

Chillies - Some Like it Hot

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They can be red, green, orange or almost the brown colour of chocolate. They can be pointy, round, small, club-like, long, thin, globular or tapered. Their skins may be shiny, smooth or wrinkled and their walls may be thick or thin. You guessed it - chillies!

The chilli pepper comes from a pod-like berry of various species of the capsicum family found in Latin America. Accidentally discovered by Columbus, these fiery little vegetables are utterly delicious and an essential part of the cuisine of many parts of the world.

To the chilli connoisseur, each type has its own distinctive flavour, and a particular variety of chilli may be used to lend a specific dish its unique taste. There are over 2000 different varieties of chilli peppers with only a few exceptions, most of these enchanting little pods have some degree of pungency for the palate.



The colour of chillies is no guide to the intensity of their flavour. All chillies begin life green and turn yellow or red as they ripen, although there is no rule that green or red is hotter.

Generally, the smaller chillies are the most pungent. Because some chilli peppers are hotter than others, it pays to know your habaneros from your poblanos and your guajillos from your jalapenos.

The heat rating of chilli peppers is related to its Scoville number. The higher the number of Scoville Heat Units (SHU's) assigned to a chilli pepper, the greater will be its burn.

Most of the heat is in the seeds and the membrane, so if it's your first time trying chillies, or you don't like too

much heat, discard these. The heat comes from a chemical compound called capsaicin (the active ingredient in chillies), produced within the glands of the chilli, that intensifies as it matures.

It is thought that the capsaicin in chillies serves to prevent animals from eating chillies so that birds, which are a better distributor for their seeds, can eat them.

Mammals receive a burning sensation from capsaicin but birds do not. If you have braved the effects of eating fresh chillies and your mouth is burning, don't be tempted to drink water, as this can intensify the effect in the short term. Instead, have either yoghurt, sour cream, cheese, milk, cucumber or chopped mint.

Chillies are Nutritious

Chillies are a rich source of vitamin C, and a good source of niacin (vitamin B3) and beta-carotene. That is, if you can eat enough of them! One hundred grams of red chillies contain a week's supply of vitamin C, but a single chilli divided into a dinner for four makes less of a nutritional contribution. Nevertheless, chillies add loads of flavour, have virtually no fat or sodium, and are very low in calories. More than just flavour, there are some advantages of eating chillies.

Some Advantages of Eating Chillies

- It has been proposed that the eating of chillies results in the production of endorphins by the body. These are the feel-good chemicals that create a temporary feeling of euphoria.

- Chillies are reputed to aid digestion.

- The hot stimulating properties of chilli make it useful in clearing sinus passages, and it has been found to reduce mucous production in certain instances.

- Chillies appear to have some type of anti-inflammatory property. This is thought to be linked to their ability to cut recovery time of colds and flu, when taken liberally in the early stages of these ailments.

- Research originating in Thailand has found that people who eat a diet high in red peppers experience a much lower incidence of blood clotting.

- Scientists have now concluded that chilli does indeed possess fibrinolytic activity, meaning that it is able to break down blood clots.

- Chillies are also thought to help buffer pain from ailments such as arthritis, headaches and menstrual cramps.

- It has been postulated that a high daily intake of chillies may improve circulation to the hands and feet, in those suffering from poor circulation.

- Other responses of the body to eating chilli include increasing salivation in order to try and refresh the mouth, and an increased rate of sweating.

How to Store and Prepare Chillies

Chillies keep well in a paper bag for three or four days at room temperature. At their best, chillies will keep for a week in the vegetable rack, although they may change colour. For example, green chillies may turn red after you have stored them a few days. You can alternatively keep them in your refrigerator in a glass jar with the lid on for two to three weeks.

Dried chillies will keep for a year. It's amazing how easily the seeds of chillies get around, so it is important to always prepare chillies wearing disposable gloves, and thoroughly wash all knives, cutting boards and anything else that comes in contact with a cut chilli.

Above all, one should ensure never to rub your eyes if you've been preparing any kind of chilli dish and not to allow chilli to come in contact with a cut or graze, as it can burn the skin.

Chillies can be used to add spice to soup, stews and curries, and are familiar ingredients in Mexican, Indian, Cajun and Thai recipes. Raw chillies can also be used in marinades and salad dressings. Moderation is the key, because large doses of chilli can cause stomach problems and internal burns.

When buying chillies, look for fresh, smooth, shiny skins. Avoid those going brown on top and never be tempted to cheat: always use fresh chillies to achieve an authentic, full flavour.

So if you have no aversions to hot, spicy foods, start hauling out those recipe books and start experimenting with a bit of chilli. Bear in mind: chillies are also believed to be mildly addictive - the more you eat, the more you want to eat!