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OCTOBER 2013

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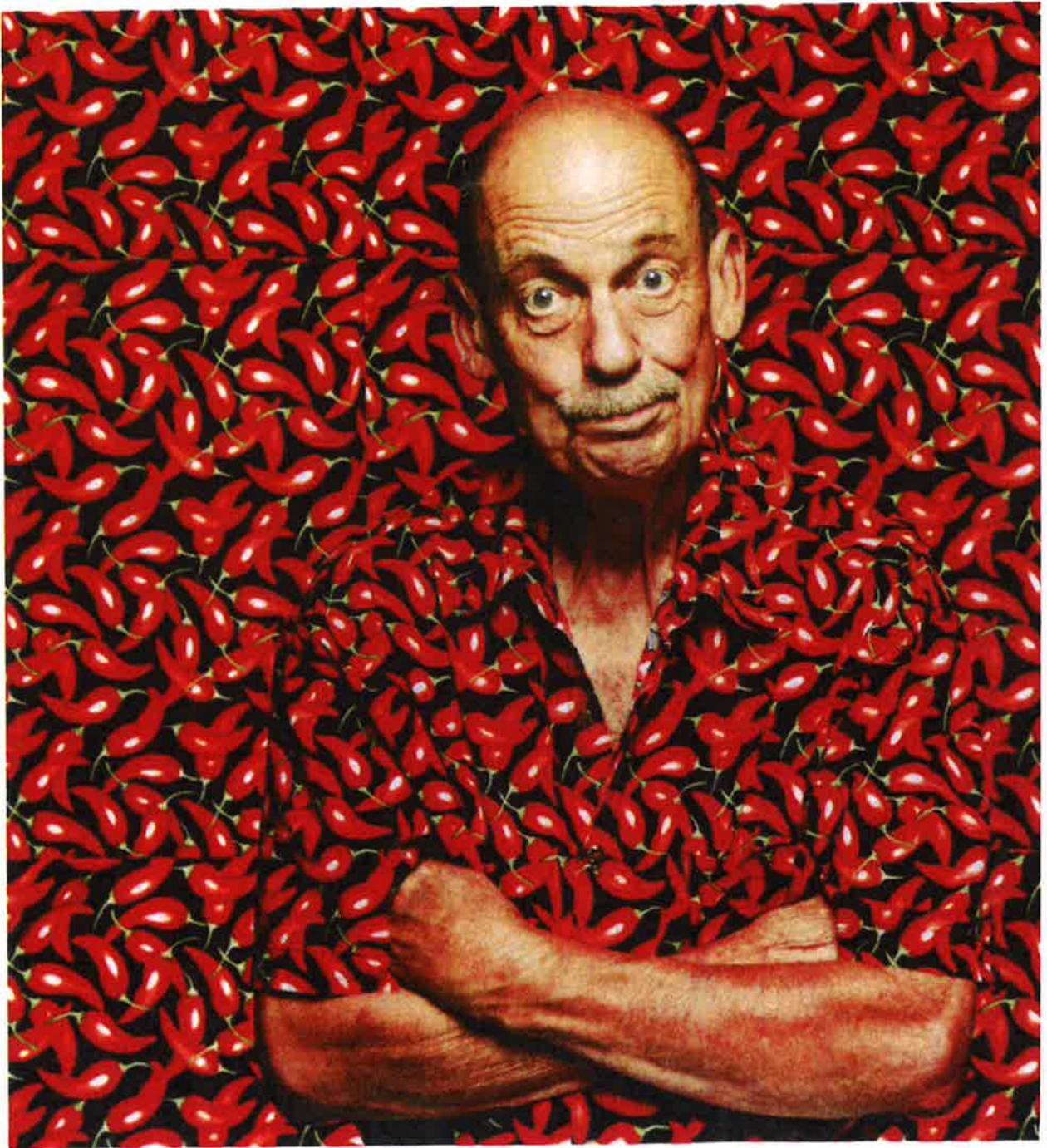
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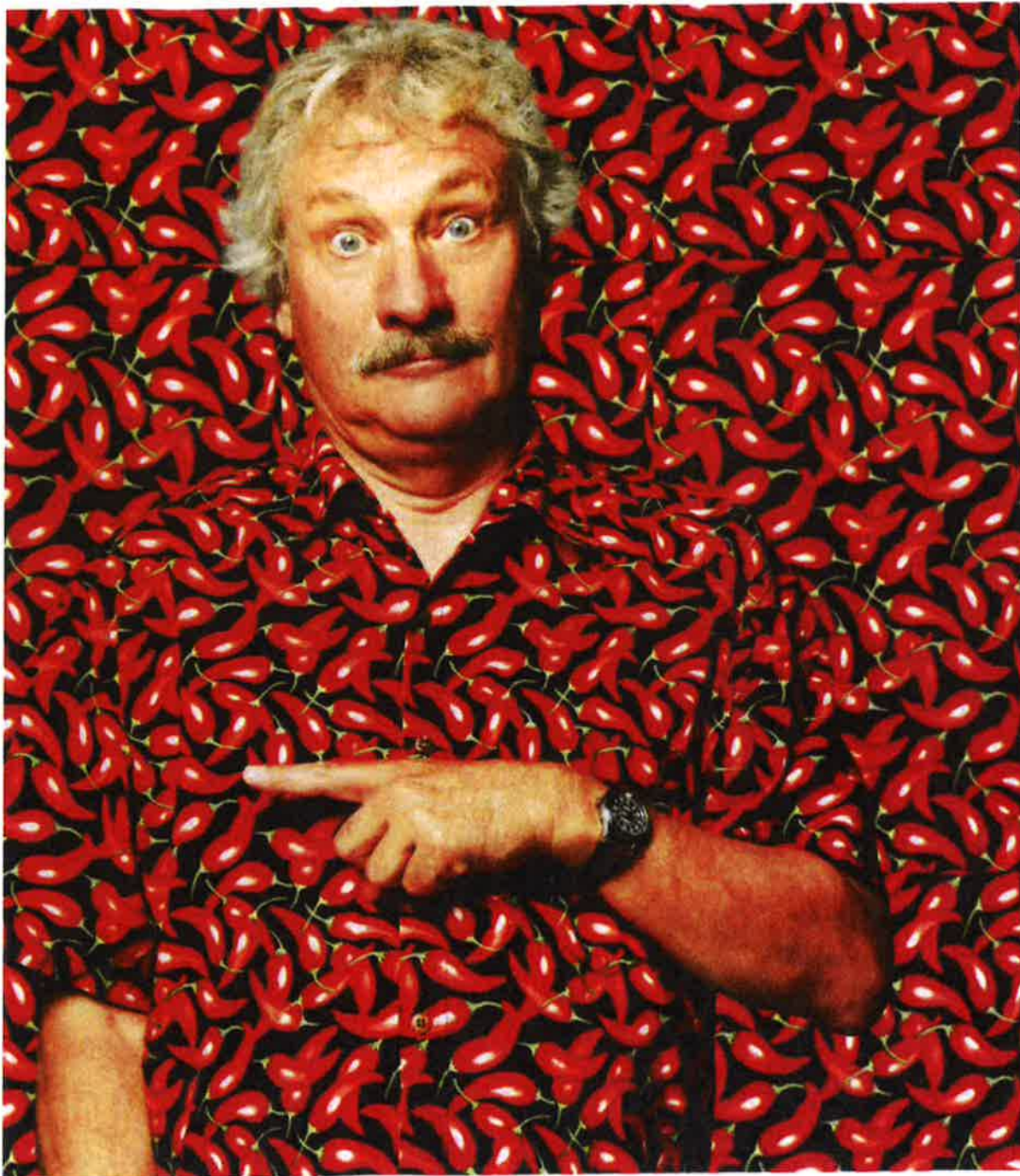
CHILEMAN & The



WITH NICKNAMES LIKE THESE, CLEARLY DAVID
THEY GO DEEP INTO WHY CHILES ARE THE MOS

Story by DANIEL DUANE *Recipes by* DAVE DEWITT

DOPE *of* PEPPERS



EWITT & PAUL BOSLAND ARE A BIT OBSESSED.
RESISTIBLE PAIN-INDUCING FOOD AROUND.

photography by WES NAMAN *Food Photography by* ANDREW SCRIVANI

“You should feel the heat in five or ten seconds,”

said Paul Bosland, his blue eyes boring into mine while I chewed my first bite of chile relleno at La Posta, an old-timey Tex-Mex restaurant in the dusty desert town of Mesilla, New Mexico. As a botany professor at nearby New Mexico State University, and the world's leading chile pepper expert, researcher and all-around carnival barker, Bosland has the swept-back silver hair and mustache of a late-period Mark Twain crossed with the young Frank Zappa.

“Yep,” I said, getting worried, “here comes that heat, right on schedule.”

“Should be mid-palate,” Bosland replied, watching me with the clinical detachment of an evil doctor conducting human toxicology experiments. That is if you can picture an evil doctor slurping an icy-cold Chile 'Rita, a margarita punched up with Besito Caliente, a blackberry-plus-habanero hot sauce.

My whole mouth, meanwhile, was turning into one of those controlled burns you see by highways out West.

“And it should be flat heat,” Bosland said, between further slurps of his Chile 'Rita. “Kind of painted on. Not sharp like needles jabbing into your lips and tongue.” He made a stabbing gesture with his fingers. “That would be more like a jalapeño.”

I groped for my own Chile 'Rita.

“But right... *now*,” Bosland said, before I could lip the straw, “as you finish swallowing, you should feel fine again, sort of, ‘I want another bite.’”

To my surprise, I did. I'd never been a spicy-food guy. Childhood trauma in a Mexican restaurant, pretty red sauce in a bowl, distracted mommy... But I'd flown to New Mexico to change that, to man up and eat some hot food and find out once and for all why people so crave chile-pepper spice. I wanted to know why hot sauces like PuckerButt, Bad Seed and Dave's Insanity Sauce are one of the fastest-growing industries in America. I wanted to know what it is about chiles that can support a New Jersey nursery devoted to them, selling 500 different chile-plant varieties (chileplants.com). And why thousands converge annually on the Chile Pepper Extravaganza in New Orleans put on by *Chile Pepper Magazine* (with the tagline “Live the Zesty Life”). And why untold more chile maniacs show up to sample novelties like chile-flavored edible panties at events ranging from the Diamante Peperoncino Festival in Calabria, Italy, to the New York City Hot Sauce Expo, with its promises of “live music, fire-breathers, spicy food vendors, awards show, eating contests.”

New Mexico felt like the obvious place for my chile quest for three reasons: First, the official state question is “Red or green?” as in my La Posta waiter's question, “Would you like red or green chile sauce on your enchilada?” Second and third: Paul Bosland and Dave DeWitt. These two are gurus in the world of chiles and call New Mexico home. DeWitt hosts the annual

National Fiery Foods & Barbecue Show in Albuquerque, which is the undisputed granddaddy of all spicy food shows. It draws 20,000 people a year for tastings of everything from hot sauces to chile-flavored cheese doodles. And Paul Bosland's Chile Pepper Institute at New Mexico State has been so successful that bleak little Las Cruces, population 99,000, now ranks as the world epicenter of chile-pepper agricultural research, attracting postdoctoral fellows from Asia, Europe and South America.

Straight from the airport, before meeting Bosland, I'd stopped for a poblano-rajas burrito that only hurt until I soaked my tongue in cold root beer (sugar being one of the known antidotes to chile




CHILE GURUS The Chile Pepper Institute in New Mexico, run by Paul Bosland (above), is home to about 2,000 chile varieties, many of which Dave DeWitt (above, right) uses in his recipes.

spice, second only to milk). And now, at La Posta, precisely when Bosland predicted I would want another bite, I did. Forking still more relleno into my flaming mouth, I plunged back into the pain-pleasure synergy that makes chile peppers unlike any other food.

Capsaicin, the chemical in hot chiles that we experience as spicy heat, may have evolved as a defense mechanism. All mammals have skin and mouth receptors that respond to capsaicin as if it were causing heat burns, although without actual cell damage. Birds do not have these receptors, allowing them to eat chiles, then spread the seeds far and wide.


Humans seem to have hacked this evolutionary defense, realizing it doesn't hurt us and that the tingling pain of capsaicin



FIRE IN THE BELLY

Most chiles, including the pickled jalapeños below, contain capsaicin, it's the compound that sets your mouth on fire, but preliminary research indicates that regular consumption can lower blood pressure by relaxing blood vessels.

Jalapeños in Escabeche
Recipe on
page 74



Thin, flavorful skirt steak is so often used for fajitas that sometimes it's referred to as fajita steak. It stays tender if cooked quickly. If overcooked it can be tough.

South Texas Steak Fajitas
with Belizean Habanero
Hot Sauce
Recipes on page 72

can be deliciously pleasurable. Theories abound for why humans are the only mammals that seek out chiles, and also for why chiles are more common in the cuisines of hot-climate countries. Chiles do cause sweat, cooling the skin. But a more plausible explanation has to do with capsaicin's antimicrobial properties: without refrigeration in hot climates perhaps our paleolithic forebears figured out that chile peppers help to preserve meat by killing harmful bacteria. Then there's the gastronomic bungee-jump theory, the idea that it's all about extreme experience. Penn State researchers have studied this question, finding that people who enjoy sensation-seeking behaviors, such as "driving fast on a twisty road," also tend to enjoy spicy food, while cautious people prefer their food mild.

Bosland leans toward a medicinal explanation, the idea that humans cultivated chiles for their pain-killing effects. "We know from an ancient Aztec codex that they would put chiles on toothaches," he says. But why we love chiles is a whole lot less important to Bosland than the plain truth that we do. His entire career, in fact, can be described as one big effort to exploit and expand that human love for capsaicin.

"I always joke, 'I put all my chiles in one basket,'" Bosland told me, of his professional life.

His laboratories have partnered with Korean and Chinese labs to sequence the chile pepper genome. And Bosland has also developed precise language for describing chile heat, which is what he applied to my experience of that chile relleno. First, there's "development," as in how fast it lights up your palate. Then there's "duration," as in how long it continues to burn. Next is "location," as in where you

sense it, ranging from lip-and-tongue to the back of your throat. After that comes "feeling," like that pinpricks-versus-painted-on distinction. Finally there's "intensity," measured in Scoville Heat Units ranging from zero for sweet bell peppers up to 2,500 for the New Mexican chile inside my relleno. At more than 2 million Scoville units is the fabled Scorpion pepper of Trinidad, currently rated as the world's hottest. That makes it the chile of choice among young men like the one calling himself the L.A. Beast, who eat Scorpion peppers raw and

then post videos of their physical meltdowns on YouTube, complete with slack-jawed drooling, sauna-like sweating and, sometimes, vomiting.

Bosland has also combined these metrics with flavor notes confirmed through High Pressure Liquid Chromatography, the same process used by wineries to identify what exactly makes cheap merlot, for example, taste like plum jam. The resulting Chile Pepper Flavor Wheel, a card modeled after wine-flavor

wheels, offers wine-like taste descriptors, such as the "perfumy, smoky, oak hint" typical of NuMex Sunflare chiles. "I want to be the Robert Mondavi of chile peppers," Bosland told me.

Some of Bosland's colleagues consider wine the wrong model for chile-pepper market expansion. Dave DeWitt, in particular, producer of that National Fiery Foods & Barbecue Show, worries that once you go with the wine comparison, "you start using wine terminology, and everybody knows what a bunch of crap wine terminology is." It bears mentioning that DeWitt and Bosland are friends and co-authors, having collaborated on *The Complete Chile Pepper Book*. That title is just one of 35 chile-related books authored by DeWitt to date, alongside *1,001 Best Hot and Spicy Recipes* and *The Chile Pepper Encyclopedia*.

"I found my niche, and I've been milking the same chile pepper for 30 years," DeWitt told me over a beer at what amounts to his throne room, the flower-bedecked bar of El Pinto, a 1,000-seat New Mexican restaurant with an annual chile-pepper consumption rate of about 200 tons. I'd driven up the morning after my Bosland dinner, taking I-25 north through abject desert into Albuquerque. Now, following

DeWitt through El Pinto's countless dining rooms and then into its salsa factory, we talked mostly about food and recipes.

DeWitt allows that habaneros have distinctive "fruity apricot-type aroma" while dried Mexican pasillas and anchos lean toward raisin-like notes. He also told me he has 5,000 chile-related recipes in his archives, including an Indonesian water-buffalo stew called *randang*, the Yucatecan habanero salsa known as *xnipec*, or "dog's nose," and even a traditional Russian salsa (if you can imagine such a thing) mixing peppers with

"I ask people sometimes, 'Have you ever known anybody who's been indoctrinated who's gone back to bland?'"



LAND OF CHILES With hot, sun-drenched days, southern New Mexico's valleys are home to miles of chile pepper farms. In the fall, roadside stands overflow with dried chiles woven into ristras and perfume the air with roasting fresh peppers.

CHILEMAN & *The* POPE of PEPPERS

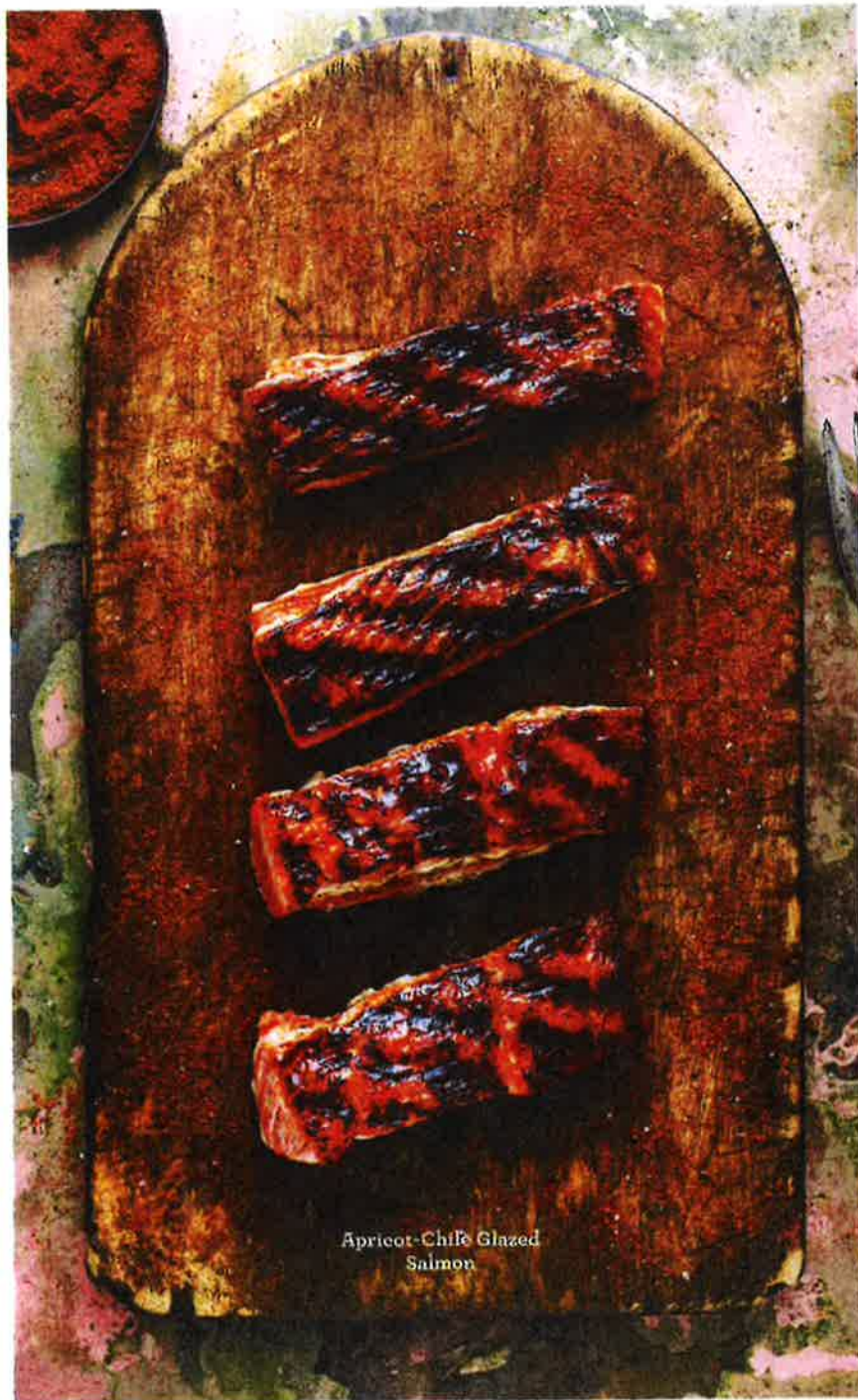
chopped raw beets. “The list goes on and on and on and on, because people have deep passion for peppers. I went to a super-market once in Malaysia and the hot sauce section had two aisles eight feet tall with hundreds if not thousands of hot sauces and curry pastes!” DeWitt marveled. He confided that he carries a little leather travel case everywhere he goes, holding vials of chile pepper to punch up the odd bland meal. “Like somebody taking their little spoon and cocaine with them,” he said, leading me toward the El Pinto lunch buffet.

Dish after dish offered the choice between red and green sauces, but also the question that matters most: “Mild or hot?” “It is a mania,” DeWitt said. But it’s not a passing trend.

“It’s been going on for so long. I ask people sometimes, ‘Have you ever known anybody who’s been indoctrinated who’s gone back to bland?’”

In my own study, at least, with its admittedly small sample size of one, the answer came through my surprising choice on everything from the red posole to the green-chile-and-pork stew. Hot, in other words, the only option that could possibly satisfy DeWitt, Bosland and, with the demons of childhood finally put to rest, me.

DANIEL DUANE is the author of seven books, including the memoir *Caught Inside, A Surfer’s Year on the California Coast*.



Apricot-Chile Glazed
Salmon

Apricot-Chile Glazed Salmon

h*xw h*wh

Makes: 4 servings

Active time: 25 minutes **Total:** 25 minutes

Cost per serving: under \$4.50

A sweet-hot glaze that marries fruit and chiles makes this easy grilled salmon special. Use jam rather than preserves for a smoother, prettier glaze. Look for New Mexico chile powder in well-stocked supermarkets or online at Amazon.com.

- 2 tablespoons New Mexico red chile powder
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1¼-1½ pounds center-cut wild salmon (see *Tip*, page 109), skinned
- 3 tablespoons apricot jam

1. Preheat grill to medium-high. (*No grill? See Oven Variation, below.*)
2. Combine chile powder and salt in a small bowl. Rub onto both sides of salmon.
3. Place jam in a small saucepan; heat over medium heat, stirring, until melted.
4. Oil the grill rack. Grill the salmon 4 minutes, then turn it over. Using a pastry brush, coat the top of the salmon with the jam. Close the grill; cook until the salmon easily flakes with a fork, 3 to 5 minutes more. To serve, cut into 4 portions.

Per serving: 215 calories; 6 g fat (1 g sat, 2 g mono); 66 mg cholesterol; 12 g carbohydrate; 6 g added sugars; 29 g protein; 1 g fiber; 433 mg sodium; 613 mg potassium. **Nutrition bonus:** Vitamin A (29% daily value), Potassium (18% dv), omega-3s.

OVEN VARIATION: Prepare through Step 3. Bake in a shallow baking pan at 350°F, about 15 minutes.

The Chile Pepper Diet

Studies suggest that capsaicin may help with weight loss and fight fat buildup. In one study, eating just ½ teaspoon of cayenne increased core body temperature, revving metabolism and thus burning more calories. Participants who didn't normally eat spicy foods experienced less hunger later on, especially for fatty and sweet foods.



Duck Chiles Rellenos
Recipe on page 74

CHILEMAN & The POPE of PEPPERS

South Texas Steak Fajitas

lvh

Makes: 4 servings, 2 fajitas (with ½ cup filling) each

Active time: 40 minutes

Total: 40 minutes (plus 8-24 hours marinating time)

Cost per serving: under \$4.50

In the late 1970s, fajitas were “discovered” in south Texas; by now they’re a Tex-Mex staple. Serve them with fresh pico de gallo, guacamole and cold beer. Bottled Italian salad dressing is a tasty (and convenient) part of the marinade. For a healthy choice, pick dressing with a short ingredient list including canola or olive oil. (Photograph: page 68.)

Steak & Marinade

3 fresh jalapeño peppers, stems and seeds removed

1 small onion, quartered

¼ cup fresh cilantro

¾ cup beer, pale ale or lager

½ cup Italian salad dressing

⅓ cup lime juice

1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce

1½ teaspoons garlic powder

1 teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon ground cumin

1 bay leaf

1 pound skirt steak (see Tip, page 68)

Fajita Vegetables

1 tablespoon canola oil

3 New Mexican green chiles or poblano peppers, seeded and cut into ½-inch strips

1 medium onion, halved and cut into ½-inch-wide strips

⅓ teaspoon salt

8 6-inch flour tortillas, heated

1. To marinate steak: Place jalapeños, quartered onion and cilantro in a blender or food processor and blend until finely chopped. Add beer, salad dressing, lime juice, Worcestershire sauce, garlic powder, 1 teaspoon salt and cumin and puree until smooth. Stir in bay leaf. Place steak in a gallon-size sealable plastic bag and pour the marinade over it. Close and refrigerate, turning occasionally, for at least 8 hours and up to 24 hours.

2. To grill steak: Preheat grill to medium-high.

3. Remove the steak from the marinade and place on the grill. (Discard marinade.) Grill 3 to 4 minutes per side for medium. Remove the steak to a clean cutting board and let rest for 5 minutes.

4. To prepare vegetables: Meanwhile, heat oil in a large skillet over high heat until shimmering. Add chiles and onion strips, sprinkle with ⅓ teaspoon salt and cook, stirring, until blackened in spots and just softened, 4 to 6 minutes.

5. Holding your knife at a 45-degree angle to the steak, very thinly slice across the grain—this helps keep the fajita tender. Serve the steak and vegetables on a

platter with the tortillas so everyone can make their own fajitas at the table.

Per serving: 467 calories; 20 g fat (5 g sat, 10 g mono); 74 mg cholesterol; 40 g carbohydrate; 0 g added sugars; 30 g protein; 3 g fiber; 792 mg sodium; 753 mg potassium. **Nutrition bonus:** Vitamin C (218% daily value), Zinc (41% dv), Iron (29% dv), Folate (22% dv), Potassium (21% dv).

Belizean Habanero Hot Sauce

Makes: 1½ cups

Active time: 20 minutes

Total: 20 minutes

To make ahead: Cover and refrigerate for up to 2 weeks or freeze for up to 3 months. Stir before serving.

Use this bright orange hot sauce to spice up eggs, soups and seafood. To cut the heat, use a little more carrot or fewer habaneros. Scotch bonnet peppers can be substituted. (Photograph: page 68.)

1 tablespoon canola oil

1 small onion, chopped

½ cup chopped carrots

1 cup water

3 fresh habanero chiles, stems and seeds removed, chopped

¼ cup lime juice

½ teaspoon salt

PICK A PEPPER

HERE ARE 12 CHILES TO TRY, SOME EASY TO FIND AND A FEW EXOTIC TYPES TO HUNT DOWN. THEY ARE ARRANGED FROM MILD TO HOT, MEASURED IN SCOVILLE HEAT UNITS (SHU).



Fresh New Mexican Chile. Long pods range from mild to medium (800-2,500 SHU) and go from green to red. Ideal for stuffing.



Dried New Mexican Chile. The mature red pods are dried in the sun and used in many sauces in New Mexican cuisine. Similar heat to fresh.



Ancho. This “wide” chile is a dried red poblano (1,500 SHU) with a unique, raisiny aroma. They are mostly used in Mexican sauces.



Poblano. This large, mild pepper (1,500 SHU) is dark green and turns red when mature. It is the chile of choice for stuffing in Mexico.



Aji Limon. The yellow pods from South America have overtones of citrus. They have medium heat (2,000 SHU) and are used fresh in salads.



Padrón. Eating this Spanish pepper sautéed in olive oil is like roulette—some pods have no heat, others are medium (about 3,000 SHU).



Chipotle. Dried red jalapeños (3,000-5,000 SHU) are smoked then used in sauces. They are sold in cans in adobo sauce.



Jalapeño. This Texas favorite has medium heat (3,000-5,000 SHU) and is used in both fresh salsas and cooked sauces.



Serrano. Smaller and hotter than the jalapeño (10,000-15,000 SHU), the serrano is green maturing to red. Used similarly to jalapeños.



De Árbol. Usually ground into powder and used as a condiment, this thin hot (15,000-30,000 SHU) pod is about three inches long.



Rocoto. The quite hot (30,000-50,000 SHU) bell-pepper-shaped pods are stuffed in Peru and used in salsas in the U.S. and Mexico.



Habanero. This chile from the Yucatán is super-hot (80,000-250,000 SHU) and mainly used in hot sauces and fresh fruit salsas.