



lonely planet

the world's best

spicy food

where to find it
& how to make it





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* Introduction *

By Tom Parker-Bowles

It started with a drop, beguilingly red and devilishly scented, poured from a small, elegant bottle onto the back of my hand.

'Go on, try it,' my sister implored, her eyes glittering with glee. 'All the grown ups drink the stuff. How dangerous can it be?' So I closed my eyes tight, and plunged my tongue into the unknown. The first taste was sharp but not unpleasant, like the vinegar that we splashed on our chips. I smiled, and sighed with relief. Much ado about nothing. And then it hit, a fierce, brutally burning sensation that started in my mouth before spreading, like a raging forest fire, across my lips and down into my throat.

My eyes brimmed with tears and I tried to scream but to no avail. I'd never felt pain like this. It was worse than stinging nettles and grazed knees and the slap of a cold football on rain-drenched flesh. I fell to the floor, clutching my belly, convinced that this damned liquid, this evil draught, was noxious poison, the killer of small boys.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the agony abated. I opened my eyes and looked about. The light seemed somehow brighter, every colour suddenly more vivid. Sure, my tongue still throbbed and my lips smarted too. But my whole body was enveloped in a warm glow. My sister, of course, was sheet-white and trembling, convinced that she was the architect of her

brother's demise. I, though, was in love. One drop of Tabasco sauce, and I've never looked back since.

Soon, I was splashing this beautiful Louisiana hot sauce over everything that was put before me, from toast and egg to steak and shepherd's pie. And this was just the start: Tabasco was the gateway drug of an addiction that would take over my life. Curries followed, each more potent than the next, madras first, then the great leap to vindaloo. I began to cook with chillies, moving quickly from dull, generic long green things to the fruity insanity of the Scotch bonnet. Before long, I was a subscriber to Chile Pepper magazine, scouring the streets for my next spicy hit.

Visits to Thailand followed, some toms with enough bird's-eye punch to floor a rampaging bull elephant, let alone a rather pasty Brit. Tom yam gungs, fragrant with heat and fish sauce, nam phrik pla flowing like monsoon-bloated rivers. I just couldn't get enough: it was pain,







sure, but exquisite pleasure too. There were dhals eaten in India at roadside shops, little more than ten pence a portion, but thick with great lengths of dried Kashmiri chilli. And Indonesian sambals, in every hue and pong.

I visited hot-sauce shows in Albuquerque, New Mexico: entire conference centres devoted to fiery foods. And fell in love with the chile con carne of Texas, plus the entire cuisine of Mexico, from birrias and ceviches to tortillas, tacos and tostadas. I huffed and puffed my way through incendiary, but impossibly crisp, hot chicken at Prince's in Nashville, Tennessee, breakfast burritos smothered with green chile in Santa Fe, New Mexico. And bought Caribbean hot sauces bottled in old Lucozade bottles from roadside stalls in Antigua. Then there's kimchi in Korea, harissa-spiked couscous, Sichuan chilli hotpots and everything else in between.

I love the chilli more than any other fruit, pretty much more than any ingredient there is. It's not all about heat, rather, huge complexities

of flavour and texture and joy. The smoky heft of a chipotle chilli, the verdant tang of a fresh jalapeno. But the reason why the chilli pepper is so damned addictive lies in its active ingredient, capsaicin, a nasty little irritant alkaloid. The hotter the chilli, the more of this chemical it contains, hitting the taste buds hard, sending them reeling in pain. So the body reacts, and sends in the Special Forces (better known as endorphins). That's why the agony of really hot chilli burn is followed by that blissful state of dreamy joy. As these endorphins flood the system, putting out the fires, we experience a truly natural 'high'.

But this book is not about chillies alone, rather 'spicy' food in its every guise. The pungent, nose-clearing honk of wasabi, mustard and horseradish; pepper's pep (black, white, pink and Sichuan) and paprika's punch; the warming allure of cinnamon and mace, the bracing crunch of piccalilli. These are dishes to make the taste buds punch the air with elation, flavours that kickstart the palate and infuse every sense with joy.

As you'd expect, there are a huge number of dishes from Thailand, India and Mexico, the three great chilli cuisines, alongside Sichuan Chinese and Korean too. But we also feast upon herrings from Norway, Turkish kebabs, Czech sausages and African chicken. Trinidadian souse sits alongside Hungarian goulash, katsu curry shares space with Spanish grilled peppers. This book is a celebration of spiciness in every form: ingredients that turn the bland to the brilliant, the dreary into the divine.

And, like all food, it's the finest way to experience any foreign culture. Forget the funereal silence and air-conditioned gloom of those insipid 'international' restaurants, with their second-rate approximations of dreary Western fare. This is real food, pulsing with vibrancy and delight, bringing a truly happy tear to one's eye. Best of all, you need nothing more than a healthy appetite, an open mind and a handful of the local currency. Spice. One word, a million different thrills.

