

FIRE UP YOUR TASTEBUDS!

While there have been extremely hot temperatures outdoors this summer, Americans also love experiencing the heat with extra hot and spicy foods.

Your favorite chicken wing shop may rate its spiciness in clever terms ranging from “mild” to “hot” to “suicide hot,” but did you know that there is the semi-scientific Scoville scale for measuring spicy hotness? This scale rates the amount of capsaicin, an ingredient in chili peppers that creates that burning sensation. Test your resolve today!

Eating chili peppers is good for your health. Chili peppers are a great source of beta carotene, potassium, calcium, and other vitamins. Consumption of chili peppers may even help reduce cholesterol.

It is essential to wear gloves when handling peppers. Some peppers contain oils that can even blister skin or cause an allergic reaction. During and after handling peppers, it is also important to avoid touching your eyes and nose.

Peppers contain a chemical called capsaicin that makes them hot. Capsaicin cannot be found in any other plant and is potent and easily identifiable. The heat produced by spices or foods is measured in Scoville Heat Units (SHU). This measurement tool was created by Wilbur Scoville, who pioneered measuring the heat produced by a food or spice. If peppers have a higher capsaicin content, they will be higher on the Scoville scale, while foods with less capsaicin or “heat” are lower on the Scoville scale.

Using the SHU, we can compare foods to see which one has more “heat” or spice. Chili peppers are almost always hot, but these peppers are always evolving, so the “hottest” pepper title frequently changes.

For a frame of reference, Jalapenos have an average range of 5,000 to 7,000 (SHU). Tabasco averages from 30,000 to 50,000 (SHU). Habanero peppers, long thought to be the hottest on the planet, generally average 200,000 to 300,000 (SHU). The Carolina Reaper, current holder of the World Record for the hottest pepper, has been rated at 2,200,000 (SHU). There is always another “hottest pepper in the world” ready to emerge. Preliminary testing shows that Pepper X (3.18 Scoville units) and the Dragon’s Breath chili (2,483,584 SHU) could be hotter than the Carolina Reaper. Official testing needs to be done before we add it to our list of hottest peppers.

Besides chili peppers, other hot and spicy foods can be made with ingredients such as wasabi, horseradish, or other spices. Americans like to make spicy chili, chicken wings, and gumbo. Examples of international spicy foods include vindaloo, jerk chicken, Sichuan hot pot, and griot. While there are hot and spicy foods from all countries and cultures, some are more well-known for their spicy cuisines, such as Thailand, Mexico, Malaysia, Korea, Jamaica, India, and China.

After eating spicy food, it is better to have a dairy product like milk or yogurt nearby to ease the burning in your mouth. Drinking water will not bring relief. It can actually make the burning sensation worse because the water does not mix with the spices and oils and instead moves the heat around your mouth.

If you want to include more spicy foods in your diet, don't be afraid to dine at Thai or Indian restaurants that serve spicy food you may have never tried. Learn about the different types of chili peppers and discover your tolerance level and favorite flavors. Maybe try a spicier salsa or a new chili recipe.

While the comfort level of spiciness for some people may be a sprinkle of pepper on food or eating the spiciest peppers, fire up your tastebuds. Start with mild spices, then gradually increase the heat level.

(Sources: <https://scovillescale.org>)