

# The spice of life

How do you make Mexican chilli sauce in a land more famous for cider and cream teas? Wahaca asked Steve Waters from the **South Devon Chilli Co.**



**How on earth did you end up growing chillies for a living?** It started off as a hobby, just growing chillies in my greenhouse. Then we got really interested in the history of chillies and Mexican cuisine more generally, as we realised how many ways there were to eat them – fresh, dried, smoked, pickled – each with such different flavours. We got the seeds on import from the US, and found they grew remarkably well here.

**How long has it been a full-time job?** Jason was working full-time, doing an IT job in Plymouth, while I was working from home as a software engineer, so it was easier for me to slip out gracefully. To begin with, I spent 2 or 3 days a week on the farm; then about six years ago, once we'd built up a reasonable customer base, Jason kicked in his job and went full time too.

**Devon's better known for cream tea and cider than chillies. Did your neighbours think you were one seed short of a jalapeno?** We got an awful lot of that when we started showing up at the farmers' markets, with 40 or so chillies in these big wicker baskets. But I think that's also why we've got a lot of coverage.

**How many varieties do you grow now?** Generally we have about 60-70 varieties on the go in our show tunnel at any one time. We grow about 30 or so as main crops, and then some guest varieties. And of course we choose some because they look good, because we sell a lot of ornamental chillies too.

**So what's your personal favourite?** It depends what you're using them for. For cooking we like the habaneros, or maybe the ajis limon, which is a 2-inch long yellow chilli shaped like a banana it tastes of citrus when it's fresh, and banana when it's dried. Ornamentally, the most impressive is probably the Twilight, a variety they developed at the University of New Mexico. You get all sorts of different colours on the same plant: purples, yellows, oranges, reds.

**Do you only like the really hot ones?** There are all sorts of heats and flavours; the heat factor is very personal. Take the pimento de Padrón, which is a small green chilli named after a town in Galicia. It's picked quite small at the start of the season, when it's about 1.5 inches long, and in Spain they fry them in a bit of oil and serve with sea salt as tapas. They're quite fun because occasionally you get a pretty warm one in there, but even the milder ones have a fantastic flavour.

**Do you still cook a lot of Mexican food?** Of course! My favourite dish would probably be enchiladas with the large green chillis, or maybe poblanos, which look like bell tomatoes but more heart-shaped. You eat them half-stuffed with mincemeat and then grilled. Or maybe a salsa. I think the key is that you don't just try and make the hottest damn thing you can. You can get such a depth of flavour, depending on whether the chillies are fresh or dried or smoked.

**What do you spend your time doing on a typical day?** All sorts. I might be out in the greenhouse making sure that the plants have got enough water; that they're not falling over; that the door's open if it's sunny. Or I might be potting seeds, or serving in the shop, or taking deliveries ... I had a very static job for 18 years, and I'm the kind of person that appreciates being out and about.

**So what's next for the Chilli Farm?** There's so many things we want to do. We're trying to sell to as many shops as we can nationwide, focusing on the specialist fine food shops rather than the supermarkets. We want to build a farm shop outside, which we can stock with local produce. And at some point we'd also like to open a little Mexican cantina, so you can buy your chillies and then see them cooked in front of you.

## Calling all growers!

Wahaca needs chillies. If you've got the land, we've got the seeds. Contact us at [info@wahaca.co.uk](mailto:info@wahaca.co.uk) for more information. Alternatively, drop by the restaurant for a free sample of Jalapeno chilli seeds.

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## The Chilli knowledge

### Chipotle

A smoked jalapeño chilli and amongst Mexico's most loved chillies. It has a fiery, smoky flavour delicious in salsas and mayonnaises.

### Guajillo

A bright red, slightly sweet chilli that is delicious with seafood. Try it in the infamous fish Pastor, one of our favourite taco fillings.

### Pasilla

This is a must in any self-respecting sopa de tortilla. Pasillas are a little hotter than anchos with a more herby, dried fruit flavour with undertones of tobacco

### Ancho

A round, dark red chilli with fruity, deep tones. Its rich flavour is mild in heat and is delicious in Mexican mole sauces.

### Chile de árbol

The direct translation is 'tree' chilli because of the shape of the plant from where this extremely hot chilli grows. We roast ours with garlic and mix them with our Oaxacan (wa-ha-can) nuts.

### Habanero

A fresh fiery hot chilli also known as the "Scotch Bonnet". Eat one whole at your peril.

Pictured: Chile de árbol as seen in our wahaca roast nuts.

