

FIRE BREEDER

Clint Meyer of Fire Dragon Chillies talks to Rachael McKinnon about growing the world's hottest chillies

Since returning from adventures to countries that are serious about their spices, Clint Meyer has been growing the world's hottest chilli varieties in Hokiang in the Far North. Clint has spent the last five years developing sauces for his Fire Dragon Chillies range and he's determined to grow the world's hottest chilli.

What made you decide to grow chillies?

I've liked chilli since I was quite young; the hot sauces like Tabasco and Kaitaia Fire. Travelling and eating a lot of chillies in South-East Asia, Central and South America pretty much got me hooked. When I got back to New Zealand, I couldn't find anything hot enough so it just started as a hobby. I made my own sauce for my own consumption and my friends and family all liked it, so I decided to make a business out of it.

At which farmers markets do you sell your products?

Bay of Islands Farmers Market at Kerikeri and a few other small ones. I do a little local one in Opononi.

How do you increase the heat in chillies?

If you're going for hotter, which is what I've been doing, you need to stress your plants more and not water them as often once they've fruited. They like it hot and dry. The more stress the plants are under, the hotter the chillies will be. If you drop the water content back you get more capsaicin, which is the active heat ingredient in the chilli. They're measured on the Scoville chart which breaks it down to parts of water to parts of chilli. I'm hoping to have New Zealand up there with the hottest chilli in the world.

What are some of the obstacles you face?

I try to grow organically. I get a few little infestations of insects and aphids that suck the life out of your plants and for those I was releasing other bugs. One was a wasp that basically puts its larvae in the aphids, which then eat the aphid. But once it reaches 30 degrees [in the hothouse] it's too hot for them. I use a seaweed spray and make my own chilli spray for when the plants are growing, but once they've fruited you have to back off because you don't want to taint the taste of the chilli.

What are the most satisfying experiences as a grower?

The feedback and responses from people who get a big chilli hit and the endorphin rush. It's quite fun burning a few people at the markets! The younger generation has no fear of chilli and seems to be able to handle it a lot better than the older generation.

How do you think embracing the farmers market philosophy can benefit a community?

Keeping it all local, as far as the produce and the money. It brings the community together and keeps what little cash there is going around the community. Most of what I use in my sauce is grown locally or from the North. 

