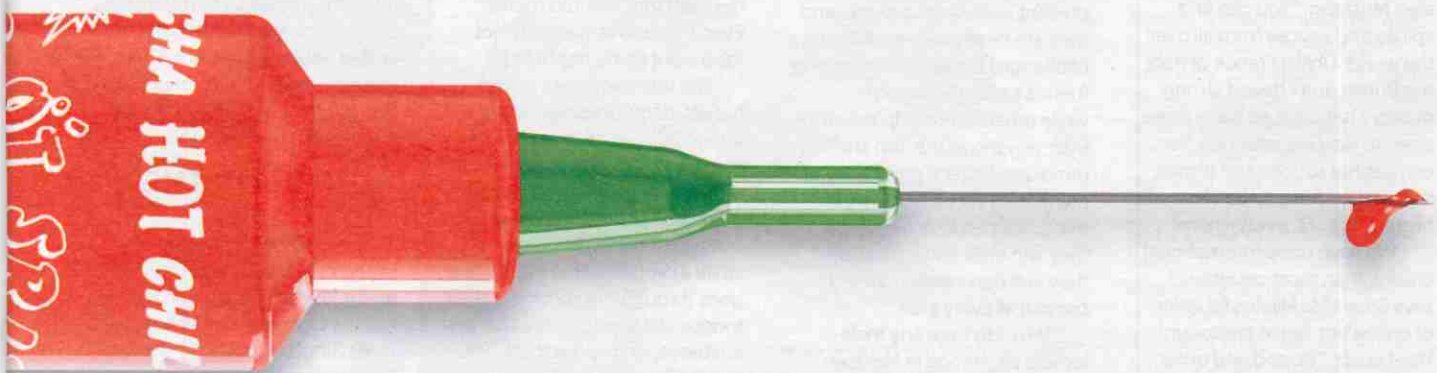


SPICE



Hundreds of people, mostly men, squeeze their way past each other and the two rows of stalls flanking the room. They stop every shuffled yard to peer closely at labels on bottles and jars, and the samples of their contents in corresponding ramekins. They take little pieces of soft tortilla, spoon their chosen sample on to them and pop this micro smorgasbord into their mouth. Some deliver a delighted “mmm”, others nod in appreciation, while a few do a convincing impression of a purple-faced newborn who’s

just suckled on a lemon. Welcome to the world of the chilli festival.

This festival isn’t at some grand cosmopolitan exhibition hall. This is Chilli Fest in Wellingborough, a small Northamptonshire market town and no culinary hub. This is telling, because a few years ago, it couldn’t have happened. It can today, because of an obsession among Britons: a flourishing desire to eat heat, to experience the tongue-flaring spice spectrum.

“Hot food in Britain is definitely at its most popular,” says Alexander Mustang, a sauce producer who founded Chilli Fest, taking his pop-up festivals around

Britain. “British people have been eating spicy food for decades, but never in these amounts. It’s been flying in the past few years.”

FIERY HELLMOUTH

According to Euromonitor International, sales of chilli sauces in the UK are going up by around 7 per cent a year, in growth terms outstripping all other condiments. Much of this is from big-hitters like Tabasco, Encona and, arguably one of the main drivers in the British spice explosion, Nando’s. Mainstream supermarkets stock formerly-niche sauces like sriracha, while

Pizza Hut has just introduced a pizza topped with naga chillies.

There are also hundreds of small, independent producers finding a market and a decent income. Fierce competition exists among growers to create the world’s hottest chilli (currently the Carolina Reaper) simply because there’s money in that title, as the plethora of extreme sauces using words like ‘death’, ‘revenge’ and ‘f*ck’ in their names crave it on their labels. You’ve seen their effects: grown men sweating, crying. Not surprising, considering that some chillies, on the Scoville



HIGH ON



HOW BRITISH MEN GOT ADDICTED TO HEAT

Andrew Dickens
investigates the
rebirth of the burn

→ scale used to measure heat, get close to US-grade pepper spray.

Something has happened among British men; when it comes to hot food, we are not what we once were, with post-pub requests for the occasional late-night phal. Spice is now a daily way of life among the masses. I write as man indicative of the trend. As a student, I was Korma Boy, mocked for my dedication to mildness. Now I bemuse my wife by putting hot sauce on almost everything I eat: hot sauces I exchange with friends, hot sauces I buy as holiday souvenirs, hot sauces with their own shelf, waiting to be selected for their perfect job.

So what, in this land of spuds and carrots, has ignited such fiery passion? The first answer: opportunity.

"The British have a clean slate," says Mustang. "You can find spices and sauces from all over the world. Unlike France or Italy, the British don't have a strong culinary heritage, so we're more open to new experiences. You can get hot sauces and dishes from Asia, Africa, South America, Mexico, the US, everywhere."

"We have more international cuisine than most countries," says Stuart McAllister, founder of online hot sauce emporium Hot-Headz. "Ireland and other European countries are behind the UK when it comes to hot food, although they're getting there. Ireland is a good market and we're exporting a lot to France now, which is the last country you'd expect to be into hot food."

You can see evidence of this exposure in Wellingborough. Teenagers work their way through every sample available, while I watch a two-year-old boy spoon a naga sauce into his mouth without blinking. I don't think chilli passed my lips in childhood; these kids are raised on it.

ORAL SENSATION

Any fan of crime drama knows that alongside means and opportunity, you need motive. What, then, motivates a man to savage his gullet with a fruit that was used as a weapon by the Mayans? Professor Paul Rozin is the world's leading voice on the

psychological effects of chilli. He tells me that its appeal is far from natural.

"Nobody likes it at first," he says. "But you change, by some miracle, what you used to find negative into a positive. In traditional chilli-eating cultures it probably happens in childhood, but in Western cultures, sometimes much later. Exposure in a positive social setting appears to be what's critical. It's true of coffee, of sparkling water, of beer. Nobody likes these things at first.

"My view is that you get pleasure from your body telling you that this is bad, an oral sensation that tells you to reject it, and yet you know that it's safe. It's what I call benign masochism; enjoying negative events in a context in which you know they're not harmful. Like a rollercoaster. This produces endorphins."

Benign masochists are present in Wellingborough, and they are nearly all men. There are challenges thrown down among friends to 'be the big man', while others can't help but work their way along the 'top shelf' ramekins. Several producers tell me that it's very much a male thing: women love hot sauce, they win chilli-eating contests, they just don't seem to need to prove it at every stall.

"We didn't see any male-female difference in Mexican villages," says Rozin, "but in the West, males, in general, do more of these benign masochism things. They'll often do them in groups, so there's some peer pressure, but also that positive social situation. It's how many men get to enjoy beer. Peer pressure is responsible for us enjoying a lot of things."

"There's an element of macho kudos," says McAllister. "But that said, some people genuinely like viciously hot sauces. They can taste the subtleties in them. We all have our own level."

FLAVA NOT FLAY

But machismo and masochism are not the sole drivers of the hot sauce boom. Maybe they blazed a trail, but today the Deathageddon varieties are a small percentage of what sells. It's reflected at Chilli Fest. Each stallholder has one or two powerful offerings – and



they're popular – but they have 10 times as many mild to moderate sauces, jams and pastes. Because what's really making our love of chilli grow is the actual taste.

Everyone at the festival agrees. Producers and consumers all use one word when it comes to what's important: flavour. They love the burn, but if it kills the flavour, it's out of the game. Flavour, followed by heat, is the acknowledged perfect mouthful.

"At the beginning, everyone went crazy, giving it Larry Large," says Mustang. "But then they decided they wanted more. Even those who like really hot food want some depth to it."

The men here are a mixed bunch, demographically, but attitudinally you'll know them from any craft beer festival or farmers' market. Their actual appreciation might not match their remarkable ability to look contemplative while a drop of Sphincterror goes through the surface of their tongue like a lit cigarette, but boy are they trying to get there. They speak of sweetness, bitterness and smokiness, of tongue feel – while weeping.

The shift in attitude towards heat and hot sauce is reminiscent of this country's craft beer movement. At first we embraced American-style beers, with their fancy cans, funky names, big

flavours and alcohol percentages – like we embraced the wacky, intense sauces. But then we wanted more. We got beer-curious, learning to appreciate more flavours and styles. Now, with both liquids, we look for the indie producers, the imported gems, and we're not afraid to say "I prefer something gentler". Maybe someone will go from a stall in Wellingborough to become the Beavertown or Siren of the hot-sauce world. Who knows? What I do know is, it's called sophistication and we are well into it.

"Those extreme sauces are mainly bought as gifts," says McAllister. "They'll stay in a cupboard as a joke for when Dave comes round. It's not a good business model. Most producers will produce one, but push the milder sauces with stronger flavours. You can cook a dish 10 different ways with 10 different chillies. You'll get earthy, smoky, coffee, tobacco flavours. The easiest way to add flavour to any dish is with a chilli sauce. As an ingredient it's underrated."

GOING FOR THE BURN

A few days later, I find myself sitting in a private room at the much-lauded Cinnamon Club, with its CEO and executive chef Vivek Singh, a man who knows flavour. I ask him for his take on British men's relationship with hot food.

"I've been cooking here for 17 years," he says. "I understood that there was a British tradition of going out for several pints of lager and then arriving at the local curry house with a sense of machismo

"IT'S BENIGN MASOCHISM; ENJOYING NEGATIVE EVENTS IN A CONTEXT IN WHICH THEY'RE NOT HARMFUL"



Spice World

LESSER-KNOWN SAUCES TO FIRE UP YOUR FOOD

"THERE'S THE FLAVOUR, THE SENSATION, THE HIGH. AND AS IT SUBSIDES, IT HAS YOU REACHING OUT FOR MORE"

absolutely world-class deliciousness, all with a very pleasant warmth. I want more. I have more. At the moment, all I'm getting is joy.

"Chilli has a huge role to play in food," says Singh. "There's the flavour, the sensation, the high. And as it subsides, it has you reaching out for more."

Here it comes. A little warmer, a lot warmer. Flavour then heat: that ideal mouthful. It's not tearing at my tongue, but I feel my throat close, my nose runs and tears form, as in grief for the loss of my dignity. The skin around my eyes begins to roast, my face gains a clammy, salty sheen. The pain, the exquisite pain. Singh laughs as he takes photos, enjoying the proxy war he's initiated between my mouth and stomach. Soon, though, my gizzard adjusts, and it's back to the oh-so-lovely flavour. It's a harmonic choir of angels and devils. If only the whole world could get along this well. I finish the dish. Smug, satisfied, orally aroused and not in pain; I think I just had the perfect chilli experience.

It's odd to think that this is now what men seek, that this is the food trend of the day. That I, mopping sweat from my brow, am in bliss. That the army of dilettantes in Wellingborough, trying hard to sound discerning while displaying facial signs of autoerotic asphyxiation, are having the time of their lives. But then, we're also keen on drinking bitter fluids that give us a headache. It's how, why and what we consume that's changed. It's not just a pint of lager and a vindaloo; it could be two-thirds of guezze and a spicy ramen. We've moved on, evolved. We're adventurous in our diets and ambitious to know what we're talking about. While we might not yet be connoisseurs, we have become men of taste, of *tasting* – and *nodding* while we do it.



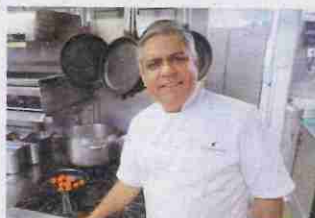
Clockwise from top left: Valentina Salsa Picante £1.99; Susie's Original Hot Sauce £5.99; Tapatio Hot Sauce £2.99; Marie Sharp's Habenero £3.95; Brother Bru-Bru's African Hot Sauce £4.99; Harry Brand Harissa Chilli Sauce £3.50; Paqua Jaya El Dorado Peruvian Golden Chilli Sauce £4.99; Karimix Scotch Bonnet & Mango Chilli Sauce £3.49; Dr. Trouble Lemon Chilli Sauce; most available from hot-headz.com

and bravado and asking for the hottest thing. But there wasn't this level of sophistication, asking where chillies are from. That's recent, maybe the past 10 years."

Singh is smiling at me. It's the look of a practical joker who can barely contain his laughter before the whoopee cushion lets rip. Two waiters have entered the room: one carrying a jug of iced water and a litre of mango lassi, the other a plate containing what was once crowned the hottest curry in the world. I'd mentioned my hot sauce habit to Singh and he's challenged me to put the pepper where my

mouth is. "The only thing missing is the fire extinguisher," he says, chuckling. It's 11am. This is to be my breakfast.

"I came up with this dish in 2008, to launch a Bollywood on-demand service," he says. "They wanted a super-hot curry, but I'd spent years telling people there's so much more to Indian food. Anyway, I discovered the bhut jolokia, then the world's hottest chilli. I took a traditional, benign Hyderabad dish as the base, and made a hot version of that. I halved Scotch bonnet peppers and filled them with



a very spicy lamb mince – almost 200g of naga chilli to each kilo of mince. So really, really hot. And that was the Bollywood Burner."

It looks so pretty, but I fear I'm about to commit internal arson. I pop a little pyro parcel into my mouth. It's really tasty. I mean