

## Chapter 47

## Foods of South America, Latin America & the Caribbean

# Guide to Chili Peppers

**Directions:** Read the following selection. Then answer the questions under *Thinking Critically*, and complete the activities as directed by your teacher.

“Tongue-burning” and “eye-watering” may not sound like appealing qualities in a food. For lovers of chili peppers, or chilies, however, these words are high praise. These small, colorful fruits are edible firecrackers.

The chili’s heat-producing component is a chemical called *capsaicin* (cap-SAY-uh-sun). Contact between capsaicin and nerve endings in your mouth and tongue creates a fiery sensation. The body responds by trying to flush out the irritating substance: the nose runs and the eyes water. Salivation increases, which actually intensifies the sensation. The body sweats to cool itself, which may explain why chilies first became popular in hot climates.

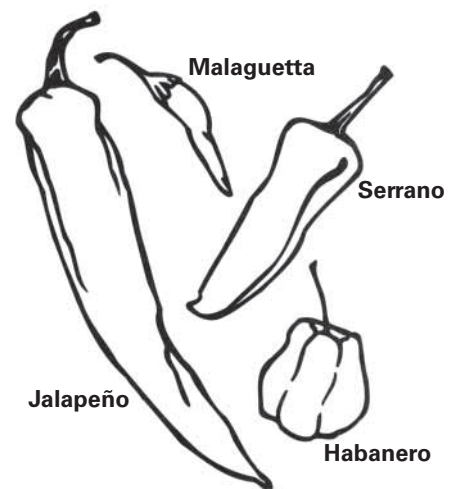
Capsaicin also “binds” with the taste-bud cells, enhancing their ability to carry flavors. Thus, you could draw the conclusion that the hotter the chili, the more you enjoy the rest of the meal. In fact, people who develop a taste for chilies may find that foods made without them seem bland.

Capsaicin can sting the sensitive membranes of the eyes and nose. Never touch your face when working with chilies. Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water afterward, or wear rubber gloves to protect yourself from capsaicin-bearing oils. (Some chilies can even “burn” your fingers.)

### Choosing a Chili

If you’ve never cooked with chilies or do so rarely, start with using a small amount. Choose a mild variety. Beware, however, because capsaicin levels may vary within the same chili. Even a tiny amount of some chilies can be painfully hot. Remove the inner membrane, where capsaicin is concentrated. Also, have a cracker or a glass of milk handy. If you bite into a chili that’s too hot, a starchy food will absorb the capsaicin. Milk protein will neutralize its effect.

Of course, you don’t have to eat chilies whole. Stir fresh minced chili powder into taco filling. Add chopped, canned chilies to a pizza. Adventurous cooks might try these popular peppers:



- ◆ **Habanero.** Also known as Scotch Bonnet. Small, red, bell-shaped pepper. Those grown in southern Mexico are said to be the world’s hottest chilies.
- ◆ **Jalapeño.** About 2½ inches long, narrow and tapered. Medium to dark green in color. Usually quite hot. A smoked, dried jalapeño is called a chipotle.
- ◆ **Malaguetta.** Tiny, slim, Brazilian hot pepper. Red or green.
- ◆ **Poblano.** A pepper that is 3 to 4 inches long with a wide top. Very dark green with wavy, dimpled skin. Most are only slightly hot. An *ancho* is a mild-to-very-hot, ripened, and dried poblano.
- ◆ **Serrano.** Similar in shape to the jalapeño, but smaller, about 1½ inches long. Smooth, medium green skin.

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## Thinking Critically

1. How have Latin American and Mexican dishes been adapted to American tastes?

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2. How has the fast-food industry modified traditional Mexican dishes? What are the advantages or disadvantages?

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3. Describe your experience with chilies. How long did it take for you to accept this taste sensation?

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4. What impact has the food from Latin America, Mexico, or the Caribbean had on your diet?

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## For Further Study

- ◆ Survey the chili peppers available at a local supermarket. Create a temperature poster placing each chili somewhere on the thermometer as related to the sensation of “heat” each produces when it is eaten. Display your poster for the class.
- ◆ Use Internet or print resources to investigate the use of chili peppers around the world. What peppers are commonly used in various regions and cultures? With what foods or dishes are peppers used most often? Write a brief report and submit it to your teacher.