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GALILEO

T. Hussey

AT some point in our lives, we have each experienced the infernal heat of a chile pepper. Maybe it was a spicy Bloody Mary or a bottle of sauce mistaken for a milder condiment or the result of a childhood dare. Sometimes the heat creeps up on you, a slow crescendo of warmth bringing excitement, angst, or agony. Maybe it's brazenly direct, a blistering bullet through the tongue ricocheting through the roof of your mouth and out of your ears. You beg for water—wrong move! Water is a conduit that actually helps the chile oils spread, exacerbating the heat. Now your esophagus is on fire and your throbbing tongue makes speech impossible. Meanwhile, your friends are

BY ALLSTON MCCRADY / ILLUSTRATION BY TIM HUSSEY

FIRE IT UP!

Brace Your Taste Buds— There's a Lot More to *Southern Hot Sauce* than Tabasco

laughing hysterically (humor is, after all, always at someone else's expense). Yet somehow, as the pain peaks and begins its merciful decline, you feel... good. How can this be? Simple really: endorphins—the body's flood of euphoric pain-numbing hormones in response to the "threat" of culinary heat. "That was fun," you think. And you do it again.

Heat is personal. What might be painfully unpleasant for me is another person's definition of wimp sauce. I learned this the hard way years ago while traveling in Malaysia with my college boyfriend Danny. We decided to grab a quick lunch in an innocuous strip mall in Kuala Lumpur. Under the hum of blue fluorescent lights, with Malaysian "Muzak" pipping through the speakers, and among a sea of cheap plastic chairs and tables, this wasn't a place where I might have expected to have my tonsils incinerated. The curry chicken soup sounded like a safe bet. But within seconds of that first spoonful, my taste buds sounded an alarm. A few bites more and the heat was on full assault. Five minutes in, I was a teary-eyed, pore-sweating, sniveling, hiccupping mess. What was merely an everyday lunchtime soup for local Malays had kicked my western ass. I learned to fear heat on that day. And to respect it. It was not until decades later that I learned to love it.



real peppers—they use pepper extract, which is basically like spraying your tongue with pepper spray. What’s the point of that? It obliterates the taste of whatever you’re eating. So we’re creating a whole different category. I think we’re onto something with our sauces because people have been stealing bottles off the table at local restaurants.”

I was sold. And I was curious. After all, if my own neighbor could launch a hot sauce product, then who else was doing this sort of thing? My own knowledge was limited to the dusty bottle of Tabasco sitting stoically and patiently in my spice cupboard.

Tabasco, the granddaddy of Southern hot sauces. Its story is pretty much emblematic of the way that most hot sauces get launched: guy tinkers in his kitchen, guy tweaks recipe for a hot sauce that he likes a lot, guy shares it with friends, friends say, “You gotta market this,” and the rest is history, then guy quits his day job (or maybe he quit his day job first and thus the free time for tinkering in his kitchen). For Tabasco founder Edmund McIlhenny, this tinkering started after the Civil War down on Louisiana’s Avery Island. A banker by trade, McIlhenny also had a love for gardening, and for peppers. He had all of Tabasco’s key ingredients at his disposal right there on the island: salt from an ancient salt dome, Tabasco pepper plants that a friend had given him, and cane vinegar from his cane sugar plantation. He experimented with fermenting his pepper mash with salt, then added vinegar, and bottled his creation in repurposed cologne bottles with sprinkler fittings to control the flow, sharing them with friends. The sauce came to be known as “that famous sauce McIlhenny makes.” Thus birthed a family business venture now in its fifth generation and going strong. Tabasco cranks out over 720,000 bottles per day and ships to over 165 countries and territories. It is still aged and bottled on Avery Island, though the peppers are now sourced from different growers in Mexico and Central America. You really can’t fault them for outsourcing the peppers. There’s no way they could grow that many on Avery Island without upsetting the ecological balance and the conservational victories the family has worked so hard to achieve there.

For ages, McIlhenny Co. Tabasco sauce was really the only game in town. Their marketing was savvy. If competitors or knock-offs arose, the McIlhenny’s could buy them out. But hot sauce has a mind of its own. It is too willful to belong to one company alone. And there’s a wide world of pepper varieties out there begging to be harnessed, blended, and bottled. Sometime around Tabasco’s one-hundredth anniversary, America’s hot sauce tastes went viral, spawning new brands, hot sauce competitions, and festivals. Now there are restaurants with extensive hot sauce bars, their own fiery product lines, and

SIX months ago, my Charleston neighbor, Smith Anderson, handed me a bottle of hot sauce. The sauce was green and smelled of fresh cilantro and lime—enticingly aromatic.

“You made this?” I asked quizzically.

“Sure,” he responded. “It’s part of a line of new sauces I’ve created with my business partner in Panama. We met on a plane in Latin America and got talking about our love for the South and for food and for hot sauce. His family is in the food business [making high-quality natural vinegars], and of course Panama has a perfect climate and fertile soil for growing all sorts of peppers and produce, including wild cilantro indigenous to the region, so we hatched a plan to develop some fresh gourmet sauces.”

The label read 9°80°—the geographical coordinates of Panama, which coincidentally shares the

same longitude as Charleston. Against my better judgment (which seems to be a running theme for hot sauce eaters), I tried some, dabbing a few drops on the tip of my finger, bracing myself for the unknown. The heat was forward but not overpowering, the flavor delightful, vegetal, herbal. I could imagine dashing this on seafood, fish tacos, crab cakes, beef, even salads. I looked at the ingredients: all natural and everything sourced from within a hundred miles of the factory, essentially farm-to-bottle. But it wasn’t labeled “hot sauce,” rather “gourmet sauce.”

“We didn’t want to scare off people who might think they don’t like hot sauce, like my mother,” explained Anderson. “I believe in flavor before fire. We’re not the big Texas guys that want to blow smoke out of your ears. A lot of sauces that advertise hottest this or hottest that don’t even use

even hot sauce sommeliers. If I walk up the street to get a healthy smoothie, it comes with a kick of cayenne. Our street-side popsicle vendor, King of Pops, uses jalapeños and habaneros in some of his treats. We are a nation catching on to the virtues of heat.

Southern hot sauce stores are popping up all over. Here in Charleston we have Pepper Palace on Market Street, which lures ambling tourists and maritime travelers into its lair with the boast “Hottest Sauce in the Universe.” You need to be eighteen and sign a waiver to try it. A gimmick? Not really. Each batch is made with forty pounds of ghost peppers, the common name for the Bhut Jolokia, until recently thought to be the world’s hottest pepper, a title now held by the Trinidad Moruga Scorpion. If you handle either pepper without gloves, your fingers can experience numbness for days.

Not wanting to end up in the emergency room, I bypassed the Hottest Sauce in the Universe and instead perused the seemingly endless shelves of hot sauces, chuckling at the audacity of the labels. Sudden Death. Devil’s Brew. Fire Ant Juice. Temporary Insanity. Delicious Suffering. Extinction. Salvation. Brain Damage. Smack My Ass and Call Me Sally. Scorned Woman. Liquid Lucifer. Liquid Lucifer’s Lover (hotter than Liquid Lucifer, of course).

Hot Sauce Harry’s in Florida packages one of its sauces in a tube of dynamite. Another comes packaged in a miniature coffin equipped with a death certificate to be filled in by the recipient. Then there is gastronomical humor, which either elicits guffaws, nervous giggles, or grunts of disgust (Sir Fartalot, Colon Cleaner, Weapons of Ass Destruction, you get the picture).

Clever, yes, but which ones are good? I started by identifying the Scovie Award winners—the most coveted award of the fiery food industry. Entries are blind tasted, so the outrageous labels don’t matter here. I also checked out the winners of Austin’s annual Hot Sauce Festival and North Carolina’s Hot Sauce Contest. Chefs spoke freely about their favorite brands and volunteered their own recipes as well.

It turns out hot sauce is (dare I say) an easy thing to make. All it takes is access to peppers and fresh ingredients (check out your farmers market and local supermarkets—you might be surprised at the range of hot chiles available). It also takes a little patience if you are fermenting your peppers, some experimentation, and a good blender. And you mustn’t forget gloves, as I found out after cutting up some habaneros with bare hands and experiencing a distinct burning sensation in my fingertips for the next six hours. I heard somewhere that climbers attempting to summit Everest line their boots with chile peppers to stave off frostbite. Oh, and be sure to remember not to rub your eye or scratch your nose or...well, just try not to

touch anything or anyone until you’ve thoroughly washed your hands after handling peppers.

There are those who think of hot sauce as a game, but I’ll venture to say most of us prefer taste to pain. The best sauces add layers of heat without crucifying your taste buds, melting your esophagus, blasting your sinuses, or making your hair stand on end. The best sauces use natural heat as an instrument in a culinary orchestra. The best sauces capitalize on the virtues of the pepper itself, be it the fruity fire of the Scotch Bonnet or habanero, the vegetal overtones of the Serrano, or the smoky, earthy-sweet notes of the chipotle. The best sauces blend ingredients that both complement and balance the heat itself. The best sauces leave you wanting more.



CHILEHEAD FESTIVALS

Austin Hot Sauce Festival

August 25, 2013: Austin, TX
austinchronicle.com

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North Carolina Hot Sauce Contest

September 14, 2013: Oxford, NC
nchotsaucecontest.com

.....

Houston Hot Sauce Festival

September 21-22, 2013: Houston, TX
houstonhotsauce.com





Ring of Fire

(opposite: clockwise from top center)

Cat 5 Hot Sauce Food Polish

Rockport, TX / tonylegner.com

Chef Tony Legner started experimenting with fiery table seasonings just as Hurricane Katrina was barreling toward the Louisiana coast, thus the name of his popular line of sauces. His hot sauce is carrot based with a blend of strong peppers: pequins, jalapeños, habaneros, and ghost peppers.

Williamson Bros. Hot Sauce

Marietta, GA / williamsonbros.com

These guys had little more than a 1988 Chevy Blazer, which they won with a hundred-dollar raffle ticket, when they opened their barbecue joint just north of Atlanta. Now their business is thriving and their cayenne hot sauce can be found in certain Whole Foods stores.

SuckleBusters

Habanero Pepper Sauce

Coppell, TX / sucklebusters.com

This sauce packs some serious heat. It can leave you gasping, yet it's rife with awesome flavor from its all-natural, simple blend of garlic, onions, peppers, and spices. Dan Arnold makes this blisteringly good Texas brew. Dash it on a burger and thank me later.

Palmetto Pepper Potions Molten Golden

Forest Acres, SC / pepperpotions.com

A friend gifted some chile pepper plants to Mark and Julie Riffle. After a lot of experimenting with blends of herbs, seasonal fruits, and fresh veggies, the Riffles hit on four different sauces with brilliant flavor. Molten Golden is my favorite: a mustard-based sauce with mangoes, cumin, and curry that has garnished multiple awards from the fiery-food authorities.

9°80° Wild Cilantro

Mt. Pleasant, SC / 980sauce.com

Award-winning Southern chefs like this sauce so much they use it at home, says its creator Smith Anderson. Anderson and business partner, chemist/grower/manufacturer Alexis Galardo have released three sauces and have five more flavors in the works--like mango tango and smoky chipotle--all fresh, all natural, all delicious.

Mile High Hot Sauce

Pikeville, NC / milehighhotsauce.com

M.P. Cooper's years in the US Air Force took him across the globe where he sampled a wide variety of peppers and sauces. Retired, he planted some peppers in his back yard and started tinkering with sauce recipes. He now grows 30,000 jalapeño plants on five acres of airport property. The sauce is fresh, robust, and zesty.



Farmer's Daughter Sweet Potato Habanero

Hillsborough, NC / farmersdaughterbrand.com

A friend handed me this bottle straight from a farmers market in Chapel Hill. The habaneros give the sauce a bright fruity heat tempered by the mellow base of the sweet potato. Sauce maker April McGreger learned from her mother and grandmother in rural Mississippi (yes, she really is a farmer's daughter) and brought her talents to North Carolina's Piedmont.

Henry's Jamaican Lime Chile

Basye, VA / henryshotsauce.com

Father-son team Ernest and Bob Henry grow this all-but-extinct native Virginia pepper on their farm in the Shenandoah Valley, which they call the "Napa Valley of hot peppers" for its perfect growing conditions. Be warned: one drop can flavor an entire meal. The pepper has a natural citrus bite, perfect for seafood.

Captain Redbeard's Savina Habanero

Edgewater, FL / captainredbeard.com

Launched in the mid-1990s by a sea captain who whipped up his own concoctions in the ship's galley, this sauce gets its strong heat and rich red color from ripe savina habanero peppers. The brand has exploded into a series of fiery sauces (try the Sharkbite Garlic Cayenne) and even a bottling service for wannabe makers.

Granddaddy's Sweet Southern Heat

Midland, TX / sweetsouthernheat.com

This excellent sauce hits you with its garlic, molasses, ground pepper, and hickory smoke, all balanced with a kick of cayenne, a closely guarded recipe that's been in this Texas family for fifty years. Perfect on steaks, burgers, and anything that begs for a good peppery barbecue flavor.

Stevie Mac's Serrano Surprise

Largo, FL / steviemac.com

The Serrano pepper isn't commonly featured in the hot sauce industry. Steven McPherson was given one by a friend, tossed it in a pot with a few other ingredients, then fell asleep on his couch. When he awoke to great smells in his kitchen, he knew he was onto something. His "Serrano Surprise" won a Scovie Award in 2012, and his hot sauce success led to the opening of his own restaurant in North Redington Beach, Florida.

Henry's Ghost Chile

Basye, VA / henryshotsauce.com

The ghost pepper until recently was thought to be the hottest pepper in the world. Most sauce makers order theirs dried and powdered direct from northern India. But Ernest Henry and his son Bob grow theirs right on their Virginia farm. This stuff is potent and pure: just one drop will splinter your tongue (or mine anyway), so use with caution.

HEAT SEEKER recipes

HOT SAUCE 101

MAKING HOT SAUCE IS SURPRISINGLY FORGIVING (UNLIKE, SAY, BAKING, WHERE MEASUREMENTS, RATIOS, AND TIMING ARE CRUCIAL). START WITH A PEPPER OF CHOICE OR A BLEND OF DIFFERENT PEPPERS. REMOVE THE SEEDS, SAVING THEM IN CASE YOU WANT TO ADD THEM BACK IN LATER TO RATCHET UP THE HEAT. CHOP THE PEPPERS AND THROW THEM IN A BLENDER. THAT'S YOUR BASE. FROM THERE, ADD YOUR INGREDIENTS OF CHOICE: MAYBE SOME VEGGIES (ONIONS, SHALLOTS, GARLIC, SWEET POTATO), HERBS (PARSLEY, CILANTRO, CUMIN, ALLSPICE), CITRUS (LEMON, LIME, ORANGE), FRUIT (MANGO, PEACH, PAPAYA, MELON, PINEAPPLE), VINEGAR OR WATER OR CREAM. THE POSSIBILITIES ARE ENDLESS AND ARE COMPLETELY UP TO YOU. BLEND IT ALL TOGETHER. IF YOU WISH, FERMENT THE PEPPERS FIRST, OR DON'T. COOK YOUR SAUCE ON THE STOVE, OR DON'T (COOKED SAUCES AND VINEGAR-BASED SAUCES WILL LAST LONGER). ROAST YOUR INGREDIENTS FIRST, OR DON'T. SWEETEN IT WITH HONEY OR SORGHUM OR BROWN SUGAR, OR DON'T. TAILOR IT TO SUIT YOUR TASTE. SOON YOU WILL HAVE YOUR OWN PERSONALIZED FAVORITE FIERY CONDIMENT. REFRIGERATE AND IT SHOULD LAST A FEW WEEKS, IF NOT LONGER.

HOLY HELL HOT SAUCE

CHEF DAVID GUAS

BAYOU BAKERY, COFFEE BAR & EATERY
ARLINGTON, VA

2 tablespoons cooking oil
1 cup onion, chopped
¼ cup bell pepper, diced
¼ cup celery, diced
2 cloves garlic, minced
4 to 5 Roma tomatoes, diced
2 cups vegetable stock or low-sodium chicken stock
2 tablespoons cornstarch
2 tablespoons cold water
Kosher salt to taste

Henry Family Farm's Ghost Pepper Hot Sauce to taste (Note: you can substitute another hot sauce if you are unable to find this brand)

1. Heat oil in a medium sauté pan over medium heat. Add onion, bell pepper, celery, and garlic and sauté until translucent. Add tomatoes and stock.
2. In a separate dish, mix the cornstarch with cold water.
3. Stir cornstarch slurry into pan and reduce heat to medium low. Season with salt and as much hot sauce as you can handle! (Add sauce a few drops at a time, tasting along the way and adding more if needed.)

* **Note:** Chef Guas uses this hot sauce on his Spicy Crawfish Tamales.

Yield: 2 cups



HOT SAUCE FOR TACOS

CHEF DAVID BRACHA

OAK TAVERN, MIAMI, FL

1 pound Scotch Bonnet chiles, seeded and diced small
1 Spanish onion, chopped
1/8 cup chopped garlic
2 oranges, juiced
½ cup mango, diced
1 cup apple cider vinegar
½ cup sugar
¼ pound raisins (about 1¼ cups)
¼ cup tomato paste
½ tablespoon salt

1. Place all ingredients except for tomato paste and salt in a pot and bring to a boil.
2. Reduce and simmer for 1½ hours.

3. Add tomato paste and salt and continue to cook for another 20 minutes.
 4. Remove from heat and blend well.
 5. Sauce must be refrigerated before serving.
- Note:** if the sauce is thick, thin with half parts water and white vinegar.

Yield: 2½ cups

"XXX" SAUCE

CHEF JEFF TUNKS

BURGER, TAP & SHAKE, WASHINGTON, DC

1 cup large yellow onion, roughly chopped
4 chiles de árbol, dried and seeded
4 Roma tomatoes, whole with stem area removed
4 garlic cloves, peeled
Salt to taste

1. In a large, uncoiled cast-iron skillet over high heat, char the roughly chopped onion and chiles by turning them over until the onion is evenly darkened on all sides and the dried chilies have blistered.

2. Add the whole tomatoes and peeled garlic cloves and continue to heat until darkened and blistered. Simmer after the tomatoes break, or about ten minutes.

3. Place all ingredients from the skillet into a blender and blend until smooth. Add salt to taste and serve.

Note: Chef Tunks serves this on his Apache Sweat Lodge Burger with Fire Roasted Green Chiles, Pepper Jack Cheese, and Smoked Onions.

Yield: 1 cup



NOSE DIVE HOT SAUCE

CHEF JOEY PEARSON
NOSE DIVE, GREENVILLE, SC

4 jalapeño peppers
25 Thai chiles
¼ red onion
3 garlic cloves
2 tablespoons Sambal
1 tablespoon salt
4 limes, juiced
1 quart white distilled vinegar
1 quart tomato strips
Salt and pepper to taste

1. Pulse first 6 ingredients in the food processor or blender (chef recommends the Robot Coupe) until thoroughly chopped.

2. Mix well with the next 3 ingredients and simmer on low until thickened.

3. Purée in blender (chef recommends Vitamix) until very smooth.

4. Add salt and pepper to taste and serve over Scotch eggs or dish of your choice.

Yield: 2 cups

FERMENTED FRESNO HOT SAUCE

CHEF ANDREW CLAYTOR
CASK & LARDER, WINTER PARK, FL

10 Fresno peppers
1 tablespoon salt
2 teaspoons olive oil
1 small yellow onion
5 cloves of garlic
4–5 sprigs of thyme
5 bay leaves
1¼ cups white distilled vinegar
Salt to taste

1. De-stem the peppers and process in food processor with salt. Place in a sealed container at room temperature for 4–5 days to ferment.

2. Heat olive oil in a pan, then add onion, garlic, thyme, and bay leaves. Caramelize.

3. Add in the fermented peppers and vinegar. Bring to a boil.

4. Boil for 20–30 minutes. You may need to add water if the solution is too thick or pasty.

5. Allow to cool. Remove thyme sprigs and bay leaves.

6. Adjust seasonings and blend until you have a Sriracha-like consistency.

Yield: ¾ cup

CILANTRO LIME CREAM SAUCE

TLP RECIPE
1 bunch cilantro, chopped

5 Serrano chiles, seeded and finely diced
4 garlic cloves
2 cups Greek yogurt (try honey yogurt if you care for sweet)
1 tablespoon fresh lime juice
½ teaspoon salt

1. Purée all ingredients in a blender until smooth.

2. Since this is a cream-based sauce (not vinegar based) it will have a shorter life in your refrigerator, so use it within a week or so.

Note: great on seafood such as fish tacos, crab cakes, or tilapia.

Yield: 2½ cups

HABANERO PEACH HOT SAUCE

TLP RECIPE
2 habanero peppers, seeded and finely diced
2 cup peaches, chopped
½ cup yellow onion, chopped
3 garlic cloves
2 tablespoons cilantro, chopped
2 tablespoons lime juice
½ cup distilled white vinegar
½ cup orange juice
1 tablespoon honey
½ teaspoon cumin
½ teaspoon ground ginger
½ teaspoon salt

Purée all ingredients in blender until smooth. This should last in your refrigerator for a few weeks.

Yield: 3 cups

BOURBON CHIPOTLE SORGHUM HOT SAUCE

TLP RECIPE
1 medium-sized sweet potato, baked
1 teaspoon blended oil
2 shallots
4 chipotle peppers, diced fine
2 habanero peppers, seeded and diced fine
¾ cup bourbon
½ cup apple cider vinegar
1–2 cups water (as needed while simmering)
½ cup sorghum syrup (can substitute maple)
1 cup raisins

1. Bake the sweet potato and scoop out the meat.

2. Heat the oil and caramelize the shallots.

3. Add remaining ingredients and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer for 20 minutes.

4. Let cool and blend well. Refrigerate.

Yield: 2 cups

