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PHOTOS BY GENEVIEVE RUSSELL

Chefs throughout northern New Mexico continue to be fascinated by the chile pepper. We learned some of the many different ways in which Santa Fe chefs cook with chile.

THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF

# chile

# POBLANOS SERRANOS JALAP

Although the chile pepper is technically a fruit, it's been New Mexico's official state vegetable (along with pinto beans) since 1965. Loved and revered by locals and visitors who come to New Mexico from communities around the world to enjoy a variety of delicious dishes prepared with green and red varieties, chile is an integral part of the state's culture and the basis of our traditional regional cuisine.

Chile has been part of the diet of the peoples in the Americas for thousands of years. Archaeologists have found remnants of chile plants at excavation sites in South America that date back thousands of years. A whole wild chile pod that is thought to be from 6,500 B.C. was found in a cave in Peru. Domestication of the chile plant is estimated to have happened more than 5,000 years ago.

New Mexicans are thought to have had their first contact with chile in the late 1500s. According to author Kelly Urig in her book *New Mexico Chiles, History, Legend and Lore*, 16th century Spanish explorer and historian Baltasar Obregón, a member of an expedition to New Mexico, made a journal entry in 1582 that says, "They have no chile, but the natives were given some to plant."

Today, many varieties of chile are grown throughout New Mexico, from Hatch in the southern part of the state to villages in the north such as Chimayó, Velarde and Dixon. Chile needs to be harvested by hand, which makes it a labor-intensive crop to grow.

Time is the difference between New Mexican green and red chiles. Green chile turns red as it ripens. In general, fresh and roasted chiles are green. Dried chiles and dried chile powder are red.

Most chile peppers are labeled as "mild," "medium," or "hot" to describe the amount of heat one can expect when eating them. Heat in chile peppers is caused by chemical compounds known as capsaicinoids. Genetics, weather conditions, growing conditions and fruit age affect capsaicinoid content and, therefore, the chile's heat level.

## CONTINUING THE NORTHERN NEW MEXICO CHILE TRADITION

Tucked away in the village of Chimayó, a fertile valley located approximately 25 miles north of Santa Fe, is the restaurant *Rancho de Chimayó*. Founded in 1965 by Arturo and Florence P. (affectionately known as "Mrs. J") Jaramillo, in an old restored family residence, this award-winning establishment serves traditional northern New Mexico food using family recipes.

In 2016, *Rancho de Chimayó* received the 2016 *James Beard Foundation Award* for America's Classics Award, which is given to restaurants for their timeless appeal while serving quality food that reflects the character of their communities.

*Rancho de Chimayó's* menu is filled with traditional northern New Mexico dishes, including tamales, burritos, enchiladas and huevos rancheros, that are topped with New Mexico grown red or green chile. Among the restaurant's signature dishes are spicy guacamole, hand-rolled tamales, blue corn enchiladas, chile rellenos and carne adovada.

"To keep up the quality of our red and green chile, we only make five gallons of them at a time," explains Mrs. J, who was New Mexico *Restaurateur of the Year* in 1987 and won the *Lifetime Achievement Award* from the National Restaurant Association. "Even though our green chile is hotter than our red chile, we sell a lot more green than red."

Farmers in Chimayó grow a highly-prized chile, but since it's only available in very small quantities, *Rancho de Chimayó* is not able to serve it on the menu. "We would need to be able to buy 15,000 pounds of it at harvest," says Mrs. J, who is establishing a new garden on the property and hopes to grow their own Chimayó chile. In the meantime, the restaurant buys internationally-known and valued Hatch chile from southern New Mexico.

Vegetarians appreciate *Rancho de Chimayó's* meatless green chile, which can accompany their favorite dishes. For *Rancho de Chimayó* guests who want to consume the hottest chile in the house, Mrs. J suggests ordering this one.

## INDISPENSABLE CHILE!

Cheryl Alters Jamison, a four-time James Beard award-winning cookbook author, can't imagine her culinary life without chile.

"I've been fascinated with red and green since I was a teenager in Illinois," says Jamison, who also has her own radio show on KTRC in Santa Fe. "My dad got a congressional cookbook from our congressman, and in it was a recipe from the wife of Manuel Lujan Jr. (former New Mexico congressman) for green chile chicken enchiladas. That intrigued me."

When Jamison arrived in Santa Fe in 1980, she bought her first 40 pound sack of roasted green chile at harvest time. "I asked myself what I was going to do with all that green chile," she recalls. What Jamison eventually ended up doing was figuring out hundreds of delicious recipes that incorporate green chile in them.

"Nothing is off-limits," says Jamison, who has put green chile in tuna salad and blue corn muffins, on pizza and as an essential ingredient in grilled cheese sandwiches. "It's all about balancing flavors and textures."

Jamison loves to use chile when she grills and barbecues. She has written a number of books on these subjects, including *Smoke & Spice: Cooking with Smoke, the Real Way to Barbecue*, which has sold more than one million copies and is one of the bestselling outdoor cookbooks on the marketplace. Jamison uses chile in dry rubs when she grills beef, chicken, shrimp and vegetables. If she wants to elevate the heat, she adds a pinch of cayenne.

Along with her late husband Bill, who passed away in 2015, Jamison has authored 18 cookbooks. The cookbooks are available on her website ([excitedaboutfood.com](http://excitedaboutfood.com)). Of special interest to lovers of chile and New Mexico cuisine is the 2012 cookbook *Tasting New Mexico: Recipes Celebrating One Hundred Years of Distinctive Home Cooking*.

"Chile is in most of my recipes," says Jamison. "I love coming up with chile recipes."

at right: jalapeño chile  
right page: ground red chile



ENO HABENERO CAYENNE AJI

## LET ME SHOW YOU HOW TO COOK WITH CHILE

A former New York chef who worked at several popular restaurants in New York City, including Soho's "Greenstreet", Tribeca's "Odeon" and Larry Forgione's "An American Place," John Vollertsen (known by everyone as Chef Johnny Vee) has been one of the 'superchefs' with Cooking with Kids for 10 years. A Santa Fe non-profit established in 1995, Cooking with Kids' mission is to "educate and empower children and families to make healthy food choices through hands-on learning with fresh, affordable foods."

Vee also offers private cooking classes where he loves introducing his students to the art of cooking with chile. He became very familiar with Southwestern cooking in the mid 1980s after he got involved in a project with an Australian company that led to the establishment of a chain of six Southwest-flavored restaurants in Australia and New Zealand.

"I always use New Mexico chile in my recipes," explains Vee, who wrote his book *Cooking With Johnny Vee* in 2008. "However, I do admit that I put poblanos grown outside the state in my chile rellenos when local chile is not available."

When it comes to green chile, Vee relishes its inclusion in his Thanksgiving menu. He has come up with a killer green chile sopapilla stuffing for turkeys and delicious green chile mashed potatoes.

"Green is good for savory dishes," he explains. "I usually use fresh green, but recently I found an air-dried green chile that I really like."

Red chile is part of many of Vee's "sweet" recipes. If he doesn't want a recipe to be too spicy, he makes sure he's using a mild red chile. "Sometimes, if a recipe calls for paprika, I substitute with a mild red chile," he adds. Vee also creates a marinade sauce with red chile in it for his Shawarma (Middle Eastern) meat dishes.

When it comes to desserts, Vee reaches for red chile. He likes the way it can taste with apples. One of his favorite sweet dessert sauces is his red chile caramel sauce.

Anyone interested in having a hands-on private cooking experience with Vee should visit [chefjohnnyvee.com](http://chefjohnnyvee.com).

## CHILE, IN ITS MANY DIFFERENT VARIETIES

At the Rosewood *Inn of the Anasazi's* restaurant, Chef Peter O'Brien embraces many different kinds of chiles and enjoys preparing them in a variety of ways. One chile he particularly likes is the poblano, a mild pepper that originated in Mexico. It can be dried, stuffed and put in a mole sauce.

"Poblanos add an earthy, smoky flavor to dishes," explains O'Brien, a classically trained chef who graduated from the Culinary Institute of America in New York and took the helm of the *Anasazi Restaurant* in 2018 after more than 20 years of experience in the hospitality industry. "I make a variety of dishes with poblanos, including a creole chicken. When recipes call for green bell peppers, I replace them with poblanos. I usually roast them."

Serrano and jalapeño peppers are also among O'Brien's favorite chiles. Serrano peppers have a bright flavor and are hotter than jalapeños, which are smoked in the *Anasazi Restaurant's* kitchen and find their way into many of O'Brien's recipes. Before adding serrano peppers to dishes, O'Brien roasts them, then cuts them in half lengthwise and takes out the seeds. "I put serranos in guacamole because avocados are so fat and buttery and can use the heat," he says.

If O'Brien wants the meat of a chile pepper to be evenly cooked and have a consistent color for dishes such as chile rellanos, roasting is a great method of preparing the pepper for use.

During the summer, O'Brien likes to grill chiles. "I like that charred flavor," he says. "I will leave some charred chile in my purées because I think the dish feels more authentic. It's important to me that my dishes aren't too perfect."

Another chile O'Brien enjoys working with is guajillo chile. Grown in abundance in the Mexican state of Zacatecas, this second-most commonly used dried chile in Mexican cuisine has many different uses.

"If I want a dark authentic salsa, I use dried guajillo chile," O'Brien adds. "It's a tight, dark earthy chile that I reconstitute with wine, water or tequila."



at left: guajillo chile

right page  
left: serrano chile  
right: cascabel chile



# EL CHIMAYO CAYENNE CHIPOTLE



jalapeño



poblano



serrano



habanero



cayenne



aji amarillo

Some of the most common varieties of chile found on restaurant menus are:

#### | JALAPEÑO |

A widely used hot pepper that's tapered and about two inches in length. Jalapeños vary tremendously in their degree of heat. They can taste like a mild green bell pepper or incredibly hot. A dried and smoked jalapeño is called a chipotle.

#### | POBLANO |

These small, dark green chiles range from mild to hot. Poblanos are usually roasted and peeled. They're a popular choice for chile rellenos, a traditional dish in which a roasted pepper is stuffed with cheese, coated in egg and fried. A dried poblano is called ancho.

#### | SERRANO |

Native to Mexico, serrano peppers are green when growing but mature in a variety of colors. These hot, long, small chiles are often used fresh and put in salsa. They are also used to flavor stews, casseroles and other dishes.

#### | HABANERO |

One of the hottest chiles in the world (much hotter than a jalapeño), habanero chiles are usually orange or red in color. They are used in very small quantities and can be found in salsas, sauces and dressings.

#### | CAYENNE |

Considered moderately hot, cayenne is a long and mostly red-colored pepper. Although it can be eaten fresh, it's usually dried and consumed in a powder form.

#### | AJI AMARILLO |

Literally named "yellow chile pepper, aji amarillo is a hot and fruity-tasting Peruvian chile pepper that turns bright orange when mature. The chile pods have a thick skin and are up to five inches in length. It is considered an important ingredient in Peruvian cooking.





# LE THAI PASILLA LA BAMBA G

## CHILES FOR EVERY SEASON

Chef John Sedlar's James Beard nominated restaurant *Eloisa* in the Drury Plaza Hotel is named after his grandmother who lived on a ranch in the northern New Mexico community of Abiquiu. Sedlar grew up in Santa Fe and owned several restaurants in Los Angeles before moving back to Santa Fe in 2015. New Mexico cuisine is clearly in his blood.

"I divide chiles into seasons," explains Sedlar. "Summer chiles are bright and fresh. I use serranos, jalapeños, habaneros and aji amarillos (Peruvian chile with a bright yellow color and sunny, tropical tones) during the summer months in salsas and sauces. I may mix summer chiles with citrus or lime and basil or cilantro."

Winter chiles are used in a dry form. Among the varieties of chile that Sedlar cooks with in the winter are the cascabel chile, a short chile with broad shoulders that has a rich burgundy flavor, the pasilla ("little raisin") chile with a blackish color and concentrated sugar flavor that balances heat with sweetness and chipotle, and a smoke-dried ripe jalapeño. Sedlar uses dried chipotle with seeds mixed in.

A fan of Chimayó chile, Sedlar heads north to the New Mexico village of Chimayó to buy it directly from farmers. "I knock on doors to get this chile," he explains. "I have my favorite growers. As far as I'm concerned, Chimayó chile is the Rolls-Royce of chiles."

While Sedlar adds spices to other kinds of chile, he only adds water and salt to the Chimayó chile, which he buys as pods. It's a very expensive chile, but Sedlar says, "it's well worth the cost."

For the past several years, Sedlar has been experimenting with incorporating chile into desserts. He recently came up with a recipe for chocolate ice cream with mole. "I like combining hot spicy chiles with cool ice cream," he says. "It's fun and quite unexpected."

at left: chimayó chile

## VIETNAMESE CUISINE MEETS NEW MEXICO CHILES

Chef Hue-Chan Karels, who left Vietnam in 1975 with her family to start a new life in the United States, is delighted to be able to share traditional Vietnamese cuisine with the Santa Fe community through her business *Open Kitchen*.

Established in 2009 in Washington, D.C., *Open Kitchen* was launched in Santa Fe in 2014 when Karels and her husband found their dream home in town. Open Kitchen offers memorable dining experiences, event planning, catering and specialty cooking classes.

"Vietnamese cuisine uses fresh, simple, and affordable ingredients to create dishes that are big in flavors, rich in nutrients and enticing to the senses," says Karels. "For fresh chile, the Vietnamese use bird's eye chile (a Thai chile pepper commonly found in Ethiopia and across Southeast Asia). "For pre-made chile sauces, we use Sambal Oelek, which is named after the Indonesian words for hot sauce and mortar and pestle, as well as Sriracha (a type of chile sauce made from a paste of chile peppers, distilled vinegar, garlic, sugar and salt).

Karels' recipes have expanded far beyond Vietnamese cuisine. "I love spicy food," she exclaims. "It's awesome to be in an environment where people add a lot of spice and flavor to food."

What Karels has discovered during the past four years since she's lived in Santa Fe is that the taste of green chile varies from year to year, depending on the weather conditions it has experienced during the growing season.

"Each year's crop is different from the last one," she remarks. "Crops change in flavor and intensity. There are years when I've had to wear gloves when roasting my own chile because it was so hot, and other times when the chile hasn't been quite so hot. It will be interesting to see what this year's crop will be like, considering all the rain we've gotten. The way I see it, my adventure with chile is just beginning." *For more information: [openkitchenevents.com](http://openkitchenevents.com)*

While Santa Fe chefs who have worked with chile for decades have established some tried and true recipes, they are continually excited about discovering new ways to use this traditional food. For all of them, the adventure continues!

## SPIRITS, BEER AND WINE, CHILE STYLE

At *Chili Line Brewing Company*, which has a taproom in Santa Fe at 204 North Guadalupe Street and just opened a new taproom in Lamy, chile is included in the brewery's dark ale La Bamba beer. "Adding chile to our La Bamba beer is something that wasn't planned and happened naturally," explains owner and brewer Alexander Pertusini.

Several years ago Pertusini was gifted with bags of dry red chile that two of his customers had purchased for him at a chile stand north of Española. The chile sat on a shelf for a couple of months before Pertusini thought about adding it to his beer.

"I had overproduced a batch of La Bamba and thought I'd try adding the chile to the beer after the brewing and fermentation process," he says. "It worked out beautifully."

Since then, Pertusini has added both green and red chile to other beers. He warns that his chile beers are not for the faint of heart. "You have to be a chile enthusiast to like them," he says. "You get a real kick in the back of your throat."

In 2015, *Santa Fe Spirits's* owner Colin Keegan first put jalapeños in his Expedition vodka, which is distilled from 100% maize. "I did quite a bit of experimenting," he recalls. "What I found is that alcohol pulls out a lot of flavors in the jalapeños that are hidden. Jalapeños work really well in vodka. They're so strong, however, that they aren't good in gin."

Keegan cuts fresh jalapeños in half to get more flavor out of them. Stems and seeds are removed. He puts the equivalent of four or five jalapeños in a one-gallon glass container filled with vodka and lets it sit on a counter for a couple of days before consuming.

"I like how jalapeños work in vodka so much that I'm experimenting with putting a milder chile in our gin," Keegan adds.

Adults are welcome to try Santa Fe Spirits's jalapeño-infused vodka at the company's tasting room at 308 Read Street.

Jasper Riddle, co-owner and head winemaker at *Noisy Water Winery & Cellars* in Ruidoso, New Mexico, made his first green chile wine in 2011 and red chile wine in 2012. The idea to put chile in wine came from his father, Rick Riddle, a retired winemaker who was the winery's original owner.

"There are many challenges and nuances to making chile wine," says Riddle, who owns the winery with his mother, Mary Jo Piedmont. "Chile varies in hotness from crop to crop. It's also quite oily. Oils can permeate equipment, which can affect the taste of the wines. We need to keep the integrity of our wines and make sure that the wines we make are consistent in strength and taste from year to year. So much of what I've learned about making chile wine has been through trial and error."

*Noisy Water Winery*, which has a Santa Fe location at 219 W. San Francisco Street, currently produces Amor En Fuego (Red Chile & Chocolate Wine), Green Chile Besito Caliente Wine and Rojo Caliente (semi-sweet red) wines.

Visitors to the Santa Fe tasting room can sample these and other wines made from New Mexico grapes by this family of fifth generation farmers.



# GREEN RED JALAPEÑO INFUSED

