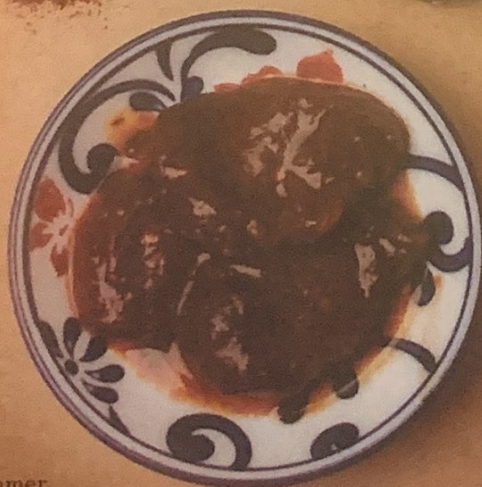




HABANERO

Approach this pepper with caution! The hottest of these chilies approaches law enforcement grade capsaicin levels. But, underneath the heat is a delicate plum-tomato, even apple flavor that is high in fiber and a wonderful flavoring for meat and poultry.

SHU: 325,000 to 570,000



JALAPENO

Probably the most popular of the chilies.

this one has a good amount of heat and a rich flavor. Green jalapenos are best in the late summer, while red jalapenos appear in the fall. Dice jalapenos for dips and hot sauce; slice over nachos, enchiladas and chalupas for added heat and beautiful color. Smoked, dried red jalapenos are called Chipotles, which makes them significantly hotter than the immature green pepper. (Chipotle is the Aztec word for 'smoke.')

In stores, Chipotle peppers are commonly canned in a tomato Abodo sauce. Giving off a rich, smoky flavor, they are excellent in sauces and soups, as well as for seasoning meats and stews.

SHU: Jalapeno, 5,000; Chipotle, 3,000



POBLANO

This large, mild, heart-shaped pepper has thick walls, which make them great for stuffing, as in Chili Rellenos.

Because it is a rather mild pepper, it can be used in quantity to add a deep rich flavor to any dish. Ancho is the dried version of the Poblano. The sweetest of the dried chilies, it has a brownish-red to chocolate color with a rich chili flavor. The Ancho is a staple in traditional tamales and in authentic Mexican cooking.

SHU: 2,000

SERRANO

This small, rich and waxy green pepper changes to orange and red as it matures. The serrano is hotter than the jalapeno, and is perfect for salsa verde and pico de gallo. Note: The smaller the size, the more heat they pack.

SHU: 25,000



If you can't take the heat...

Don't get out of the kitchen! Grab a glass of milk or a dollop of sour cream. Capsaicin, the heat element in chili peppers — dissolves easily in the fats found in dairy products. The capsaicin and the fats mix together, which keeps some of the capsaicin molecules from finding the heat receptors on your tongue. Don't expect the same results from low-fat sour cream or fat-free milk. It's the fat that does the trick.

Another common trick for putting out the fire: Drinking tomato juice or eating a fresh tomato, lemon or lime. The idea is that the acid counteracts the alkalinity of the capsaicin. So, squeezing a lime or lemon over your food — or eating tomatoes along with your meal — may reduce the impact.

To remove the heat from your skin: Don't wash your hands with water! Water only spreads the fire. Capsaicin isn't water soluble, but when combined with chlorine or ammonia, the capsaicin turns into a salt, which is soluble in water. Instead, mix one part bleach to five parts water and dip your hands quickly. Don't soak your hands, as ammonia can be irritating.

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