

## Add Your Favorite Recipe to the Story of New Mexico Chile



The green chile we enjoy today was first introduced to New Mexico by 16<sup>th</sup>-century Spanish explorers who noticed the absence of the *capsicum annuum* among the native peoples they encountered.

It was Antonio de Espejo, a wealthy native of Cordova living on the northern frontier of Mexico, who financed his own search party to find three Franciscans rumored to have been killed near present-day Bernalillo. Leaving San Bartolomé (Chihuahua) on November 10, 1582, Espejo's small party of 45 men, mostly Indians and some soldiers, made its way to Puara pueblo where they learned from local Christian Indians that the friars had indeed been murdered. (Pérez de Luxán)

Not content with having accomplished his mission, Espejo determined to explore the region further. After visiting several neighboring pueblos, he crossed over into the land of the Zuni near the present Arizona line, and continued what had become a scientific and geographical expedition taking him as far as the Hopi districts north of present-day Prescott. Arriving at his starting point in September of 1583, Espejo demonstrated the success of his adventure with a fine map and comprehensive report of his findings.

One especially learned member of the expedition, Baltazar Obregón, was the first European to provide detailed information on the many tribal nations he encountered in New Mexico, recording their habits, customs, and diets. "They have not chile," he wrote, "but the natives were given some seeds to plant." There is much to glean from this observation penned by the author of *The History of the Discoveries of New Spain*. Most interesting is the fact that Espejo's men carried chile seeds among the items typically used for trading.

Given the difficulty of starting new cultivars in New Mexico's arid climate, the Indians were not initially successful. Writing in 1601, the early colonist Francisco de Valverde noted that chiles were not even listed among their crops (Francisco de Valverde). It would take the economic stability of further colonization in the 17<sup>th</sup> century for widespread chile production to succeed not only in the pueblos, but throughout the Rio Grande valley.

Although somewhat overshadowed by other New Mexico chiles, excellent chile varieties are still cultivated by Puebloans today, most notably at Acoma, Isleta, and Zia. Aficionados are able to speak of a variety's *terroir*, the soil and climate conditions unique to a given pueblo, while connoisseurs and some chefs are known to blend these varieties in their handmade salsas. The

Y'aak'a Café at Acoma's Sky City Cultural Center offers historically informed dishes allowing patrons to taste Acoma chile in a traditional culinary context.

Not to be underestimated are the great Rio Grande Chiles of New Mexico. While the traditional Spanish varieties of Chimayo and Española are the more famous, those of Corrales, Bosque Farms, and Los Ranchos de Albuquerque remain popular.

All the rage, of course, are the renowned green chiles of Hatch, New Mexico, a village of 1,650 people situated 40 miles northwest of Las Cruces. Hatch has attracted as many as 30,000 chile enthusiasts from many countries to its annual chile festival, making it the veritable "Chile Capital of the World." Although cancelled this year, the festival is normally a spectacular, weekend-long event featuring local bands, Flamenco dancers, contests, vendor booths, and entertainment acts, all creating a vibrant, carnival-like atmosphere. <http://www.hatchchilefest.com/events.php>

Jane Butel, the world renowned expert on Tex Mex and New Mexican cuisine, offers 160 recipes in her seminal work, *Chili Madness : A Passionate Cookbook*, available at the Rio Rancho Public Libraries here: <https://bit.ly/3aFOL9N>

Sources:

Diego Pérez de Luxán, *Expedition Into New Mexico Made By Antonio De Espejo 1582-1583, as Revealed in the Journal of Diego Perez De Luxan, a Member of the Party*. Quivera Society Publications, Volume 1, 1929.

Don Francisco de Valverde, "Investigation of Conditions in New Mexico, 1601," in *Don Juan de Oñate*, eds. George Hammond and Agapito Rey (Vols. V and VI, Coronado Cuarto Centennial Publication, University of New Mexico Press, 1953.