

BY KAREN COATES



In the bag: Raja peppers, grown high in the mountains of Nagaland, are catching the attention of chile lovers everywhere.

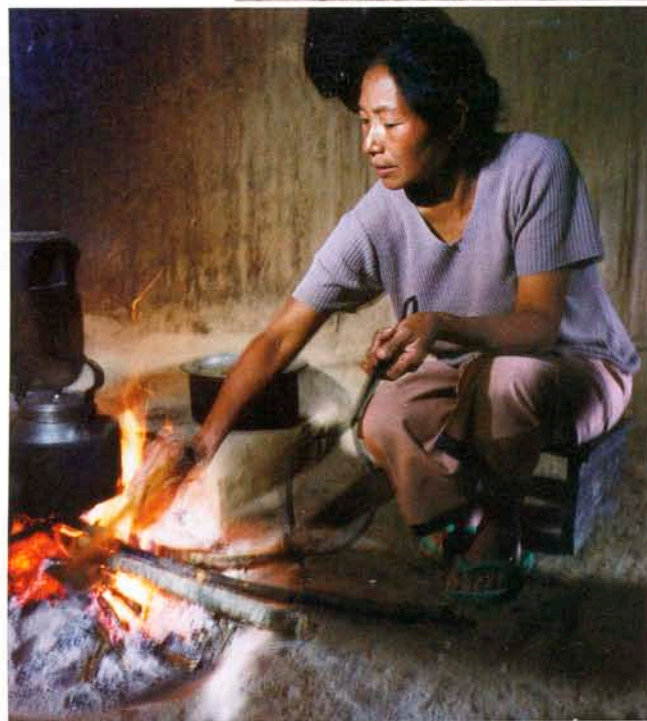
NAGALAND

THE RED HOT CHILE PEPPERS

It was September in New Mexico, when shopkeepers across the state perfume the breeze with the aroma of roasting green chiles and you can feel the mystic allure of great peppers. As the end-of-summer air around me prompted folks along the Rio Grande to haul out their roasters, I sat with coffee in hand and read a newspaper clipping about faraway farmers in straw hats who harvest and market another arresting chile: *bhut jolokia*. If it's ›



Farmers such as Neilhoulie (seen here at home with his wife, Louzeu, and their three children) not only harvest the piquant rajas but also eat them daily. The dried peppers are stored so that their seeds can be planted the following season. On the floor in her kitchen in the village of Khonoma, Kono stokes the fire in preparation for cooking a classic stew, as prized for its health benefits as it is for its flavor.



possible for a pepper to be trendy, *bhut jolokia* is having its moment. Grown in Assam, in northeastern India, it has grabbed world attention for one primary reason: its astonishing heat. With a stunning 1,001,304 Scoville heat units (SHUs)—the measurement used to rate a pepper's piquancy—nothing on earth beats it. (Not yet, at least. See "The Heat Race," page 57.) The mighty jalapeño, clocking in at only about 8,000 SHUs, quavers in the shadow of this capsaicin lode. In 2006, the Chile Pepper Institute at New Mexico State University, an academic arbiter of all things chile-related, submitted the *bhut jolokia* that it had been growing to *Guinness World Records*, and its preeminence as hottest chile pepper was confirmed. Spice hounds everywhere started racing to find and test this new record-breaking fruit.

Beneath all the hullabaloo was a little nugget of particular interest to me: Natives of northeastern India don't eat *bhut jolokia* for its heat so much as for its smell. The pepper's unique sweet-smoky-spicy aroma has wooed disciples across India's northeastern states for centuries. Every tribe calls this pepper by a different name—*bhut jolokia*, *Naga jolokia*, *Naga morich*, *chal mircha*. But it's all the same biology, a combination of *capsicum chinense* with a few genes of *capsicum frutescens*, which manifests itself in only slight variations of shape and size.

I had to find this pepper.

It took months to plan my travels across oceans and continents. Monsoons, riots, strikes, and a cyclone all got in my way. When my train finally stopped in Assam, where the chiles are grown for the global market, the locals told me: No. You're not there yet. Go one state farther east, to Nagaland. There, they said, I would meet the region's premier chile extremists among the tribes who eat this pepper at every meal, every day.

Which is how I found myself in an SUV, winding up through a curvaceous landscape, a geographical and cultural crossroads of hills that stretch from India through Myanmar to Thailand and beyond. Villagers here have the eyes and high cheekbones of Southeast Asians and the weathered complexions of people who live close to wind and sky. Their fire-fed kitchens mimic those of Laos, 750 miles away. Meats and chiles cure in smoke-blackened huts, where life has changed little since ancestral times. Here in Nagaland, *bhut jolokia* is called *raja*, meaning "king," a reflection of the people's palate and history. By any name, it is central to the region's cuisine.

The village of Khonoma peers over rice terraces carved into rippling terrain. Tiny cobblestone lanes link one family to another. People here trudge up and down all day long—from house to house, from home to field, from everywhere to church. When a passing villager named Kono heard of my interest in chiles, she grew animated.

"She wants to see our cooking? I'll cook for her!"

We scampered down an impossible series of jagged stones and entered a little wooden house, where she thrust open the door to her kitchen.

"I'm going to cook one of the simplest dishes," Kono said as she began to make the stewlike base used nearly every day—with or without meat, altered with seasonal vegetables, but always made with hot chiles. The Nagas prefer the *raja* because it "is hotter than other chiles," she said. "And the smell—it is very good. My family ate it when I was young.... Even our forefathers grew it." >

Kono stoked her smoldering fire and set water to boil, then she unwrapped a banana leaf holding fermented soybean and uncorked a jar of preserved pork fat—both necessities for most any Naga dish. A dollop of each went into the pot, followed by tablespoons of bamboo shoot and fermented cucumber. “It smells a little bad,” Kono admitted, but the cucumber cures stomach pain. She added local herbs—a mintlike basil (*nietso*, “good for high blood pressure”), a fuzzy little white flower (*nienhyu*) that smells and tastes of lemongrass, and the sour petals of a red flower (*gakbro*) that Laotians eat to boost strength and fight hangovers.

Kono’s stew—forest-green, herbal and spicy, slightly sour, a bit minty—had an almost medicinal quality. And I realized then that the Naga kitchen is also a pharmacy, with ingredients used for both flavor and physical health; the *raja* is not just heat, it is medicine. “I’ve eaten it since I was young,” said Kono’s neighbor, a 75-year-old man named Victor. “I like it because it’s hot. But also because it’s good for gastric problems.”

Eaten fresh, the *raja* has a hint of cranberry. Dried? I know nothing else like it. These chiles adopt the flavor of the smoky fires that roast them. I will never forget my first taste after buying a bag of fresh peppers—red, green, and saffron—at a tiny night market in the Assamese town of Kohora. I bit into a chile, just the tip, a piece the size of a pinhead. Nothing. “Maybe I haven’t got the right chile,” I thought. So I tried again, a pinhead more. That’s it, that’s the one, the prodigious pepper of my quest! A fruity flavor followed by instant flames. I didn’t even swallow. Fire traveled through my body and hit my brain. I had to sit down, feeling woozy and high. After half an hour, when the pain stopped, I craved more.

But no one in Nagaland talks of the endorphin rush, and few Nagas eat these chiles plain. Some cooks add a fresh *raja* to a boiling curry for just a moment, then remove it, grill it, pound it, and return it to the pot. That reduces the heat. “Don’t stir it!” an old woman warned me. “Once you stir it, it’s so hot even your breath will make you snifle.”

Everywhere I wandered, villagers fed me; their generosity is a mark of their religion. More than a century ago, the Nagas comprised 16 disparate tribes of headhunters who battled each other with spears. Today, warrior legends and cultural distinctions linger among the tribes, but Christianity unites most Nagas (as does a desire for independence from India). Villagers count their blessings in meals cooked and shared, and I partook at every invitation. One woman fed me *raja*-rat stew—not that kind of rat but a perfectly edible jungle rodent with meat that tasted of elk. In another kitchen, a pretty young villager smashed ginger in a wooden mortar as she made a zesty *raja* “gravy” with mashed potato, tomato, garlic, and herbs. This kitchen also produced a remarkable specialty of pork boiled in its own blood and bamboo with just enough dried *raja* to coax an incredible earthy flavor from the pot. The *raja* might lead every dish, but it never overwhelms.

For a grassroots sense of Naga cooking, I visited a market in the capital, Kohima. Women from distant villages arrived by bus each morning to sell all manner of foods: frogs, grubs, snails, dried eels, woodworms, bee larvae, beans, squash, jungle greens, bamboo, juices, and heaps of herbs.

Rajas, too. But where they’re sold—from market stall to roadside table, city to countryside—is far from where they’re grown. These peppers thrive in the remnant soils of bamboo forests in the lowlands, but Nagas are mostly highlanders. “If the villages were on the lowland, we could not see the enemies,” my guide Neitho explained.

In Seiyhama, one such hilltop town at the end of a rocky road of mud slides and cave-ins, Neilhoulie, a 62-year-old farmer with gnarled hands and flip-flops on his feet, invited me into his kitchen to talk about *raja* farming. All 220 Seiyhama households harvest the chiles in fields that are cultivated on a rotation system.

Neilhoulie’s chiles are a day’s hike away, in fields once covered with bamboo, which villagers clear in the fall. “We burn the land in March,” he said. “After burning, we start sowing the seeds. Once we plant, we don’t do anything.” No fertilizers, no irrigation, no pesticides. Just picking the peppers steadily from August through January. Neilhoulie goes twice a week to collect his chiles, which earn him on average 20,000 to 30,000 rupees a year, or about \$450 to \$700.

He offered to show me his personal crop growing in the family garden, down a steep trail behind the house. Beside the path sat a banana leaf with a teakettle, a machete, a pile of wild apples, and three freshly picked chiles. Farther on, past the cabbage, passion fruit, apples, yams, carrots, and ginger, a few green peppers hung from two *raja* plants. A pair of red pants dangled from a long pole in the distance. “The bulbuls like this chile,” Neilhoulie said. “That’s why I made a scarecrow.”

Tough bird, the bulbul. Tough farmer, too. “Me, I can take two or three of these big chiles at once,” he proclaimed.

I gazed at the view behind him: an abyss with a few stands of swaying bamboo, fronting a panorama of blue-green peaks that march nearly 60 miles into the distance. My GPS measured Neilhoulie’s garden at an altitude of 4,682 feet. He swung a green pepper toward the mountains behind him and smiled. “I like this view very much.”

Hours later, I stood on top of a hill directly across the valley from Neilhoulie, my belly full of *raja* pork and a similarly fearless chutney. In the quiet night, a star streaked across the flickering sky. It would, of course: This is a supremely enchanting land. It’s not just heat that ennobles the *raja*. It’s an element of magic. ■

THE HEAT RACE

While Warwick Horticulture Research International and the Chili Pepper Company, both in the U.K., continue their collaborative study of the hottest peppers on record—and growers mix and match to achieve an even mightier one—those of us who consider eating spicy food a competitive sport might like to keep the current leaders and box scores handy.

PEPPER	PROVENANCE	SCORE (IN SHUs)
BHUT JOLOKIA	INDIA	1,001,304
DORSET NAGA	ENGLAND	878,884
RED SAVINA HABANERO	CALIFORNIA	577,000
SANTAKA	JAPAN	100,000
JALAPEÑO	MEXICO	8,000
ANCHO	TURKEY	1,500
PIMIENTO	USA	0