

It's Chile Down There

New Mexico gets most of the attention when it comes to chile peppers. And rightfully so. The thing is, if it weren't for Ed Curry and his chile fields southeast of Tucson, New Mexico would be in a world of hurt. Turns out, Ed supplies 90 percent of the green chile seeds used in American agriculture.



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RED HOT CHILE PEPPERS The climate and soil of Southeastern Arizona offer ideal conditions for growing chiles, where, on his farm near Pearce, Ed Curry crossbreeds chile varieties to produce specific traits.



THE SMELL OF SOUTHEASTERN ARIZONA HANGS HEAVY IN THE FALL AIR OVER Ed Curry's fields. Dry, hot, but almost sweet in a way, the scent clings to your clothes, and later, to your memory. Down there in Pearce, 90 miles southeast of Tucson, Ed Curry grows chiles. And he does it well.

His fields are thick with plants — chiles hanging like bunches of bananas from the low branches. Tromping out there dressed in the colors of green leaves and red chiles, Curry gives a shout.

"You ain't seen nothin' yet," he promises.

That claim could send the players of the world's chile industry into a state of hypersalivation. That's because this farmer doesn't just grow chiles, he creates chiles to meet the needs of the international marketplace and the palates of its customers.

Want a mild chile? Need a chile with smooth skin? Want one with a distinct flavor? Call Ed down in Pearce.

"Anyone can do it," he says of the crossbreeding process necessary to produce a chile made to specifications. Then, he adds with a smile, "You need to live to be 150 years old to see the results."

Not quite, but it can take a lifetime of innovation out in the fields to earn the place where Curry now stands. According to the 2006 "Agricultural Experiment Station Research Report" from the University of Arizona, the Seed & Chile Company now supplies most of the seeds for the green chile business of the United States.

"We're about 90 percent of the industry," Curry humbly confirms. But that's not all. He also helps meet the country's growing demand for cayenne and paprika. That makes Curry and the Arizona chile industry one of the state's best-kept secrets.

Southeastern Graham and Cochise counties offer ideal conditions for growing chiles — endless sunshine, elevations higher than 4,000 feet and cool nights. But, when it comes to exercising bragging rights in the chile arena, Arizona's neighbor to the east gets most of the attention.

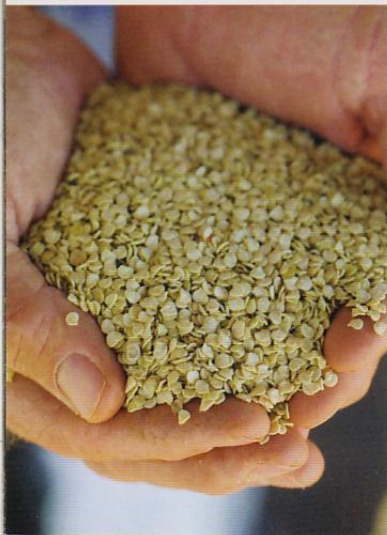
In New Mexico, folks have been extolling the virtues of their green chiles for decades. And with just cause. New Mexico ranks No. 1 in chile production, with 21,000 dedicated acres. By comparison, Arizona has about 7,000.

In Tempe, the annual Salsa Challenge, set for April 25, 2009, attracts tens of thousands of visitors. And the Tucson Firefighters Chili Cook-Off (not yet scheduled at press time) feeds 10,000 or more every year. But, it's the little

LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT It can take a lifetime to produce high-quality, genetically designed chile seeds (below, left) that meet growers' needs.

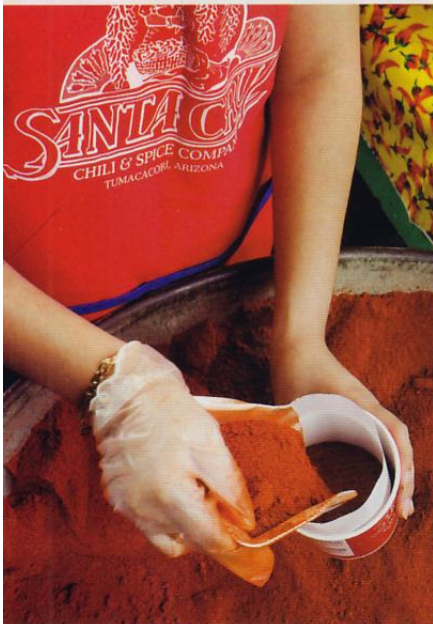
TOP SELLER Curry produced a chile variety known as Arizona #20 (below) that is prized for its consistent flavor and heat.

MUCHOS ANCHOS Curry inspects a field of ancho chiles prior to harvest (right). Anchos are dried poblano chiles.





“You tell them the best seed in New Mexico comes from Arizona, and that’s the truth.”



town of Hatch, New Mexico, that gets people drooling in anticipation of its yearly harvest. Nevertheless, what they’re growing over there has a definite Arizona connection.

“It’s the same seed,” says veteran plant breeder Phil Villa. Now working out of Camarillo, California, Villa has partnered with Curry in crossbreeding projects for more than 30 years. The seed he refers to comes from the Arizona #20, the standard of the industry and the choice of most green chile growers. Curry developed that chile.

“You tell them the best seed in New Mexico comes from Arizona, and that’s the truth,” Villa says with a fiery dose of Arizona pride.

Jean England Neubauer doesn’t have to worry about chile history arm-wrestling. Her focus is on what comes out of Curry’s fields now. At harvest time in the fall and winter, Curry takes the seeds of his plants, while Neubauer — as head of the Santa Cruz Chili & Spice Company in Tumacácori — takes the rest.

In one year, she’ll use more than 500,000 pounds of Curry’s raw chiles for her line of products, which includes Santa Cruz Chili Paste, the backbone of the company.

“As tomato paste is to Italian food, chile paste is to Mexican food,” she says.

Working with Curry, she can promise her customers a clear taste of Arizona chiles. “Picked in the morning,” she says, “in the can by the afternoon.”

While reading this piece, you might have noted the change in spelling, from *chile* to *chili*. Industry buffs and chile aficionados explain that chile refers to the raw product, and chili to prepared dishes. Until the late 15th century, those chiles were limited to

the stewpots and the gardens of the American continent.

Columbus and his crew were the first Europeans to take note, and then possession, of the tangy fruit of the New World. Forty years later, the Spanish conquistadores made their own chile discoveries in the markets and gardens of the Aztec empire.

Once Europe, Asia, India, Africa and all points east and west bit into this purely American delight, they made it their own. Consider Hungary and its paprika-flavored goulash, and South Korea, where chiles now comprise more than 12 percent of that country’s daily diet.

For many people in Arizona, chile is a term often limited to the familiar — the greens and reds used in regional cooking. We know the mild Anaheim of a chile relleno, and the bite of the jalapeño in salsa, but the heat-loving chile comes in an infinite variety of colors, shapes and tastes.

The mulatto chile ripens to a chocolate brown. The Scotch Bonnet looks like a tiny hat. Terms we often attach to wines, are now used to describe chiles — an “earthy” red, a “fruity” poblano. And the attention usually focuses on the heat of the chile. We go to chile festivals to savor a brow-beading cup of chili con carne. We teach our digestive systems who’s boss with a nip of habañero, the king of hot. But we might be missing something.

Mad Coyote Joe, founder of the Mad Coyote Spice Company in Cave Creek, writes and lectures on chiles. He says people can overlook one of the true attributes of chiles, what he refers to as the “delicate nuances.” In his book, *On the Chile Trail: 100 Great Recipes From Across America*, there are pages of recipes that say more about the chile gourmand than the chile daredevil. A touch of habañero, yes, but the title and taste are cool in his chilled avocado soup with Sonoran shrimp confetti.

“It’s not about the heat,” he says of the chile’s virtue. “It’s about the flavor.”

Which is why representatives of major

SOME LIKE IT HOT The Santa Cruz Chili & Spice Company in Tumacácori uses up to 500,000 pounds of Curry’s chiles per year to produce their salsas, picante sauces, chile paste and spices (above, left).

PEPPER DOCTOR The company also produces its Pure Mild Chili Pepper (left) at its facility in Tumacácori.



food companies and chile-growers around the world find their way to that farmer down in Pearce. They, like the Genovese navigator of old, search for new horizons. They want those nuances, the new flavors, the distinctive tastes and the bigger harvests. Sometimes, they want the impossible.

In 1995, a major food producer came to Curry with a request. "We want a red chile that peels," they said of a chile that didn't exist.

Eventually, they dropped the project, but not Ed. It took him a decade of crossbreeding generations of chiles to create an easy-peel red, but he did, and he'll release it when he's ready. As any farmer worth his harvest knows, the advantage comes with good timing — both nature's and your own.

So, for now, he tramples through his fields, shaking loose that dry, sweet, hot scent of the land and the green-leaved plants. Phil Villa joins him and calls out to anyone listening, "Oh, look at that one over there. And this one right here."

■ *Santa Cruz Chili & Spice Company is located across from Tumacácori National Historical Park. For more information, call 520-398-2591 or visit santacruzchili.com. ■■*

Kathleen Walker is a longtime contributor to Arizona Highways. She lives in Tucson, where she likes her days hot and her chiles mild.

Photographers Ryan and Don Stevenson not only documented Arizona's chile industry, they roasted, prepared and ate nearly every variety on Ed Curry's farm, and they're certain of one thing: Ed Curry has the largest, meatiest and tastiest chiles they've ever eaten.

STRING 'EM UP Chile ristras (above), a popular Southwest decoration, adorn Arizona shops and street corners at harvest time.

FIGHTING FIRE WITH FIRE Tucson firefighters Bert Thomas (left) and Michael Smith compete with other Pima County firefighters to win first prize during the town's annual chili cookoff held each autumn at Presidio Park (below).

BASIC SALSA CRUDA

INGREDIENTS

- 1 serrano chile, diced (removing seeds will reduce the heat)
- 2 tablespoons white onion, diced
- 1 large, ripe plum tomato, diced
- 2 tablespoons fresh cilantro, chopped
- ½ teaspoon corn oil
- ½ teaspoon Key lime juice
- A pinch of salt

DIRECTIONS

Mix all ingredients together and let stand 1 hour to blend. Makes ⅔ cup.

Source: Mad Coyote Joe

