



Some freshly picked red chiltepin peppers.  
Photo by Jonathon Shacat Herald/Review

Originally published Sunday, Oct. 24, 2010  
<http://www.svherald.com/content/lifestyle/2010/10/24/chiltepins>

This version has been reformatted to fit the PDF format of the Hotel Los Arcos de Sonora website

## **Chiltepins Pepper is small but packs a large punch**

By Jonathan Shacat•Herald/Review

BANAMICHI, Sonora — Whether it's huevos con frijoles or caldo de pollo, a traditional meal here in Sonora, Mexico, would not be complete without the chiltepin hot pepper.

Chiltepins, a red-colored pea-sized fruit, are harvested from the wild every fall and then preserved in various ways so they can be consumed over the course of the coming months and years.

They are extremely hot. On the Scoville scale, which measures the spiciness of peppers, chiltepins rank in the 50,000 to 100,000 heat unit range, which is hotter than cayenne, but not as hot as the habanero.

The area where chiltepins are commercially harvested and recognized for their quality flavor is in the mountains in the state of Sonora, Mexico. But, they are found in other places along the U.S.-Mexico border, including as far north as Phoenix, said Kimberlee Chambers, assistant professor at Willamette University in Oregon, who has conducted research on the topic.

Green chiltepins are generally harvested in September and October, while the red are picked in October and November, but it depends on elevation, aspect, rainfall and economic status, she added.

“Those with money will hold off and only harvest red as they are much easier to pick and worth so much more. When they ripen depends on the environmental variables and landscape,” said Chambers.

Each year, Rogelio Flores, of Banámichi, harvests red chiltepins on his ranch and sells them for 250 pesos per liter, which is about \$20. He can get 20-some liters in a typical year, although yields vary from none to as many as 30 liters.

“Last year, there was no rain, and so there were no chiltepins,” he said.

Some ranchers allow people to pick the peppers on their property in return for payment of one third of the product.

But, Flores prefers to harvest by himself to make sure the plants are not mistreated or damaged.

Chiltepins grow in unique conditions, making them very difficult to cultivate in a garden. But, some people in this region still claim success in growing their own plants.

“The seeds pass through a bird’s stomach in the wild, which may or may not cause them to be scarified



by the stomach acids. It is also possible that when the birds pass the seeds, they provide them with just the right amount of fertilizer to get them started,” Chambers said.

“Additionally, these plants, at least in the Rio Sonora Valley, have evolved to grow in some pretty harsh conditions (poor soil and hot dry climate) so they may have very specific growing requirements that are difficult to replicate,” she added.



Chiltepins are commonly served with meals here in Sonora.

Locals in Banámichi create a salsa by combining the green chiltepins with oil, garlic, oregano, salt and pepper.

Others make salsa from red chiltepins mixed with tomato, onion, garlic, oregano and salt.

Beatriz Yescas de Corella, another resident of Banámichi, said the green salsa compliments fried eggs, while the red salsa is tasty with tacos, eggs or carne machaca.

Also, she added, fresh green chiltepins go good with meat.

And, red chiltepins that are dried and crushed, are delicious



with posole, menudo and chicken or fish stew.

The Hotel Los Arcos de Sonora in Banámichi, for example, offers the red salsa with eggs at breakfast, said co-owner Tom Matthews. The chiltepins add a burst of heat to the dish.

“Start off with just a little and work your way up,” suggests the hotel’s September newsletter. “The heat fades fairly quickly unlike other varieties of chiles that start slowly, build their heat and linger. This rapid heat effect may make the chiltepin seem hotter.”

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