Peppers are like love: sweet or hot

Southam Newspapers EDMONTON - One of the great joys of my job which combines food and travel writing - is that

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the two go together like nachos and cheese. For instance, when I think of hot peppers, I think of October mornings in a New Mexico farmers' market, with the chili roasters being un-

loaded from half a dozen battered pickups and the long green pods of the Anaheims turning and turning, like bingo balls in the metal baskets. The gas jets hiss, the chili seeds pop and the sweet smell of roasting peppers floats down the wind. If you haven't already had a hot breakfast tamale with roasted chilies and a cup of strong coffee, now is the moment.

Sweet peppers, on the other hand, take me back to Budapest - the market again, where the red and yellow wax peppers hang in great swoops and loops.

The thing to eat there is sweet peppers, stuffed or fried. Both dishes are served with a good bash of sour cream and a slab of coarse, crusty bread. On a good day, you'd be drinking a lusty red wine with this.

If you love peppers, don't worry about their Latin names or their Scoville units. Think instead of what a Hungarian grower told me:

"Peppers are like love: sometimes red hot and wild, sometimes sweet and mild. You need a little of both.

Now is the season.

Sweet Peppers

There was a time within Canadians' living memory when green bell peppers were considered exotic. That was before the current paintbox of colours.

All bell peppers start off green. The riper and redder the pepper gets, the sweeter it tastes. It also becomes more fragile and its shelf life gets

Some variations go beyond colour:

Hungarian wax peppers, also called banana peppers or goat horn peppers, are long and tapered with transparent-looking skin and a pale yellow colour. Great for pickles, mild salsas, piz-za. Terrific fried with onions and stirred into sour

Italian bell peppers are the ones we know best. Green or red, their thick walls and juicy flesh makes them excellent candidates for roasting. Bright orange, yellow, purple and black peppers, sold in some stores as Dutch peppers, taste about

Pimentos, of stuffed olive fame, look like fat little apples. They're about 3 inches (8 cm) tall and 6 inches (15 cm) wide. They're great for roasting and for stuffing.

Cubanelle peppers are about the same size as Italian peppers, without the shoulder. They go to market light green, ripening to orange and finally to red. Medium hot but still sweet.

In The Market

Look for sweet peppers that are heavy for their size, with smooth, unblemished skin and deep colour. Avoid any that are wrinkled, have soft spots near the stem end or are cracked.

Store peppers in a perforated plastic bag in your crisper.

Hot Peppers

Jalapeno is a popular medium hot chili with thick, fleshy walls. Terrific for nachos, or stuffed with jack cheese and deep-fried.

Serrano are longer, leaner, hotter. Dark green. Bird chilies, also known as Thai chilies, are smaller and even hotter.

Habaneros, often sold as Scotch Bonnets, are incendiary. A jalapeno scores from 3,000 to 8,000 Scoville heat units, habaneros never go lower than 80,000 units and can reach as high as 577,000. They're short, chubby, 2 inches wide (5 cm), in a rainbow of colours - red, yellow, green and orange.

Anaheim is the classic New Mexican field chili, about 6 inches (15 cm) long and 2 inches (5 cm) wide. Its slender, elongated shape makes it perfect for roasting and stuffing. Mild.

Poblano is mild, heart-shaped with fleshy walls. Good for stuffing. **Ancho -** a dried poblano. Available as a paste.

Has a more intense flavour.



Big Tamale Pie With Peppers is great served with a salad and Mexican beer.

Three ideas for peppers

This dish is a tamale without the fuss and bother of wrapping it in corn

Serves 6 to 8

1 tablespoon (15 mL) olive oil

2 large onions, chopped

2 cloves garlic, minced 3 fresh jalapeno chilies, minced

4 large bell peppers, seeded and chopped 2 pounds (1 kg) lean ground beef or

sausage meat

2 tablespoons (30 mL) good chili

1 tablespoon (15 mL) brown sugar

1/4 cup each (50 mL each) chopped cilantro and parsley

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Cornmeal Crust

1 medium tomato, diced

1 green bell pepper, diced

1 cup (250 mL) grated sharp cheddar 2 green onions, minced

1 jalapeno, sliced, for garnish

In a big frying pan, fry onions and garlic in olive oil until transparent. Do not brown. Add peppers. Continue frying until soft, but not browned. Add the ground meat and stirfry until all signs of pink have disappeared.

Add remaining ingredients and stir well. Let the mixture simmer until a thick sauce has formed.

The cornmeal: Bring water to a boil in a saucepan. Add cornmeal in a stream, stirring. Add salt. Cook until thick,

about 5 minutes. Let cool - this will take at least 20 minutes. Using your hands, mould the cornmeal mush on the bottom and up the sides of a casserole or large baking pan. The crust should be no less than 1/2 inch thick.

Spoon the sauce into the cornmeal crust. Topping: Toss the remaining ingredients together and

sprinkle over the surface of the pie.

Bake in a preheated 350 F oven for 30 minutes, or until

the cheese is well melted. Spoon onto plates. Vegetarian Variation: Instead of ground beef, beat 8 eggs and stir them into the cooked vegetables. Omit brown sugar and chili powder. Pour into the cornmeal crust and top as directed. Bake until puffed and golden, about 45 minutes. Let the pie sit 10 minutes before serving. Serve with an avo-

The Roasted Pepper and Goat Cheese Sandwich Roasted peppers

Garlic Goat cheese

Crusty bread Roast and peel 1 large red sweet pepper, 1 large green sweet pepper and 1 medium-hot Anaheim green pepper un-

til skin blisters. Peel as directed above. Cut peppers into quarters and seed. Lay the skinned peppers in a flat plate. Cover with good olive oil and 1 or 2 cloves garlic, minced. Add a little salt and pepper. Let peppers marinate about one hour at room temperature.

Slice a crusty baguette or Italian loaf lengthwise. Toast the cut surfaces. Lay slices of sweet and hot pepper on one half, letting the olive oil drizzle onto the bread

Top generously with crumbled goat cheese (feta will do in a pinch, or a mixture of feta and mozza.) Top with another slice of baguette. Wrap snugly in foil. Bake, or place on barbecue, about 15 minutes.

Open-face variation: Place the baguettes under the broiler and broil until cheese is golden and soft. This is almost a

The Two Pepper Blast

Makes 4 cups 2 red jalapeno peppers, seeded and diced

1 red bell pepper, seeded, diced, chopped 1 cup (250 mL) white vinegar

3 tablespoons (45 mL) lemon juice

5 cups (1.25 L) granulated sugar

3 ounces (85 mL) liquid pectin

In the container of a food processor, place jalapenos and bell pepper. Add 1/2 cup (125 mL) of the vinegar. Pulse until roughly pureed.

Pour into a Dutch oven along with remaining vinegar, lemon juice and sugar. Bring to a boil and boil for one minute. Remove from heat and skim foam. Pour into hot sterilized jars leaving 1/4 inch (6 mm) headspace.

Place sterilized lids on top and secure with metal bands.

Process five minutes in boiling water. This is good on toasted bagels with cream cheese.



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