

HOT PEPPERS

by Bob Hartig

The main use of meat loaf is for conveying large quantities of Tobasco Sauce to the human mouth. All food was in fact created for this purpose—just ask anyone who loves hot sauce. Hamburger, roast pork, buttered corn, eggs, chili: all tools, mere tools, to assist in the speedy and thorough cauterization of the taste buds. Frankly, it matters little what a person uses so long as it gets the job done. New York Strip is fine. So is Spam.

“Spam?” you say. “Come on! Surely you prefer the flavor of steak.”

Flavor? Ha! When my tongue is going up in smoke, you think I can tell the difference between prime rib and road kill? Don’t talk to me about flavor—I’m involved with something higher, something infinitely more occupying. I’m talking about *pain*.

My obsession with hot peppers began early. I experimented with Tobasco at age four. By my late teens, I had become so accustomed to jalapenos that I could consume huge quantities with no effect at all, other than sudden forehead zits, a runny nose, copious sweating, and indescribable agony.

My prowess became the stuff of legend. My awe-stricken friends bestowed on me various titles, if phrases such as “that flaming lunatic” can be considered a title. They loved to show me off to strangers. We’d be sitting in the Aaiiiee Caramba Café, a Mexican restaurant infamous for its jalapenos. “Hey, Hartig,” my buddy Mark would say, handing me a pepper. “Here, eat this.” I’d pop the fiery morsel into my mouth as some onlooker, still bleeding at the eyes from his own encounter, looked on aghast, waiting for a reaction that never came. “How can you stand it?” he’d finally ask. “Stand what?” I’d reply with an innocent smile, dabbing delicately with a napkin at the scorch marks around my mouth. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about. Care for a pepper? Very flavorful, though personally, I prefer them with a little bite.”

My tongue, of course, never felt quite as nonchalant as my demeanor suggested. “YAAAHHHHH!!!” it would scream. “Murder! Magma! Eruption! Help!”

“Did you just hear a tiny voice calling for help?” someone would say.

“Not me. Here, have a pepper.”

So it went for years. I never met a pepper I couldn't master. Well, once. I was eating dinner at the home of some friends from Pakistan when I spotted a pan full of little round, blackened objects about the size of cherry tomatoes. Fried hot peppers! I was about to drop one into the old hopper when the host spotted me. “Be kefull,” he warned. “Dot's vely, vely hot!”

Right! I thought. *Obviously he's sized me up as just one more occidental piker who can't handle spicy food. Thinks I don't know from hot!* Chuckling, I tossed the plump little unit into my mouth. The following moments were memorable.

In seconds, I was ushered through a doorway into a different realm. A core of white-hot, nuclear heat filled my mouth, then expanded through my entire being with the intensity of a supernova. The room swam before my watering eyes and dissolved into darkness. Time lost all meaning; seconds seemed like hours. The fabric of reality itself stretched to the breaking point, then began to rip at the seams like a bargain-basement garment. I flailed with my hands, trying desperately to retrieve the shreds of my disintegrating universe.

Then, through my panic, I heard a voice, clear, incisive, confronting me with the Ultimate Cosmic Question: “Why are you tearing up your shirt?”

The Ultimate Cosmic Question was a bit of a letdown. “Eh?” I responded, opening my eyes.

A face stared at me through the cloud of steam erupting from my mouth and nostrils. It was my friend Steve. “I repeat,” he said, “Why are you ripping your shirt to shreds?”

“My shirt. Yes, good question,” I replied, casually draining a handy pitcher of iced tea. “I thought it was the fabric of reality, the shreds of my disintegrating universe, that sort of thing.”

“Ah.”

“Look, it's kind of hard to explain.” A fleck of drool escaped my lips and proceeded to burn its way through the kitchen floor. “By the way, have you tried one of these peppers? You should. Very flavorful, though personally, I prefer them with a little bite.”

In retrospect, I believe this incident years back represents my first exposure to the habanero pepper, which is to the standard jalapeno what lava is to latte. It would not be my last experience with habaneros—only my mildest. Even in my youth, I understood the value of breaking into new things gently.

The years rolled by, a fair number of them on bent rims and donut tires. I achieved the grand age of forty, and with it, a lengthy experience with hot, spicy foods. In a word, I had become—*ahem*—seasoned. The pepper no longer existed that could faze me. Tobasco sauce was my beverage of choice, a refreshing thirst-quencher on a hot summer day.

And, I admit it, I had become blasé. I'd be sitting with a friend in the Aaiiiee Caramba Café. “Hey, Bob,” my buddy would say, taking a chili pepper and lighting his cigarette with it, “here, eat this!” He'd hold the fiery morsel before my face, temptingly.

“Sorry, not in the mood,” I'd reply. “On the other hand, I'll be glad to eat that pepper you lit it with. Very flavorful, though personally . . .”

“Yeah, yeah.”

One by one, my friends wrote off my taste buds as a lost cause. My tongue, suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, had lost the ability to feel or process pain. Only a miracle could restore it to sanity and sensitivity.

A miracle was forthcoming.

It was Christmas Eve. One by one, gifts were being exchanged and unwrapped. My sister, Diane, handed me a cylindrical, gift-wrapped object roughly the size of a jar of habanero peppers. Whatever could it be? Probably the heat and the slightly charred condition of the wrapping paper should have tipped me off. Nevertheless, I was mystified.

Ripping through the paper, I uncovered—you guessed it—a jar of habaneros. “Hey, hey, hey!” I said. “What have we here? Peppers. My, my. What a swell gift.”

Diane smiled at me innocently. “Just thought the Bionic Mouth might enjoy a challenge.”

I peered inside the jar. The peppers peered back, or would have if they'd had eyes. They looked harmless, even jolly. Clearly they wanted to be my friends. I could hear their little pepper voices calling to me through the glass. “Bob!” they said. “Go ahead, eat us.

We're delicious, and we're *soooo* cute, and we wouldn't *think* of incinerating your vital organs!" Later, after I emerged from my coma, I would remember their words and draw strong conclusions about the character and trustworthiness of habaneros.

Strange, I thought as I unscrewed the lid from the jar. *Why do I have this weird sense of deja vu?* I popped one of the plump little units into my mouth. My sister looked at me expectantly.

"Very flavorful," I said. "Though personally, I . . . I . . . IiaaiieeYAAAAAA!!!!!"

A core of white-hot, nuclear heat suddenly filled my mouth, then expanded through my entire being with the intensity of a supernova. Heat pimples exploded on my forehead like popcorn. My eyeballs began to sweat. My tongue evaporated in a cloud of steam, making it difficult to verbalize my feelings, more than a few of which I was suddenly getting in touch with. Then from there, things began to get bad. Fortunately, my brain at this point called an emergency shutdown, upon which I promptly launched into a near-death experience.

Floating next to my body, I observed detachedly as it continued to operate on autopilot, animated by pure, pain-induced reflex. "*Haaahhhhhh!*" it gasped, fanning its tongue with its hands. Lurching out of the chair, it staggered blindly toward the kitchen, where it ripped open the refrigerator and inhaled a gallon of milk. This, I should note, is not the recommended way of ingesting milk, drinking being the preferred method. Fortunately, the extreme heat vaporized the plastic container on the way down, freeing its contents. But the refreshing liquid brought only slight, fleeting relief.

"Bread . . . must have bread," I saw my lips mumble as I seized a loaf. In my disembodied state, the sight of my hands clawing away the plastic wrapper and cramming multiple slices into my red, sweating face disturbed me deeply. I thought I'd raised myself better. Yet here, the first time I left myself unattended even for a few minutes, what did I see? Total disregard for good manners. A body that stuffs its cheeks with half a loaf of bread is a slob by any definition. Clearly, without my close supervision I was just a social liability. I made a mental note never to leave me by myself again.

The next thing I knew, my life began to flash before my eyes—not in its entirety, but in bits and pieces.

I was standing in the kitchen of my childhood home, making lunch for my friend Mark and myself. “A peanut butter and jalapeno sandwich?” Mark said. “I’ve never had one of those. What’s a jalapeno?”

“Never mind. Just try it. You’ll like it.”

I was a teenager sitting in the old stuffed chair downstairs, eating a little snack while the dog begged. “Now, Ghanja,” I said, “are you *sure* you want one of these cream-cheese-and-Tobasco crackers? You are? Okay, but don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

I was thirty-two years old, watching with satisfaction as my friend Sue filled her soup bowl with my contribution to the church potluck. “Don’t you think you’ve gone a little over the top with a name like ‘Thundering Thermonuclear Desolation Chili?’” she asked. I smiled. “You be the judge,” I said.

I was forty, it was Christmas Eve, and I was unscrewing the lid off a gift from my sister, Diane. . . .

It was my last conscious thought before everything went black.

When I came to, I was lying flat on my back in a steam-filled room. At first I thought I was in a sauna. Then I realized that the steam was coming from me. Three anxious faces peered at me through the mist—my mother, my sister, and my brother. “How long have I been out?” I mumbled.

“About an hour.”

“Hmmm. Decent peppers, Diane. In fact, I’d go so far as to declare them a religious experience.”

“I should think so.”

“Yes, indeed.” I sat up. “Say, I could use something cool to drink. Got any Tobasco around?”

“Nope, sorry. By the way, does the phrase ‘the shreds of my disintegrating universe’ mean anything to you? You kept shouting it over and over while we were restraining you. Any idea what it means?”

“It means I’ve ruined a good shirt. That’s a sure sign of a definitive pepper experience. Tonight was about as definitive as they come.”

Months later, my buddy Pete and I were watching television at my apartment. Now, Pete is a guy who takes the words, “Make yourself at home,” about as literally as anyone

I know. It had taken him no time at all, for instance, to cultivate a rich and satisfying relationship with my refrigerator, destroying half a block of cheddar cheese and the better part of my expensive deli salami in the process. Presently, he was rummaging around in search of other prospects.

“Say,” he said, “what’s in this lead-lined container?”

“You mean the one with the radiation warning label on the side?”

“Yeah, that one.”

“Oh, nothing you’d be interested in,” I replied, flicking the channel with the remote control.

“Right. I’ll bet it’s something really good.” I heard him grunt as he undid the tightly sealed lid. “Say, what are these things?”

I thought of the cheese and salami Pete had just demolished and smiled. “Just some peppers,” I said. “Go ahead and try one. Very flavorful, though personally, I prefer them with a little bite.”