

Tucson Lifestyle

THE MAGAZINE TUCSON LIVES BY

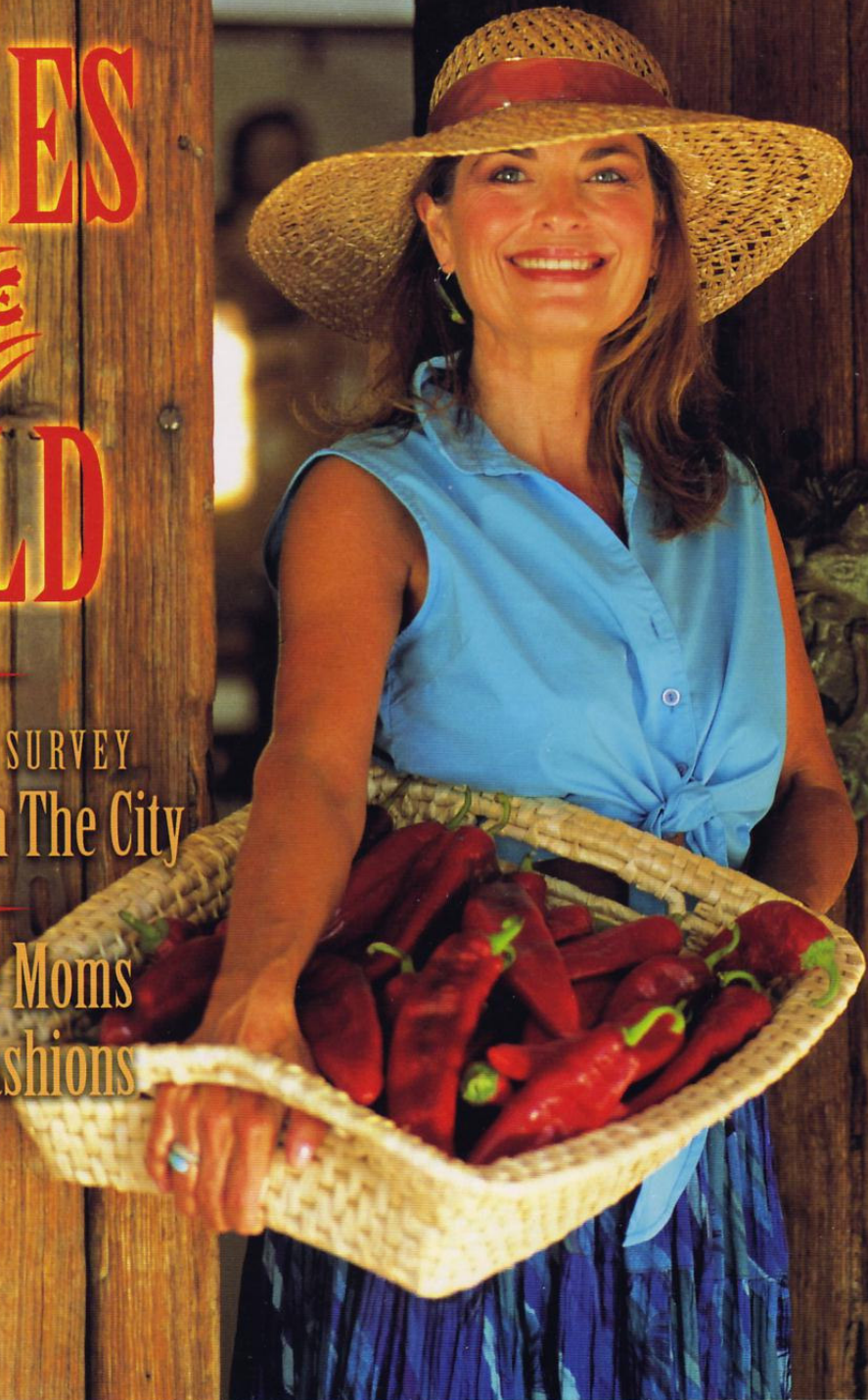
CHILES

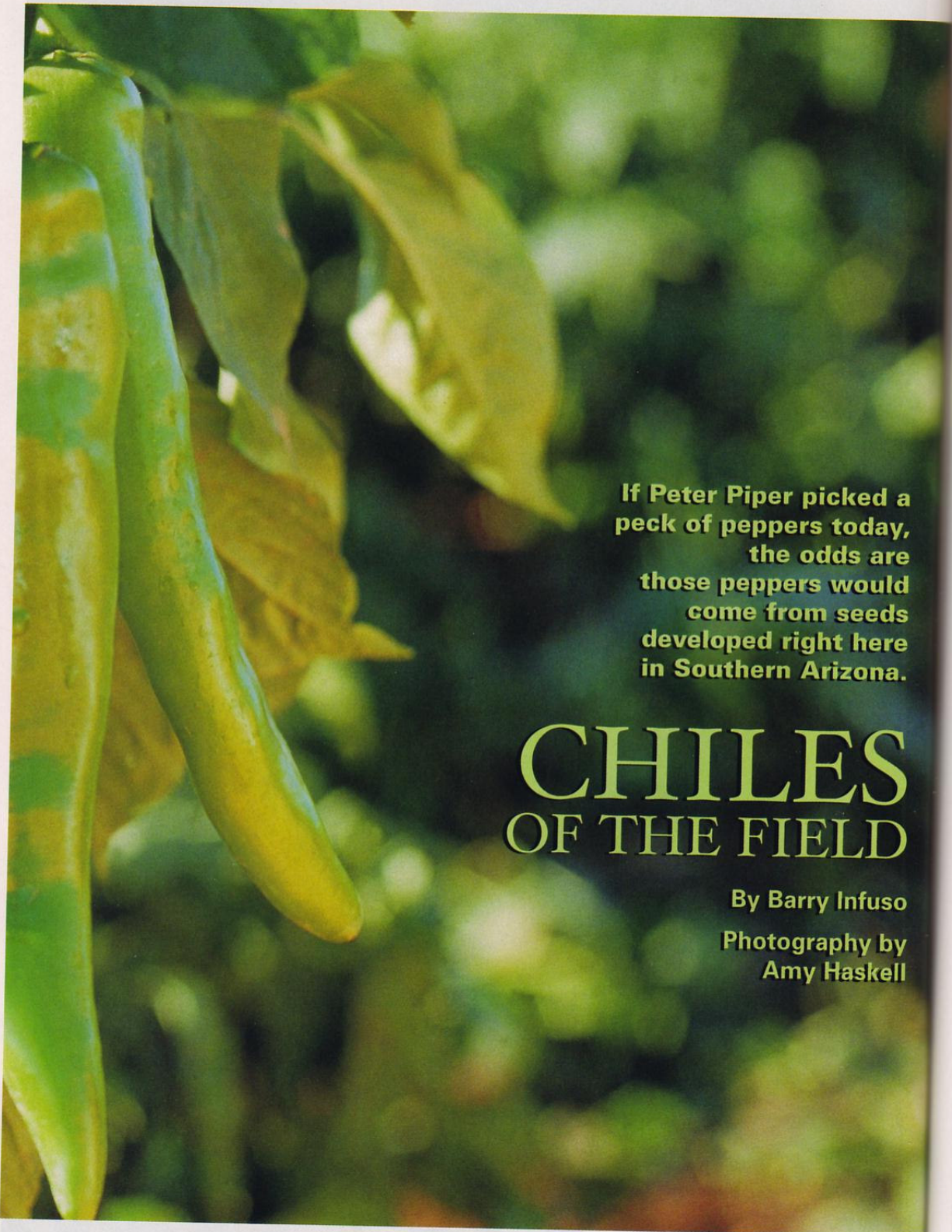
OF THE

FIELD

INDEPENDENT SURVEY
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In Spring Fashions





If Peter Piper picked a peck of peppers today, the odds are those peppers would come from seeds developed right here in Southern Arizona.

CHILES OF THE FIELD

By Barry Infuso

Photography by Amy Haskell

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Ed Curry, owner of Curry Farms in Pearce, Arizona, near the Dragoon exit off I-10, developed the Arizona/20 seeds that pepper pickers prefer.

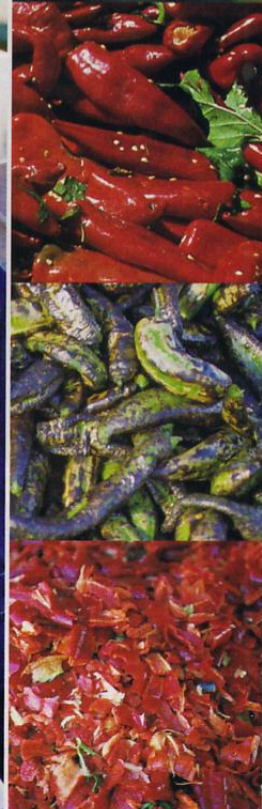
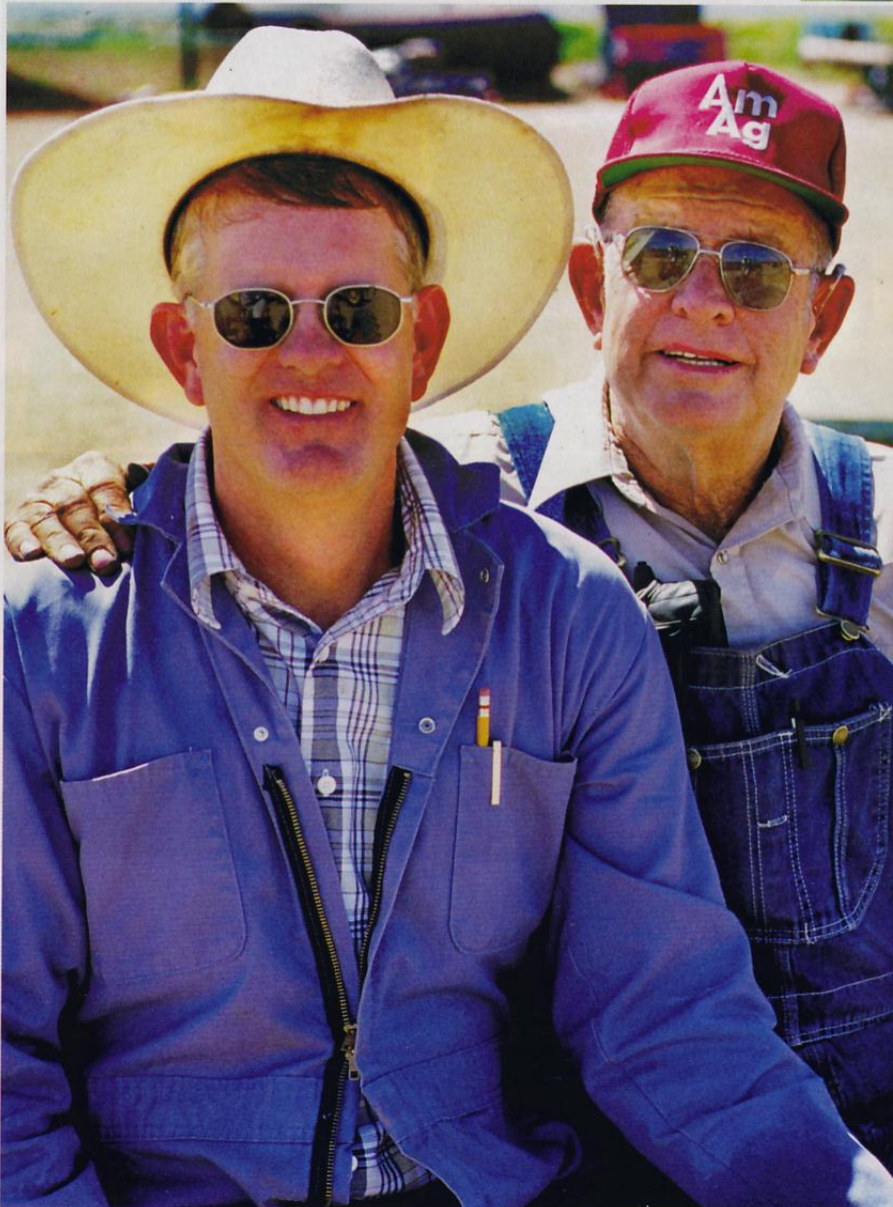
Curry grew up on his father's chile farm in Elfrida, Arizona. His dad Noel researched agricultural pamphlets from The University of Arizona's School of Agriculture and learned that chiles were just about the best crop to grow at his farm's 4,200-foot elevation. Today, Ed has his own farm, and with six children, he thinks the chances are good that one of them may follow in his footsteps.

When you listen to him talk about chiles, there is no doubt that the stuff flows in his veins.

Chiles come from the species *capsicum annum*, a perennial shrub. There are 20-30 types of capsicum (depending on which expert you ask) and five domesticated species, with dozens of pod types within those. To carry it a bit further, each pod type may have a number of cultivators, or varieties, that range from the mild bell pepper to the fiery habañero.

For many years, chiles from Hatch, New

Ed Curry followed in his father Noel's footsteps by establishing a chile farm.





The plants go through many stages before their seeds are finally harvested, beginning as green, immature chiles, ripening to red, and finally being processed for their seeds.



Mexico, were the only ones available in any quantity to growers and packers. The Hatch version is thin-skinned, and after it's dried to make chile powder, bitter. When pepper packers such as Old El Paso and Santa Cruz Chile Company wanted a milder pepper with more meat on it, Ed Curry set his mind to developing it. He collaborated in 1978 with plant breeder Phil Villa to cultivate a seed that became the Arizona/20. You may never have heard of the Arizona/20, but 80 percent of all green peppers grown in North America are Arizona/20s from Ed's seeds.

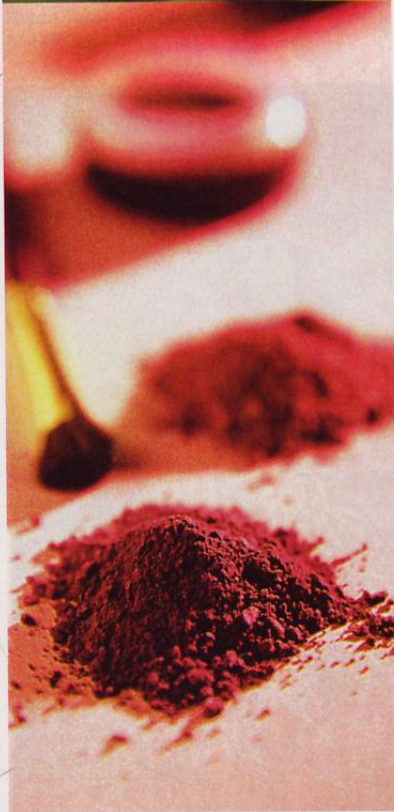
The name comes from the field number "20" where the seed was developed. Packers demand that growers provide a crop of the highest quality, such as can only be found in Ed's seed type. This is quite a responsibility for him. "If something were to go wrong, it could impact a number of growers, as well as the chile crop all around the country," he says.

Ed and Phil were fortunate to meet agriculture researchers Dr. Ben Villalon and Dr. Kevin Crosby of Texas A&M, who helped develop even more varieties to answer the

never-ending quest for the perfect pepper that blends taste and yield. One ongoing project for Ed and his friends is to cultivate a mild, yet superior red-colored pepper for paprika, as well as for use in natural dyes for products like lipstick.

In order to harvest the seeds, Ed must first grow the peppers. After 140 days, the peppers are firm; at this stage of ripeness they are called fruits. Another 30 days are required for them to mature to red and be ready for picking and processing. At this point, the pepper is called spice. It is then

The pulp goes to nearby Santa Cruz Chile Company for processing, where it is made into a variety of products, including chile powder. Chiles are even used as pigment for makeup.



cut open to release the seeds. This leaves the pulp, which has no value to Ed because he's only interested in the seeds.

The seeds are removed by submerging the opened peppers in water. The heavy, germinated seeds sink to the bottom, while the non-germinated seeds float to the top, where they are easily removed by skimming the surface. They are then dried in the open air, screened, bleached and packed in 40-pound sacks, which hold up to two million of them. Next, the sacks are shipped to farms across North America, including Mexico.

The premium meat (or pulp) remaining after the seeds are removed is processed in a nearby plant owned by Santa Cruz Chile Company. Santa Cruz makes chile powder, a variety of sauces for enchiladas, and a number of other chile products sold around the country.

Thanks to innovators like Ed Curry, chiles are hot stuff. Just how popular are they? Consider the fact that there is even a magazine published for capsicum connoisseurs (*Chile Pepper*), containing recipes, advice on where to find the best bottled, canned or

pickled peppers, and information about chile festivals and even chile-related garments.

Barry Infuso is a chef and culinary director at Pima Community College, Desert Vista Campus where he is known as "the Dean of Cuisine." ►