

Nick and Choose { NICK ALTSCHULLER }

FEEL THE BURN

If you can't take the heat, get out of my kitchen.



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IN THE MORNINGS AFTER, THE kitchen staff goes on bucket patrol. Like criminals sweeping their tracks, they look for the stains and splatters of the fluids that erupted from their victims. Safely rinsed away, the evidence slides into the gutter and preparations begin for another Hell Night.

For 15 years, East Coast Grill has hosted the Hell Night dining series, which exalts the chili pepper and leads some acolytes to splash their esophageal offerings out on sidewalk. It's an assault on all the senses. Death metal throbs in the air. The restaurant is soaked in a devilish shade of red, like the mood lighting in Satan's boudoir. In the kitchen, minions in gas masks pollute the atmosphere with billowing clouds of capsaicin. Those who call for pop-sicles are openly mocked. Those who order the Pasta From Hell must sign a waiver. The latest rendition included the Trinidad scorpion Butch T pepper, newly crowned the world's hottest. Clocking in at more than 1,400,000 Scovilles (the unit for measuring spicy heat), it's roughly 250 times more powerful than a jalapeño and will puncture a hole in your stomach like a needle to a water balloon. Last month, EMTs arrived after one diner who ordered the fettuccini à la Mussolini passed out at the table. He awoke to find he had not earned his souvenir T-shirt.

Hell Night continues to expand and continues to sell out fast. I've been three times myself. A major part of its popularity stems from the fact that it's an experience hard to duplicate at home. Chilies are an intimidating ingredient, and with a couple false steps, a dish can go from picante to practical joke. Like many chili-heads, I've taken up the crutch of hot sauces. With each swing of my refrigerator door, the sound of rattling bottles proclaims my culinary cowardice.

Graciously, East Coast Grill owner Chris Schlesinger and head chef Jason Heard helped me select three peppers that spicy food fans should have in their pantry and offered pointers on how to tame the flames. "People misunderstand heat," says Schlesinger, sitting in front of an arsenal of chilies. "Heat is a weapon, a blunt instrument. You need to combine things to be effective."



Spice
world

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Any good soldier should know his weapon, so here are some **SCORCHING HOT FUN FACTS:**

*People are affected by different chilies in different ways. A Chipotle could put a smile on my face and tears in your eyes. A Manzano could have me doubled over while you're asking for seconds.

*The smaller the pepper, the bigger the burn. The seeds and ribs pack the heat, so a lower meat-to seed-ratio means a magnification of pain.

*A friend in neuroscience told me the area in the brain that responds to nicotine is next to the area that responds to capsaicin. So were you to serve chile relleno to a dinner guest back from a cigarette break, you'd be digging shards of skull out of the carpet for weeks.

The first pepper that Heard recommends is the wrinkled little cherry bomb known as the Scotch bonnet.

Great for seasoning, Scotch bonnets can be diced up for salsas or dropped into stews. Schlesinger describes the Scotch bonnet as "floral and nuanced." And, like a perfume, you really don't want to get any in your eyes. At 100,000 to 350,000 Scovilles, a handful of Scotch bonnets is like a book of matches: great for building heat, but playing with them could lead to disaster.

Tip From Heard: Keep the burn where it belongs. "Always wear gloves. And when you go to the bathroom, wash your hands *before* and *after*."

Next, there's the medium-sized pepper, like a serrano or poblano. Heard encourages neophytes to "substitute this in for when you would've used bell pepper before you knew anything about chilies."

One trick to try is to flame roast a serrano on your stovetop. Once the skin starts to pop and blacken, stick the pepper in a paper bag and let it steam, after which the skin should peel off easily. Dice it up and toss with orange segments and lime juice. A relish of sorts, I spooned mine into a sandwich and found the spark of spice collides nicely with the spark of acid before fading into a long, slow burn.

Tip From Heard: Scrape the seeds out before dicing, as roasting makes them bitter.

For a quick, biting heat that doesn't linger, there's the slender green or red bullet called the Thai bird chili. Use it to flavor vinegar, shave into curries, or make your own batch of nuoc cham. For this savory Vietnamese condiment, mix a cup of fish sauce with two teaspoons of rice wine vinegar and five thinly sliced peppers. While Heard suggests dashing nuoc cham on spring rolls or grilled beef, I can attest it also adds bold flavor to sandwiches. (Hey, I'm adventurous at the table, but I can be lazy in the kitchen.)

Tip From Heard: Whatever you make is going to be hotter the next day, as the capsaicin has had a chance to spread and saturate.

In your own endeavors, remember Schlesinger's call for combination. Variety is the spice of life, but in the kitchen, it's variety that's going to keep spice in check. So in the beginning, be merciful. For any novice, the goal should be making food people can keep down. Leave regurgitation to the professionals. ***

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