

Digest

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A Road to Identity: The New Mexico Chile

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The first time I (quite literally) stumbled upon a New Mexico chile, I was venturing through the rural southwest on a cross-country bike trip from California to Texas. It was mid-November, green chile harvest time, and the small back country roads outside of Hatch, NM, were littered with fresh green chiles that had tumbled from the large trucks transporting the crops to the nearby roasting plants. Our bike wheels thumped down the cracked and dusty asphalt as pods crushed under our tires, releasing the chiles' fresh aroma to waft lazily up to our nostrils.

Little did I know, as we pedaled on with the fragrance of sun-baked chiles in our wake, what a rich symbol of New Mexican identity I had just encountered. At that time I was a newcomer to the state – a recent college graduate, exploring the country through the lens of my newfound sense of adulthood. Over the next few years, as my ties to New Mexico evolved and strengthened along with my own emerging identity, I would grow to deeply appreciate the rich symbolism of these small, fiery pods. Through its complex relationship to natural and human history, its connection to both place and people, and its seamless adaptability, the New Mexico chile both defines and reflects New Mexican identity for an ever shifting fabric of communities in the American Southwest.

The Chile History: A Journey

Shortly after our biking adventure rolled to an end, with a heart still full of the open skies of the Southwest and a palate longing for the taste of fresh roasted chiles, I began learning about the history of the New Mexican chile. Both the natural and cultural histories associated with the chiles represent merging and blending, of locations, people, and ideas.

Not indigenous to the what is now the American Southwest, chiles began their journey to this part of the world after being introduced to Christopher Columbus during his



explorations of the West Indies in the 15th century. Lore has it that the islands' inhabitants presented a chile to the uninvited visitor as a practical joke, watching in amusement as Columbus ate the pod unaware of its heat. Ships later brought the chiles back to Spain, from where they spread across Europe before eventually being transported to what is now New Mexico by Spanish explorer Don Juan de Onate in 1598 (Diaz 2013). Here the chiles were incorporated in the indigenous diet based on corn, beans, and squash, and have been woven into the region's dynamic foodways ever since (Casey 2007:2). These foodways now provide a rich example of what Pilcher refers to as true Latino foods, "the historical product of encounters between peoples from many lands" (2013:186).

The fact that chile plants are not native to the southwestern United States is evident in their original environmental needs. The type of chile that Columbus encountered in the West Indies required massive amounts of water -- a scarce resource throughout most of arid New Mexico. In spite of this initial drawback however, the utility of the chile as a food, spice, and medicine gave it enough of an edge to thrive and grow in its new home, as people challenged the natural environment to cultivate chile crops. By the early twentieth century, farmers had succeeded at growing chiles commercially, increasing both the economic as well as cultural significance of the plant (Casey 2007).

The typical New Mexican chile eaten today is a product of this historic journey of the chile plant. A nightshade of the Genus *Capsicum*, the most widespread chile variety is commonly referred to as New Mexico #9. This particular chile is a hybrid of various chiles that came before, carefully selected for its color, growing properties, and level of capsaicin (the chemical that gives chiles their spice). Therefore the chile most of us eat today is by its very nature a blend, reflective of the history and community it defines. Several other hybrids are grown and distributed as well, as are a number of older, "pure" non-hybrids of the landrace variety, which are said to have changed very little from their first introduction to this land in centuries ago. (Fryxell 2007).

As I pedaled on through the state during that bicycle journey years ago, eating my way through plate after plate of chile-based dishes, I began to recognize the importance of this natural and human history in defining the chile as a symbol of New Mexican identity, with its blend of cultures and landscapes. I would soon become even more aware of this history as my personal ties to New Mexico and its chile grew, and my identity became more intertwined with and connected to the iconic food.

Terroir: Connection to Place

I didn't return to the Land of Enchantment until five years after my initial, roadside encounter with New Mexico chiles. My best friend and bicycling companion had returned to the Southwest and settled into the northern mountain town of Taos, which, along with an indescribable New Mexican allure, drew me to spend a winter with her there in the high desert. That winter in Taos immediately reinforced in my mind the extent to which the chile factors into the current culinary and cultural identity of the state and its inhabitants. My previous impressions were confirmed: in New Mexico, chiles are ubiquitous. You are greeted by them as you first cross the state line on the roadside "Welcome to New Mexico" signs. You encounter them hanging in dried bunches (called ristras) from adobe doorways and storefronts. You discover them on most every menu in every restaurant -- and sometimes in every dish on that menu. Thus I embarked upon my own culinary journey, discovering how chiles played into the flavor of classic New Mexico dishes.

The first thing I learned about New Mexico chiles was the difference between chiles posed in the state's most frequently asked question, "Red or green?" (officially adopted as the "state question" by the New Mexico State Legislature in 1999) (Casey 2007). While red and green chiles differ in taste and heat factor, they do in fact come from the same plant. Green chiles are those picked early while still slightly unripe, which tend to have a spicier bite to them. Green chile pods are roasted, dried, or used fresh in sauces that make up one of the most versatile components of the New Mexican cuisine. It is also the green chiles that can be used whole in the stuffed chile relleno (Casey 2007:174). Red chiles are those picked when ripe, and hung out to dry in the brilliant New Mexico sun. They are then ground into a powder and are most often incorporated into red chile sauce, whose flavor is fuller, richer, and yet milder than that of the younger green pods (Casey 2007:180). These two sauces characterize many dishes from a variety of Latin American backgrounds -- blending culturally diverse recipes and uniting their flavors into something uniquely New Mexican, in meals such as stews, enchiladas, tamales, burritos, huevos rancheros, and chile rellenos. Each of these dishes is either bathed in a hearty layer of green or red chile sauce, or incorporates heaps of roasted green chiles on their own.

It became evident to me that much of the chile's power in defining a New Mexican identity lies in its ability to link taste and place, a concept defined by the French word *terroir*. As Saltzman describes, "foods grown in a particular area acquires a flavor profile derived from soil, climate, water, and terrain" (2014b:1). In this way, the chile embodies the taste of the New Mexico landscape, connecting its eaters to the earth. The dryness of the desert landscape is infused into its smoky flavor, and the Southwest heat is encapsulated in the pepper's fiery seeds. The cracked skins of



the dried red chiles mirror the caked earthen adobe walls against which they hang. Even the question -- “red or green?” -- evokes images of the two-toned landscape of rusty-colored earth contrasted by varying greens of juniper, pinyon and sage.

It may seem strange for an introduced species (as it did not, after all, arrive in the area until the 17th century) to somehow so accurately represent this new landscape through its taste. Here again, however, the chile represents adaptation, as throughout history growers shifted, honed, and hybridized varieties in order to be more suitable for the dry, sunny climate of New Mexico. The fact that the chile is now a mainstay of New Mexican identity is a testament to its power to blend and adapt.

Identity: Connection to Self and Each Other

I began to wonder, as I gained a deeper understanding of the culinary role of New Mexican cuisine and settled into my own nascent identity as a New Mexican, what the chile meant to people -- my new neighbors -- in defining their New Mexican identity. Chiles are not just a food that people eat, or a flavor that characterizes the most common dishes in the area. They are also grown here, processed here, and celebrated here. What does this say about the region and the diverse group of people who call it home?

In considering the ways in which food can be tied to identity, Saltzman mentions ethnicity, region, nationality, gender, class, politics, and economics (2014a:1). Since New Mexicans as a group represent a wide spectrum in many of these realms, it became evident to me that the common denominator was indeed place, securing chile in my mind as a place-based food.

The heterogeneity of the New Mexican population is particularly evident in its present-day cultural diversity. The land’s remaining indigenous communities include 22 federally-recognized tribes, 11 reservations, and 19 pueblos. Much of the Spanish influence still exists, and is visible in the architecture, art, and religious traditions. There is a large population of Mexican immigrants contributing to the blend, in addition to the more recent influx of Anglos -- artists, wealthy retirees, and radical-thinkers seeking an alternative life off the grid. As Saltzman states, most people “ have more than one identity, which affects our relationships with particular foods” (2014a:1). Indeed, New Mexicans don’t all have the same relationship to this place, each other, or this place-based food, but the chile unites each different group by providing all with a common link.

One of the similarities that these cultures do seem to share is the pride that New



Mexicans show for their chile. There is an air of strength, boldness, and “piquante” in the chile that is reflected in each these cultures, and which transcends differences in the formation of a united “in-group.” This pride is seen even in the state question of “red or green?” Servers ask this question every day and in every restaurant across the state, in reference to which kind of chile diners would like on their plates. True New Mexicans, I learned shortly after moving to Taos, will often respond with “Christmas” -- a call for both red and green chiles. The first time I answered in this way, I myself felt a flicker of pride and a deepened sense of belonging to this land I was starting to call home.

The pride New Mexicans take in their state food is also reflected in the fervor with which they officially celebrate and honor the chile. Every Labor Day, towns and cities all over the state have Chile Festivals, at which residents share recipes, play games, and crown “Chile Queens.” The largest chile festival occurs in Hatch, a small town in southern New Mexico, where the bulk of the state’s chiles are grown. During festival time, the town of 2,000 receives over 30,00 festival attendees -- providing an opportunity for the town to celebrate the history of the chile, while also acknowledging the economic importance of the chile crops. As Stoeltje notes, “In all socially-based festivals ... the messages will be directly related to the present social circumstances as well as to the past” (1992:263). These festivals are also a time for New Mexicans to reflect upon change, and to remember the history of the chile and the ways in which it blends past and present.

Identity: As An Outsider

According to Saltzman, “For those cultures for which food is a major source of identity, certain ingredients and certain dishes have become iconic signifiers for group member as well as outsiders” (2014a:1). As I explored the relationship between chile and New Mexican identity further, I realized that as a place-based food chile not only serves to unite a diverse blend of New Mexicans and their varied identities -- it also serves to unite a blend of outsiders in their connection to both the place and its people, as well.

The chile is an iconic symbol of the state for outsiders. I felt this personally during my bicycle journey through the state in 2008, at which point I considered myself a passing visitor. My connection to chile was one of the strongest and most memorable experiences I had in New Mexico during that time, and for me blurred the line between insider and outsider. Unlike some place-based foods that solely reinforce this line, the chile is something locals are often willing and eager to share, and at times perhaps even exploit, while still valuing its presence in their everyday lives. In my bicycle-



based quest to “discover New Mexico,” I sat alongside farmers, business professionals, shop owners, and families, in venues from back alley restaurants to urban food carts, sharing smiles and excitement as we learned about the chile. This warm welcome and willingness to share strengthened my connection to the state and its inhabitants.

I was able to experience this from the other side after moving to Taos and witnessing this almost immediate chile-induced connection to place in the people who came to visit me. After picking my father up at the airport for his first visit after my move to the state, I took him directly to the famed Orlando’s Cafe for lunch. “I remember the first restaurant we went to in Taos, and having the chile... It definitely felt like New Mexico. I remember you telling me all about the different kinds of chiles, the flavors, the spiciness. It was a good experience, it was really special, because I was in New Mexico and I was with you” (Gooch 2014).

While there is much willingness to share this symbol and blend with outsiders, one cannot deny that there is also an element of smugness in the way in which insiders share chile. How much heat can visitors take in their chile? Red faces, fanned mouths, and extra glasses of water elicit sly grins and a twinkle in the eye of a local. Much like that first chile bestowed upon Columbus by the residents of the West Indies, it is a New Mexican’s way of protecting that identity and subtly marking someone as an “other.”

It is perhaps this “local’s pride” that has combined with outsider interest to result in a strong and widespread chile-based tourist industry, through which New Mexicans both share their pride and reap economic benefits. In addition to the Labor Day festivals, at which outsiders are welcomed, tourists can visit chile farms, explore the chile specialties of different restaurants, or embark upon more unusual events such as the “Green Chile Cheeseburger Trail.” In this latter form of tourism, yet another blend or hybridity occurs, as this iconic place-based dish is combined with a more nationally known dish, facilitating the ease with which outsiders feel comfortable and connected. The outsider is thus allowed to straddle the divide between exotic and familiar (Long 2004:26).

For any food that attracts tourism and is therefore subject to change and outside influence, one eventually has to consider the question of authenticity. It’s hard to say what defines an authentic chile to begin with, since by its nature and through its history it has proven so adaptable to different people and cultures. There is often debate among local New Mexicans about who has the best chile, as is evidenced by official contests, restaurants’ claims, and good-natured around-the-town arguments. Orlando Ortega of Orlando’s Cafe, for example, claims that their chile is “the best and purest, because it relies on very few ingredients. Simplicity is key” (Ortega 2014). However, the quest



for an authentic chile doesn’t seem to carry much weight. Perhaps this is because the chile is in itself an ever-changing thing -- from its arrival to this part of the world 400 years ago to its iconic status in New Mexico today, the chile has evolved and adapted with the identities of those who live with it, grow it, and eat it. As a place-based food, its authenticity lies perhaps more in where it is grown, cooked, served, and eaten, than how. This claim supports the idea that the chile helps bind and blend an identity based on geographic location, as opposed to culture, ethnicity, or shared history.

This place-based authenticity is reinforced by the dearth of New Mexican chile outside of the state. Even my father, from neighboring Texas, mentioned that “...chile’s not something I’d really thought much about before coming to New Mexico. I’d never really eaten it before” , (Gooch 2014). In some ways, it is surprising that the chile’s authenticity is not challenged more by geographically widespread preparation and consumption. Mintz states that “the regional foods most likely to remain more authentic are exactly the ones that cannot be shipped, or do not travel well, or are either difficult or impossible to copy.” (Mintz 2002:28). Chiles do ship and travel well, however. They can easily be frozen or canned, and many growers within New Mexico offer shipping to anywhere in the United States. Why, then, has the chile for the most part remained firmly seated in New Mexico? This conundrum strengthens the power and allure of the chile, and its unique place in representing the diverse amalgam of cultures in the American Southwest.

Change, Adaptation, and Preservation

It is clear in considering its history in relation to land and people that the chile has changed significantly over its time in the American Southwest. I now return several times a year to my home in the high desert of Taos, and have been able to observe first-hand how chile continues to adapt and shift today, and how that reflects the dynamic blend of New Mexican identity. These days, particularly in urban areas, it is common to find chile in everything from beer to pizza to chocolate, as producers respond to consumer whims and attempt to promote their state food with innovative combinations. There has also been movement toward creating organic chile products and vegetarian (as opposed to the pork-based) chile sauces to cater to the rise of health- and environmentally-focused food attitudes. Many restaurants have had to shift recipes to accommodate new demands and diner populations. Pat from Michael’s Kitchen in Taos says that, “we switched over to a vegetarian chile about ten years ago, when people started asking. For a while we did both, pork and veggie. Now it’s all vegetarian, the red and the green” (Garcia 2014). Orlando Ortega was ahead of his time in this realm. “Our chiles have



always been vegetarian. Even Orlando's grandmother's chiles were vegetarian" (Ortega 2014). The fact that Orlando's family recipe nonchalantly defied the "traditional" pork-base for so many years simply reflects the fluid concept of authenticity in regards to chile, and one of the reasons that change and adaptation are so easy to come by.

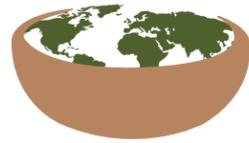
The New Mexico chile is therefore able to shift and adapt to its environment with ease, while still representing this geographic identity. According to Rahn, food "... is interwoven with a community's identity, its growth and development, ... and its balancing of tradition with change" (2006:33). It is critical to consider what kinds of changes these shifts reflect -- and to remember that as celebratory and pride-inducing a place-based food can be, there are unspoken ways in which it also represents struggles and inequalities inherent in the social and cultural place it helps define. From Spanish colonization to urban gentrification, the chile continues along a tumultuous ride of social change and redefinition.

While the chile has changed with and represents changes in New Mexican heritage, there has arisen a concurrent drive to preserve the historic type of chile and its role in defining identity. As previously mentioned, some of the old, non-hybrid landrace chiles are still grown in New Mexico today, and are cherished by some farmers as keys to maintaining a link to and an understanding of the past (Padilla 2012:51). Northern New Mexican farmer and scientist Loretta Sandoval, for example, works with other growers and scientists studying and promoting the landrace chile pepper. According to Sandoval, this pepper is valuable for taste, nutrition, and environmental sustainability (as it requires a more biodiverse growing environment than mainstream commercial varieties), as well as preservation of cultural heritage and identity. "Just like all regional Heirlooms all across the US and other places, the peppers and humans that cultivated them, like my ancestors, they are very important to both diet and health and also a sense of who we are as farmers and pastoral people" (Sandoval 2014). In addition to growing landraces herself, Sandoval writes grant applications seeking money to help other New Mexico farmers shift their crops to landraces. She says, "there is a huge decline of individuals growing the peppers, especially in the smaller secular regions here. Most of the farmers that steward these seeds are in their 70's, but I also am seeing a resurgence of others growing the peppers again -- thank God" (Sandoval 2014). These farmers are connecting with the chile in a way that pushes back against its adaptability, therefore still incorporating -- albeit critically -- these aspects of the chile into their New Mexican identity. Such work can remind us to be conscious and informed consumers of the food and the heritage of this place.



Within several months after moving to Taos I already felt like a local, bantering about the merits of this chile or that and requesting my dishes "Christmas." Now, several years later, for me the blending of chiles on a plate is representative of this melange of culture and history that continuously shifts to define the place that I love. As I have come to embrace the chile and my identity as a New Mexican, I have through this foodway been reminded of where I -- as a white, middle-class woman and a recent outsider -- fit into the blend of social and cultural fabric, of what my eating of the chile reinforces and redefines, and of how one place can hold so much complexity. Through its unifying power, I am able to acknowledge and respect the similarities within the New Mexican community, as well as its incredible diversity.

Now the slightest whiff of roasted chile transports me across oceans and mountains, to the landscape, the people, and the taste of the high desert, which, years after my bicycle's tires first encountered those fresh New Mexico chiles, I can now respectfully and proudly call home.



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