

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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How Hot is Medium, Hot or Fiery?

Have you ever tasted a bite of food your spouse assured you was 'mild', only to feel like your tongue was seared off? Or bought a bottle of hot sauce labeled 'Fiery', only to find it almost bland? If you've been in either situation you are well aware that what one person finds mildly spicy another finds unbearable. Labels are not accurate!

Part of the problem of course is just that spicy heat is a relative taste. Some people are more sensitive than others. And our tongues and taste buds adapt. The more often we eat spicy foods the less spicy they seem. We become accustomed, whether it is to hot peppers or hot curries. The less our tongues object, the more spice we want. Countries where small children are given hot peppers tend to use a lot more pepper. The children grow accustomed to them, and just keep wanting more.

Our American taste buds are rapidly developing a huge international flavor palate. Early settlers brought the foods from home, and we pretty much stuck to our own family cooking. Then soldiers started coming home from World War I and II with a taste for more variety. More immigrants arrived from the far corners of the world bringing along their spices too. Now there are shelves and shelves of hot spicy sauces, from the Habaneros of the Caribbean to Asian, Indian, African and South American heat. Take your choice, just be careful!

But how can you know before you buy, or bite into, whether it will be too hot for you? Unfortunately, you can't. In the early 1900's Wilbur Scoville might have been suffering from the same uncertainty. Instead of avoiding peppers altogether he developed a chemical way to measure the 'heat'. The scale is now named after him, Scoville units. Basically this measures how much capsaicin, the 'hot' chemical, a pepper has. Sweet bell peppers rate a 0, no heat at all. Pure capsaicin, the hottest pepper extract possible, rates 16,000,000 units. There are a couple of hot sauces that have the same rating - use with extreme caution!

Other peppers fall somewhere in between these extremes. Mild Jalapeños have between 2,500 and 5,000 Scoville units of heat, while Serranos get up to 23,000. Thai peppers have about 100,000 Scoville units. Jamaican hot peppers have 200,000 units and Habanero peppers get as

many as 350,000 units. Standard pepper spray has 2,000,000 Scovilles, but police grade spray hits 5,300,000 units.

So how can you know before you buy, or bite into, whether it will be too hot for you? There are no rules or regulations to control the words on a label. What one label screams is "Flaming" might be milder than another that promises "Hot". There is no way to compare a word to a Scoville unit. The FDA, which regulates food labeling, makes sure that the nutrition facts and ingredients are correct, that allergens are listed and that the quantity in the package is correct. It also regulates the use of certain claims such as 'low in sodium' or 'low fat'. These have an impact on health. But it doesn't even try to manage any claims about the flavor of the food.

Chiliworld.com has a list of some peppers and hot sauces on its website with their Scoville units. If you like some heat but have your limits, take a look at it. Figure out about where your limit is. See what sauces or peppers are likely to taste good and remember them. Then when you read a hot sauce label, look for a Scoville number. It might not be on the label, but if it is you'll have an idea if that product is in your safe range or well above it.

Here's a hot dip for the start of football season, but it's hot in temperature only. If you want more kick, use a bit of whichever pepper suits your fancy, or just add as many splashes of your favorite hot sauce as you want. Enjoy, and may your team win!

Hot Crab and Red Pepper Dip

1 ½ C (6 oz) shredded mozzarella cheese	8 oz cream cheese, softened
1 tsp garlic powder	1 tsp Italian seasoning
1 red bell pepper, minced	1 small onion, minced
1 (6-ounce) can crab meat, drained	1 C chopped fresh parsley

Preheat oven to 375° F. Combine 1 cup of mozzarella, cream cheese, garlic powder and Italian seasoning in bowl and mix well. Pick over crab and remove shell and cartilage. Gently stir in red pepper, onion, crab and parsley. Spread in 9" baking dish. Bake 20 minutes until heated through and lightly browned. Sprinkle with remaining mozzarella cheese. Garnish with additional parsley if desired. Serve with crackers or raw vegetable sticks. Serves 4.

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