

9/3/2006

Day:	Sunday
Publication:	THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS
Head:	THE HATCH MYSTIQUE When the world craves green chiles, it turns to a small town in New Mexico
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Credit:	Staff Writer
Section:	LIFESTYLES - SUNDAY LIFE
Zone:	STATE
Edition:	FIRST
Column Name:	
Series:	
Page Number:	12
Word Count:	2322
Dateline:	HATCH, N.M.
Art:	MAP(S): (DEAN HOLLINGSWORTH/Staff Artist) Hatch; PHOTO(S): (Photos by JUAN GARCIA/Staff Photographer) 1. Ramón Licón (left) and Esteban Ochoa are among hundreds of workers who pick thousands of sacks of green chiles each summer in southern New Mexico's Hatch Valley. Each burlap bag holds about 40 pounds of flavorful chiles, which are shipped nationwide. 2. The New Mexico No. 6-4 is a green chile developed in the 1950s. It may have two or three interior veins. 3. Manuel Grácia makes ristras, decorative strings of chiles, at Mercado de Chiles, his roadside stand. A relative newcomer, he began growing chiles part time in 1993 and full time in 1999. 4. Jim Lytle, a Hatch chile grower and co-owner of the Hatch Chile Express store, smells a chile. Among the green chiles he grows is the Big Jim, named for his father, who helped develop the variety. 5. Duane Gillis walks through a field of chiles to see whether they are ready to harvest. His family formed a co-op that supplies chiles on a large scale to grocery chains such as Wal-Mart. 6. ON THE COVER: Manuel Grácia walks past the chile ristras that he makes and sells from a roadside stand in Hatch, N.M.
Correction:	
Notes:	
Text:	<p>HATCH, N.M. - Jim Lytle plucks a chile from one of the waist-tall plants and hands it to me. It's a New Mexico No. 6-4, a mild green chile popular in dishes throughout the Southwest.</p> <p>I crunch into the green flesh. It bursts in my mouth with a slightly apple tone followed by the pungency of earth, spice and smoke.</p> <p>The Village of Hatch - in the heart of New Mexico's Hatch Valley - was named for General Edward Hatch, who once commanded nearby Fort Thorn. But it's really chiles, such as the one I nibble now, for which Hatch is known. So widespread is its fame that Hatch proclaims itself the chile capital of the world. And, for almost 40 years, the town has hosted a Hatch Chile Festival on Labor Day weekend</p> <p>Tex-Mex fans will recognize Hatch chiles from Dallas events centering on the</p>

New Mexico green chile harvest. Chuy's restaurants have featured it in their annual Green Chile Festival for almost two decades. Blue Mesa Grill is celebrating its 10th annual Hatch Chile Festival this year. Central Market just celebrated its eleventh Hatch Chile Fest. Blue Goose Cantina also has added Hatch menu items for the season.

But, for those of us who aren't chile connoisseurs, what makes Hatch green chiles so special? Customers from California to the Carolinas wait for the harvest with mouths watering. Does a Hatch chile really taste different from the same chile grown in, say, Anaheim, Calif.?

Jim, a third-generation chile farmer, tells me the story of friends 40 miles away in Las Cruces. They grow chiles, too, and they sell to canneries.

"Guess where they get their chile to eat?" he asks. "They come to Hatch and buy my chile because it's a better flavor than Las Cruces chile."

Days after my visit to Jim's fields, rains will burst through a nearby arroyo, flooding downtown Hatch. Hundreds of people will be evacuated, and many will lose their homes. Some chile fields will be ruined.

But during my few sunny days in New Mexico, three local families educate me about the mystique of Hatch chiles. From the small farmer with a few acres and a roadside stand to one who ships hundreds of truckloads of chiles a year, all are irrevocably intertwined with chiles. For decades, even centuries, the water and sun have nourished chile pods on this land. The chile has nourished the farmers and provided their livelihood.

For them, Hatch chiles are part of their identity and a way of life.

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If you drive north on Interstate 25 from Las Cruces and cross the Rio Grande at the Hatch exit, you'll see the Hatch Valley before you. It's a fertile strip along the river that extends north from Caballo Lake through the tiny towns of Arrey, Derry, Garfield, Salem, Hatch, Rincón, down to Radium Springs. The Hatch growing area also includes Las Uvas Valley a few miles west of the river.

David Lucero, a New Mexico Department of Agriculture marketing specialist, says that the Hatch chile is not a variety of chile. Hatch is simply a growing area. Farmers in other parts of New Mexico grow the same chile varieties, but only chiles grown in Hatch can be called Hatch chiles.

"When you go back in history to the folks that did the initial breeding ... who worked for [New Mexico State University], they knew what they were looking for, what they were breeding for," David says. "So they bred chile varieties that were ideal to the soil types over here and the climate and that sort of thing. That's what makes it special. I'm sure you can take these varieties and grow them in other areas, but ... it's just not going to be the same.

"There is definitely, in my opinion, a different flavor to New Mexico chile," he says.

In the late 1500s, Spanish colonists brought chiles with them as they traveled up from Mexico, NMSU horticulture professor Dr. Paul Bosland says. He's director of the Chile Pepper Institute at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces and an expert on chile breeding.

By the 1800s, chile farming was beginning to spread, and Hatch became one of the earliest growing areas in the southern part of the state. It's also where NMSU began to grow the new chile varieties it was developing.

In the late 1800s, NMSU horticulturist Fabián García decided to breed a green chile that was more resistant to disease than previous pods. He thought that "if he made it more uniform, milder, more Anglos would eat it," Dr. Bosland says.

That pod was known as the New Mexico No. 9. It was very popular until the 1950s, when horticulturists developed the New Mexico No. 6, and then the No. 6-4, the mildest and most uniformly sized green chile yet. The 6-4 is still grown throughout the state.

Growers have long shipped chiles out of New Mexico, but the green harvest's popularity has boomed in the last 15 to 20 years, Dr. Bosland says.

"For the longest time, people in the U.S. weren't interested," he says. "Most of our immigrants came from northern Europe, and they just didn't have spicy food in their cuisine."

A younger generation and an influx of immigrants from Asia and Latin America who are accustomed to spicy dishes have brought chiles to the forefront of our cuisine, he says.

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Jim Lytle's work is steeped in tradition. His mother, June Rutherford, is part of the Franzoy family - Austrian immigrants who settled in the area during the 1920s. They began growing chiles almost as soon as they got here. When his father, "Big Jim" Lytle, married June, they continued to grow chiles.

Walking through Jim's fields, I spot some plants that have succumbed to verticillium wilt, a virus fostered by heavy summer rains. But most are healthy and dense, and some appear to bow under the weight of their fruit.

I hold a Sandia, a hot green chile; sample the fruity taste of the güerito, a hot yellow chile; and admire the santaka, a small chile that grows in upright clusters and looks like a red candle when ripe.

The largest chile fruit by far is the foot-long Big Jim, a medium-hot chile frequently used for making chiles rellenos. Jim's father helped NMSU develop a large chile pod for canning, and so the chile was named after him. He didn't get to see the result of his work; he died in 1970. Canneries used the chile for only one season.

Then, in 1987, Jim and his wife, Jo, opened the Hatch Chile Express store. He decided to bring back the Big Jims and sell them as medium-hot chiles. "And people went crazy," he says.

Big Jims have become so popular that they abound in the fields around Hatch and at roadside stands. Home gardeners like them, too. Since then, Jim has bred another chile that he calls Lumbre (fire), an extra-hot pod guaranteed to make you sweat.

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Hatch is a slow-paced town along New Mexico Highways 187 and 185. Most businesses seem to have a chile-themed sign, and banners depicting green and red chiles hang from streetlights.

Just a stone's throw up the road from Hatch Chile Express, cars stop at an unmarked roadside stand. This is Mercado de Chiles. Owner Manuel Grácia offers fresh green chiles, dried red chiles and decorative strings of dried chile pods, called ristras.

Manuel, 53, is a hopeful newcomer. He and his wife emigrated from Mexico and settled in Hatch to raise their family. For 13 years, Manuel worked at Las Uvas Valley Dairy to support his nine kids. But he wanted part of the chile game.

In 1993, he began cultivating 12 acres he owns in the valley. He sold chiles on weekends and worked at the dairy during the week. In 1999, he began farming full time. The following year, his wife died. Despite his grief, Manuel built up his business, and for the past several years has sold chiles year round.

Several times, high winds have toppled his stand. Thieves have broken in at night, and, on one occasion, set the stand on fire. Still, he's out here every day, sometimes with one or two of his kids. "I love my work," he says.

Today, most customers want fresh chiles that cost \$15 for a 40-pound bag. For \$5 more, Manuel will roast all the chiles, hand-cranking the propane-fueled drum in the sizzling sun.

Anne Gilpin of Albuquerque watches as Manuel roasts the five bags of chiles she bought. One-and-a-half bags are for her family, and the rest are for friends. "Chile is my addiction," she says.

Manuel wraps her chiles in black plastic bags and places them in cardboard boxes so that they'll keep "cooking" as she drives home.

"I'll get high on the smell on the way home," she says. "But it's a safe high. I won't be arrested for it."

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Duane and Cheryl Gillis head a family that has chile roots as deep as those of Jim Lytle's. Duane's grandmother Rose Riggs is the eldest sister of June Rutherford, Jim's mom. Everywhere in Hatch, it seems, Franzoy descendants are carrying on the chile tradition.

The Gillis branch has formed a co-op that supplies green chiles on a larger

scale. Duane's mom, dad, brother and two sisters are part of the co-op. I tag along one morning as Duane checks on some of the 2,000 acres that the family either owns or contracts in order to supply an Arizona grocery chain and Wal-Marts across the country. (Competitor Skyline Produce supplies HEB stores, including Central Market.)

We ride along with the smell of onions wafting into our car windows. I am reminded that the onion harvest overlaps with the chile harvest. No sooner are farmers done with onions than it's time to start picking chiles.

Duane, dressed in jeans, a denim shirt and work boots, steps across a railroad beam that bridges an irrigation channel and enters a chile field. He picks a few pods of New Mexico 6-4 and splits them in two, checking their maturity, then he moves on to another field.

Duane has two teens, a daughter still in high school, and a son who just graduated. His son hopes to join the family business after college. Today, he's in El Paso doing chile-roasting demonstrations.

Beginning in late July, the Gillises have about 100 pickers working throughout Hatch Valley. Trailers haul the chiles to a giant warehouse in Arrey, about 17 miles north of Hatch.

All day today, workers at the plant re-sort the chiles brought to the warehouse. They pack the good ones in 1.5-bushel bags or boxes. These are loaded onto 18-wheelers that ferry them across the country to waiting fans.

Before the season is over, Gillis Farms will have shipped more than 250 semis full of chiles.

While farming is a business, the Gillis family, like most of Hatch, has a deep passion for the taste of green chiles.

And at the end of the season, each household will roast and freeze a supply of chiles to last through the year.

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If there's one thing that stays with me as I leave Hatch, it's the knowledge that while I enjoyed all the green chile dishes I ate in the valley, I can't tell the difference between a Hatch chile and the same variety grown elsewhere.

I asked Duane about the flavor of Hatch chiles, and he told me another story. I'm beginning to think of these tales as parables illustrating the cult of Hatch chiles. He said he once gave a friend chiles grown elsewhere, which he tried to pass off as Hatch chiles.

"She called me up and said, 'I'm very disappointed in you,'" Duane says. "She could tell the difference."

Dr. Bosland told me early on to think of chiles the way I'd think of wine. Connoisseurs can distinguish between a grape grown in one soil and the same grape grown elsewhere.

"There are real flavor differences once you become a chile connoisseur," he says.

"I would say to the person just beginning to eat chile, it don't matter. They don't have a sophisticated palate."

You know what that means. I'll just have to eat more chile.

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UPDATE

In mid-August heavy rains flooded the Village of Hatch. Hundreds of residents, including Manuel Gracia's family, had to be evacuated. At press time, his house was uninhabitable, and he thought it was a total loss. His chile stand survived, and he says he will continue in the chile business.

The Lytles' store, Hatch Chile Express, is on high ground, and it remained dry. Some of the employees lost their homes, and Jim lost 20 percent of his crop.

At press time, the Gillis family had lost about 40 acres, a small percentage of their crop. Heavy rain continued to threaten fields last week

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LOCAL HATCH EVENTS

Some local Hatch chile events were delayed because of rain in New Mexico. Still ongoing:

-Chuy's Restaurant's Green Chile Festival will run through Sept. 17.

-Blue Mesa Grill will have Hatch chiles on their menu through mid-September.

-Blue Goose Cantina will have Hatch chiles through mid- to late-September.

WHERE TO ORDER

-It's too late for this year, but watch this Web site for info on next year's Hatch Chile Festival: www.hatchchilefest.com.

-You can still get roasted and frozen green chiles from Hatch Chile Express, at www.hatch-chile.com or 1-800-292-4454.

-Mesilla Valley Chile Co. ships Hatch dried red chiles starting at about \$27 for 12 pounds. Call 505-267-4695. or send an e-mail to mvcc@hughes.net.