

PACKING HEAT

A Hawke's Bay couple have dedicated themselves to introducing people to the joys of chillies
— YVONNE LORKIN steels her tastebuds for a visit...

If you're startled by a woman shouting "Me!" the next time you're tootling around the Hastings Farmers' Market, don't be alarmed. It'll just be someone asking Anne Prescott from Orcona Chillis 'n Peppers "What have you got that's hot?" It will probably be the hundredth time she's heard it that morning but she doesn't mind, it's all part of the fun.

Not everyone has the same fervour for the fiery stuff however, some are afraid to attempt chillies due to a bad experience in the past. Anne doesn't like to scare people off, so always encourages tasters to start with something a little sweeter before hitting the heat.

"At the end of the day, food shouldn't hurt," she says. "Some want to go straight to the hottest products, but if I can get them to step back a notch or three and work their way up then they'll usually buy something with less heat than they expected, because they realize it's about flavour. If you go to the really hot one first you're not going to understand the different heat levels."

Anne and partner Kevin Baker have been at the helm of Orcona since 2004, growing chilli plants in a mixture of tunnel houses and glasshouses at their tiny Pakowhai property in Hawke's Bay. The sauces, relishes, jellies, paprika, chipotle flakes, harissa and pickled jalapeños are prepared in Anne's tiny commercial kitchen squeezed inside the shed behind their house.

Out in the tunnels, in addition to the multi-coloured habanero, jalapeño, red and green serrano and bird's eye chillies dripping from the canopy, a number of plants are covered in dainty mauve or white flowers. "The purple flowers are rocoto and the white flowers are paprika," Anne explains. "Once the paprika chillies turn red we smoke them, dry them and grind them into our sweet smoked paprika flakes."

Native ferns and other greenery also thrive in the base of each plant. "It's purely weeds and whatnot in the potting mix we use," says Kevin, "but when they've got that cover on the top it stops the scarab flies laying their eggs in the potting mix, so it's good protection."

As well as multi-coloured capsicums, newcomers yellow cayenne and red rockets have joined the fresh paprika, poblano, Mexicana, habanero, serrano, rocoto and jalapeño chillis which Anne sells regularly at the farmer's market stall alongside her sauces and relishes.

Chilli strength is measured in Scoville heat units (SHU), the higher the SHUs the hotter the burn. On the Scoville scale, a capsicum rates zero, while a tiny bird's eye can start at 50,000. Anne suggests customers try a few products before sampling the Red Hot Rocoto Relish, or her Rings Around Uranus Sauce, which is made from eye-wateringly fiery yellow habanero chillies, which carry an SHU rating of up to 300,000.

At home it would be a rare meal that didn't feature something Anne and Kevin have grown.

"Stuffed jalapeños are my favourite," says Anne. "All you need are some fresh red or green jalapeños, full-fat cream cheese and Orcona Sweet Smoked Paprika. Heat your oven to 180°C, split the jalapeños lengthways (try to be clever and keep the stalk intact too), remove the seeds and membrane, pipe or spoon the cream cheese into them, sprinkle with Orcona Sweet Smoked Paprika (which I use in absolutely everything!) and bake for 12 minutes. Leave to set for a couple of minutes then wolf them down." She also recommends smothering fresh fish with Orcona's Lime and Chilli

Relish before grilling and adding a dollop of Orcona Harissa to give couscous a Moroccan kick.

There are just over 3000 plants on the grow at Orcona, each of the tunnel houses contain anywhere from 300 to 650 plants and they have glasshouses too. "The original owner bought this block under the returned serviceman's scheme" says Kevin, "but to make it viable (it's only an acre and a half), he decided to grow orchids, hence 'Orcona'. So in the late 1940s he ordered the glasshouses which came as kit-sets made from aluminium melted down from old WWII planes."

The couple only found out about the history of the property in 2008. "He (the original owner) turned up at the farmers' market and said he still had crates of glass in his shed that were left over from building them," explains Kevin, "so we paid him a visit to buy the glass and while we were there we got a history lesson!" he laughs.

The previous owners had taken it on as a capsicum farm in 2000 and quickly branched into chilli growing as well as developing sauce and relish recipes with the help of local chef and chilli-fan Kent Baddeley, before putting Orcona on the market five years later.

"Back then we couldn't even grow a pot plant!" says Anne, roaring with laughter. "We drove past Orcona one day and saw it was for sale. Kevin said 'How do you feel about making sauce and relish?' I said 'What the hell would I want to do that for?'... but six months later we moved in!" ♦

Orcona Chillis 'N Peppers – visit online at chilli.co.nz Phone 06 873 5083 or email enquiries@chilli.co.nz

For more about chillies see page 48



Kevin Baker and Anne Prescott
Photograph by Anneliese Hough