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<b>Head:</b>	Some like it hot! A tendermouth carefully navigates the minefield that is the Fiery Foods Show
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<b>Dateline:</b>	ALBUQUERQUE, N.M.
<b>Art:</b>	PHOTO(S): 1-7 (Photos by RICK SCIBELLI JR./Special Contributor) 1. Joe Suarez feels the heat after sampling an especially wicked sauce from Tahiti Joe's. His wife, Francine, stands ready to cool him off. 2. Willy's Sassy Luau Sauce won the grand prize at the show. 3. Sailor Girl Gourmet Foods handed out samples of pretzels dipped in its Firecracker Glitter. 4. Tahiti Joe's Polynesian Hot Sauce 5. Prairie Thyme Chocolate Habanero Fudge Sauce 6. Austin Spice Company Texas-Red Lemon Pepper seasoning 7. Dragon Fury medium Asian-style salsa 8. ON THE COVER: Ready for anything at the Fiery Foods Show in Albuquerque. Photograph by Special Contributor Rick Scibelli Jr.
<b>Correction:</b>	
<b>Notes:</b>	<p><b>Text:</b> ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. - The first thing I see in the exhibit area is a T-shirt emblazoned with a red chile pepper wrapped in an ammo belt. "Taste buds?" it reads. "We don't need no stinkin' taste buds!"</p> <p>This is my first time to attend the National Fiery Foods &amp; Barbecue Show, so I take the shirt as a caveat. After all, at this show even hard-core chileheads will wipe sweat from their brows, beg for water or beer to quench the heat, and regret the dare that made them bite into a chocolate-covered habanero.</p> <p>Fiery Foods was founded 18 years ago by international chile pepper expert and author Dave DeWitt. It's always held - where else? - in New Mexico, practically the chile capital of the world. This year, the show was held March 3-5 at the new Sandia Resort &amp; Casino just north of Albuquerque.</p> <p>The trade show draws exhibitors from around the world, marketing everything from habanero mash to wing sauces, from spicy potato soup to chile-dusted pecans. While some vendors tout specialty items such as tamale-making equipment and novelty sauces guaranteed to set certain body parts on fire, most are here hoping to fulfill a dream. They are pilgrims on a quest for the Holy Grail of heat and flavor that will make their sauces or salsas commercial successes.</p>

Fiery Foods was the first show of its kind and has become the biggest in the world, according to organizers. When it opens to the public on the first day, the line snakes out the doors and heat seekers jam the aisles, babies and grandparents in tow. With more than 13,000 people walking through the doors during the weekend, many vendors will add to their distributorships and their fan bases.

On Friday morning, I'm excited about attending the show, but a bit nervous, too. When it comes to hot foods, I am a wimp. T-shirt warning in mind, I square my shoulders and go in.

A world of fire

About 200 vendors are here, from as far away as Alaska and the Yucatán, and I am immediately overwhelmed. How do I begin to make sense of the vast amount of soups, nuts, fudges, chips, powders, salsas, sauces and rubs? I have no idea what's new and what's classic. Never mind the world of megahot novelty sauces that some people collect just for the labels.

Most booths offer paper cups with dabs of condiment and chips, crackers or pretzels for dipping. For the brave, there are plastic spoons.

Timidly, I approach the Golden Toad Gourmet Sauces & Spice Blends booth. The logo: "Saving the planet one tongue at a time."

The company name reflects an extinct Costa Rican toad. Owners Todd and Sara Jilbert say part of the company's proceeds go to conservation efforts.

I need to warm up to the real heat so I skip the Habanero Pepper Sauce and try the Chipotle Pepper Sauce steak rub. It's just slightly spicy and a bit sweet. Feeling confident, I move on.

At Around the World Gourmet, I try the mild Dragon Fury salsa. The label shows a fire-breathing dragon, but CEO Jennifer Saunders assures me it's not hot. Dragon Fury has plenty of flavor and little bite. Even the medium-hot version tickles without burning.

Around the World Gourmet, named for the salsa's global ingredients, was founded by Jennifer and two friends. The company is less than a year old. Later, I'll find out that the show has about a 30 percent turnover rate from year to year, something Dave says keeps it fresh.

What's new about Jennifer's products is the mix of "Asian cuisine ingredients - rice wine vinegar, ginger, cilantro, scallions," she says. "Nobody has this on the market," she promises.

I cleanse my palate with a nibble of Klondike Candies' spicy brittle. The Alaskan company - apparently they can use the chile warmth up there! - uses fireweed honey in the brittle.

Then it's back to sauces and salsas.

## Tamale time

The Three Hot Tamales company boasts, "We make grown men cry." Sounds good, but the feminist in me stirs. Who would name a company "Three Hot Tamales?"

Another partnership of three women friends: a blonde, a brunette and a redhead. They hauled their products all the way from ... New Jersey? OK, I'll bite.

The Make Me Moan Mango Hot Sauce, infused with mango and pineapple, begs to be tasted. The first thing I savor is a light wave of fruity sweetness. The flavor lingers so that it overlaps with the back-kick of habanero that follows. I want more!

Kristi Smith, the redhead, says she and her partners work with each sauce "until we get that back-kick of heat." No capsaicin extracts in these sauces, so it's about flavor, she says. It's a line I'll hear throughout the weekend from other exhibitors.

Three Hot Tamales has been around only since last June. Yet, in the show's Scovie Awards, named for the Scoville Scale that measures a chile's heat, the mango sauce took third place in the "Hot Sauce - Fruit" category. Its Cry Baby Hot Sauce won first place for "Hot Sauce - Habanero."

"They said it would be a miracle if we won," Kristi says. "We were up against people who have been in the business for 12 years."

In the next couple of hours, I taste chile-flavored caramel corn and a peri-peri sauce. Peri-peri, also known as African Bird's Eye Pepper or Angolan Pepper, can be quite hot.

I sample some salsas and chips from the Xochitl company of Dallas, a favorite of mine for a long time, and chat with owner Carlos Salinas. I meet Darrell Fitch, a Tarrant County firefighter marketing his Big Dawg Salsa and Seasonings. (What is it with firefighters and heat? There are at least two others here this weekend.)

By the time I've sampled Cindy Reed Wilkins' Cin Chili - she's a two-time Terlingua International Chili cook-off champion from Houston - I'm pooped. I make my way to the lobby for a drink. But on the way I have to stop by Jim Campbell's booth.

## Stupid Hot

Jim is a firefighter and owner of Mild to Wild Pepper & Herb Co. He's also an Indiana farmer who grows the red savina habanero, the hottest pepper known to chileheads. He uses it in his products.

As I taste one of his barbecue sauces, food writer Gwyneth Doland approaches. She wants to try something hot. When Jim tells her that women tend to be the most tolerant of ultrahot sauces, she agrees that men are "wusses."

Uh-oh. This could get ugly.

Jim simply says, "Of course, you've got to try the Stupid Hot. It's a slow, creeping kind of heat." He generously splashes it on a chip and hands it to her. She puts it into her mouth and instantly turns red.

"See, she thinks she's hot right now," he says. "Wait a couple of minutes."

"That's really hot," she says. "All right, I'm going back to the beer table."

A few minutes later she returns, her color back to normal. "That's really hot," she repeats. "It doesn't go away."

That's why they call it "culinary bungee jumping," he says.

I silently thank the chile god for this morning's T-shirt warning and go in search of a margarita.

Hotter than hot-hot

By noon Saturday, I've tasted a tangy Texas-style barbecue sauce from Grumpy's Foods and a chipotle ketchup from Big Rick's. I've heard a man say, "There's a difference between hot-hot and insanity." I've seen another man beg for water from a vendor. I've visited with Craig Barton, founder of the award-winning Austin Spices. I've had hot potato chips and even a wing sauce hawked by a guy in a hazmat suit at the Defcon Sauces booth.

Overall, it appears that the main trend is flavor over heat. Dave DeWitt confirms that it's flavor, flavor and more flavor. And to achieve it, vendors are mixing ingredients in innovative ways.

"Just about any condiment or snack that you can think of, there is a variation that is hot and spicy," he says. "Nuts, pickles, olives, ketchup. Bigger than ever is spiced-up barbecue sauce."

When I mention that several of the Scovie winners are new companies, he says he hopes they all make it. Some will find markets; many will fail.

Still, there is a certain thrill in learning that a company just three years old took the Scovie Grand Prize this year. This is the first show for Willard Ashburn of Ashburn Sauce Co. and the first time he has entered Willy's Sassy Luau Sauce in a competition.

"I don't like the blistering heat 'cause you just can't taste it," Willard said when I tasted the sauce. It took about two years to create the flavor and get it onto store shelves last year.

I couldn't immediately separate the flavors. They were at once familiar and exotic. Layered with the spices and chile powder were raisin, pineapple, banana and coconut.

Who would have thought? Yet, there it was, one of those rare, lovely blends of

ingredients sought by those who dream of the perfect flavor.

As I leave, I have to agree with Dave. I hope all the newcomers make it. The world of fire is big. There's always room for more flavor.

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#### THE SCOVIE WINNERS

Willy's Sassy Luau Sauce (shown on Page 8) took the grand prize in this year's Scovie awards for best hot foods.

#### WHAT'S HOT IN HOT

##### \*Flavor, not heat

The extreme heat "is not gone, but it's definitely a real specialty niche," says chile guru Dave DeWitt. "I think more people want flavor than extreme heat."

##### \*Exotic hot sauces

This is a trend that has been growing for the past five years or so, "with people putting a lot of different things into their hot sauces," he says. "Herbs, fruit flavors and combinations of chiles."

##### \*Sweet heat

Sweets spiced with chile continue to grow in popularity. Hot pralines, brittle and fudge were the dominant sweets at this show, but a vendor also offered samples of spicy honey.

##### \*Spicy snacks and condiments

There were plenty of preserves, chutneys, chips and spicy nuts on offer.

#### UH-OH, NOW WHAT?

While folks at the Fiery Foods Show turned to beer and water as chile chasers, these drinks won't quench the fire if you accidentally get a taste of something too hot. Dairy products such as milk or yogurt contain casein, the antidote for capsaicin, the substance that puts the fire in fiery foods. Of course, you can't find those at the show. Then there's the fellow pictured on our cover, who brought his own antidote.

#### WANT TO GO?

For information about this show and a list of the Scovie winners, see [www.fierce-foods.com](http://www.fierce-foods.com). Or head to the Zest Fest in Fort Worth in September. Learn more about this Chile Pepper magazine event at [www.zestfest2006.com](http://www.zestfest2006.com)

Log on to see the complete list of Scovie winners, including links to Web sites where you can order some of the products.

