

# Food for Thought: The Chili-Lover's Guide to Mouth Surfing

By Robert Templer

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

It might help to begin with a brief primer on chilis, which get their heat from chemicals called capsaicins -- complex fat-soluble alkalines. Even the hottest chilis contain only about 1% of the chemical, which is confined to the placenta -- the inner ribs of the fruit to which the seeds are attached. Capsaicins are multitasking chemicals: Aside from stimulating nerves that produce a burning sensation, they make you salivate and sweat, and leave your nose runny.

Theories abound about why the chili, with its palpable ability to punish, is so adored in cultures as diverse as Korea and Madagascar, Mexico and Indonesia. One is that chilis, by inducing salivation, create what food scientists call a "full mouth," akin to the rich sensory experience of very fatty foods. Chilis also boost the production of digestive juices and are a great source of vitamins A and C. Recent research by scientists at the Yale University School of Medicine suggests capsaicins could protect against some cancer-causing chemicals.

Other chili-philes insist that the appeal lies in the chili's capacity to preserve food and mask spoilage. But scientists are dismissive of these claims. (According to one scientist, chilis are "all bark and no bite.") And then there's the idea that the cooling effect of chilis -- which follows the sweating brought on by the capsaicins -- accounts for their popularity. Well, then why are chilis so pervasive in colder climes like the highlands of Mexico or Korea? (Koreans have probably the world's spiciest diet, consuming an average nine grams of chilis a day per person.)

## FULL TEXT

As a six-year-old living in Hong Kong, I found an ornamental pepper bush next to a swimming pool. For reasons that were compelling at the time but escape me now, I decided to pick all those alluring red fruit and crush them in my hands. As my screams echoed for blocks around, parents froze and searched anxiously for their children.

No amount of ice cream, honey or other cooling balms eased what I still recall as one of the most painful moments of my life. I had covered myself in the burning juice, searing the membranes of my eyes and mouth. From then on, I shied away from those malevolent bushes.

And yet now, I go out of my way to recapture a similar feeling, seeking out Sichuan and Thai food, dousing anything too bland in hot sauce, even snacking on pickled jalapeno peppers. How is it that one can move so far from aversion to addiction? How do tens of millions of people each year turn from chili-haters to chili-lovers? Masochism, it seems.

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Rather, people may love chilis for a simpler reason: they stimulate. Two University of Pennsylvania psychologists who studied chili-eating in the U.S. and Mexico, Peter Rozin and Deborah Schiller, found that chili lovers relished the "benignly masochistic" burning sensation. Their subjects even enjoyed the runny nose and tears -- the body's way of flushing a toxic substance.

Consider the graphic nicknames given to some of the more common chili dishes: "Ants Climbing a Tree," the moniker for a fiery Sichuan pork noodle dish that produces a tingly burning in the throat; "Weeping Tiger," the translation for "Sua Rong Hai," a northeastern Thai dish of beef, herbs, lime juice and, of course, a heap of chilis.

It seems to be a uniquely human attribute to delight in negative physical responses. Grazing animals will sample a chili only once, if ever. And lab rats fed chili-laced food from birth will always opt for plainer fare when it's available.

Mr. Rozin and Ms. Schiller refer to this human pursuit of a dose of pain and discomfort as a "constrained risk" -- like riding a roller coaster or watching a horror movie. Indeed chili-eaters showed a preference for these activities as well other irritant foods like mustard and horseradish. The thrill, psychologists believe, is derived from the realization that while the body is reacting to what it senses as harm, the brain realizes that no real damage is being done.

Andrew Weil, an ethnobotanist writing in the *Journal of Psychedelic Drugs*, refers to the joy surrounding irritant foods as "mouth surfing." The secret, he says, is to perceive "that the sensation follows the form of a wave: It builds to a terrifying peak, then subsides, leaving the body completely unharmed. Chili eating is only painful when one has to go from the trough of the wave to the crest over and over." He recommends eating chilis at a fairly constant rate during a meal, in effect working through the heat to inure yourself to it. "One is then able to glide along on the strong stimulation, experiencing it as something between pleasure and pain that enforces concentration and brings about a high state of consciousness."

There is much to be said for Mr. Weil's mouth-surfing technique. At a meal with a group of Thais in Bangkok, I ate not just one but a mouthful of the tiny weapons-grade chilis lurking like anti-personnel mines in an otherwise refreshing salad. As they erupted in my mouth, I flailed around, as sweaty and incoherent as Marlon Brando in "Apocalypse Now." Iced water just washed the capsaicins around my mouth and lips, spreading the pain. Pounding waves of agony crashed down on me but the Thais, never breaking a sweat, masterfully glided along the top. The trick is to carry on eating.

The benign masochism to which Mr. Rozin and Ms. Schiller refer may be tied to the production of endorphins, natural opiates the brain produces in response to pain. Rising endorphin levels turn pain into pleasure. They account for the post-jogging buzz and the powerful addictiveness of opium and heroin. Chilis stimulate beta-endorphins, the most powerful of the natural drugs able to create pleasure sensations. Studies have shown that people taking drugs that block endorphin action get less joy from eating piquant food.

Chili thrill-seeking, being one of the more socially sanctioned forms of masochism, starts early, generally between the ages of seven and 12. Cultural forces and peer pressure may help us overcome our initial dislike of chilis: As we move into adulthood we learn, with some struggle and anguish, to overcome our disgust with grown-up vices like coffee, alcohol, cigarettes and sex.

But whatever age you are, stay away from ornamental pepper bushes. As thrilling as a dish of "Ants Climbing a Tree" or "Weeping Tiger" can be, splashing your skin with chili juice is no fun.

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Mr. Templer, a writer based in Berkeley, California, is the author of a book on contemporary Vietnam.

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Capsaicin Cuisine: 'Ants Climbing a Tree'

- 15 ml. or 1 tbsp. soy sauce
- 15 ml. or 1 tbsp. rice wine or sherry
- 5 ml. or 1 tsp. cornstarch
- 30 ml. or 2 tbsp. peanut oil
- 15 ml. or 1 tbsp. finely chopped ginger
- 120 ml. or 8 tbsp. chopped scallions
- 2 green chopped chilis
- 10-20 ml. or 2-4 tsp. chili paste with garlic
- 230 grams or 1/2 lb. pork or beef, finely chopped
- 160 ml. or 2/3 cup chicken stock
- 1 small packet glass noodles, about 115 grams or 1/4 lb., soaked in hot water for five minutes and drained
- 120 ml. or 1/2 cup carrots diced finely and blanched for a minute in boiling water
- 5 ml. or 1 tsp. sesame oil

Mix the soy sauce, rice wine and cornstarch, and add the pork. Marinate for at least an hour. In a very hot wok coated with 30 ml. or two tbsp. of vegetable oil, combine the ginger, scallions, chilis and the chili sauce. (Vary the

amount of chili sauce according to taste.) When it foams, add the meat and marinade and cook until the meat loses its pink color. Add the chicken stock and simmer three minutes. Add the prepared glass noodles, coating them with the meat and sauce mixture. Add the carrots. Simmer until most of the liquid has evaporated. Add the sesame oil and serve immediately.

-- R.T.

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