

## backstory

## New Mexico's cult of the chile

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CONTRIBUTOR

HATCH, N.M.

**S**heathed in green satin and confidence, Green Chile Queen Alexandria Berridge claims her title – coveted by every teenage girl in this village – is about more than beauty.

"I actually know what I'm talking about," she says of her chile credentials.

This is no small claim in New Mexico, where the cult of the chile – the state's official fruit (yes, fruit) – verges on the religious. The fruit's likeness is a sort of state Virgin de Guadalupe – *ristras*, hanging strings of chile pods, bless front porches everywhere. Chile sauce is slathered on every native food for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Thousands make a pilgrimage to the annual September harvest festival in this town, the self-proclaimed chile capital of the world, to buy their yearly stock. And it would seem that the trade in chile tchotchkes and T-shirts is a bigger state export than the chiles themselves.

Queen Alexandria says her knowledge – a speech about "authentic Hatch chile" – secured the crown. Key in that speech was the story of a chile farmer's wife who had to hitch a ride with neighbors to the hospital when she went into labor because her husband didn't want to be pulled away from his harvest.

But Alexandria – whose well-worn cowboy boots peak from beneath her gown – also has some of her own first-hand chile lore: she's witnessed the plowed earth of her family farm erupt in green every season of her 17 years; she's brushed through the rows of plants in the back-breaking labor of picking chile pods; and she walks her talk by participating in the festival's chile-eating contest.

But Alexandria was crowned this month in a particularly dicey harvest season – the crop emerged in August to weeks of rain. Alexandria watched her dad get three tractors stuck in the saturated fields of the Hatch Valley.

A wet chile is not a happy chile. There's a reason chiles thrive in the baking sun of the southern New Mexico desert. Wet chile plants ripen too fast, and pods maturing at lower temperatures can have less bite. Muddy fields make for difficult harvesting, and some of the green and most of the red chiles (which ripen later) hadn't been picked in time for the Labor Day festival.

Chile peppers aren't simply an overplayed Southwestern icon (which, at its worst, has a face and legs, and dances). New Mexico is the nation's biggest chile producer, and chile products contribute \$200 million to the state's economy. There's even a chile think tank – the Chile Pepper Institute at New Mexico State University – devoted to breeding, researching, and the high task of "educating the world about chiles." And, in that category of educating the world, the Hatch Chile Festival website points out that New Mexico spells it "chile," not "chill," the way its hot pepper rival, Texas, (and the 48 other states) spell it.

So when the town of Hatch swam in four feet of water last month, many New Mexicans had nightmares about chile dearth.

But at the festival earlier this month, there were plenty of prized Big Jims (medium heat), Sandia (hot), and New Mexico No. 6 (milder)

**A hot icon – at its worst with dancing legs – is found on every porch and in every meal.**

Pods slung in big burlap bags over buyers' backs. Though rain limited the crowds this year to under 10,000 (the usual is 20,000) it was still the most action Hatch (pop. 1,600) sees all year.

Rain or not, peppers pack enough political punch here that Gov. Bill Richardson found time – amid a diplomatic effort to free a New Mexican journalist being held by Sudan authorities – to open the Hatch chile festival as grand marshal of the Labor Day weekend parade. It took all of 20 minutes – and banter between parade and curb made it clear that everyone knows everyone.

Mayor Judd Nordyke suggested that there were more chile stands at the festival this year because rain damage to crops and homes have made locals more strapped for cash. The irony, he noted, is that he recalls people at prayer meetings earlier in the summer asking for rain. "It just didn't need to come all at once," he added.

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At the festival, chiles are literally in the air – the smell of fresh roasting peppers spins out of hand-turned gas roasters. Every few feet is a stand festooned with bright chains of red and

Big Jim green chile, which June helped develop, is named after her late husband.

Mrs. Rutherford and three of her brothers still farm here – and, yes, she still gets out in the fields. The most momentous chile development she recalls was when the North American Free Trade Agreement took effect in 1994. The industry has never been the same. She says she used to export large amounts of chiles to California. After NAFTA she sells none there.

Most pods are still harvested by hand, so cheaper labor in other countries is threatening the Chile Capital of the World. Since NAFTA, the US has imported increasing amounts of cheaper foreign chiles, particularly from Mexico. The folks at



PHOTOS BY KATY JUNE-FRIESEN

**QUEENS WHERE CHILE IS KING:** Green Chile Queen Alexandria Berridge (left) and Red Chile Queen Cynthia Rodriguez reign in Hatch, N.M., the self-proclaimed chile capital of the world. *Ristras* – bunches of pods – above are a New Mexican icon found hanging on front porches across the state.



green *ristras*. Tourists are like hummingbirds – stopping to buzz around the iconic bunches and buy packaged chile staples such as chile powder, salsa, chile jellies, chile oils, and even chile peanut brittle. And where chile can be eaten in the form of chile-on-a-stick (a pod stuffed with cheese, then deep-fried) and chile chips (deep-fried chile pieces) the lineup of the hungry is anxious and impenetrable enough to be more like a New York queue than a laid-back Southwestern one.

Amid the pungent array, it's not hard to separate locals from the tourists. Locals are more casually dressed, and many tote around another regional figure – the Chihuahua, which is clearly the leading canine here. One woman is pushing hers around in a cart with the sign "Cujo."

At June Rutherford's booth, customers are teeming. Ground to powder and packaged in 1 pound to 2 pound Ziploc bags, "June's Special Hot Red Chile" sells well, as does her chile knowledge. She's been at this game most of her 82 years – as she puts it, "My folks was chile farmers." Her father, Joseph Franzoy, was the first chile farmer in Hatch Valley in 1915. The

New Mexico State University have tried to perfect a chile-picking machine, but so far it's not efficient enough to make a difference, and growers are still trying to figure out how to compete.

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Queen Alexandria, still in boots and gown, is lugging a jug of milk toward the long folding table under the festival's airport hanger. She's preparing for the under-18 chile-eating contest, and milk is the best bet for cutting chile heat. Four contestants face the seated audience and hunker down over paper plates that hold five roasted hot chiles. The announcer yells "go!" and seeds and juice fly as Alexandria tries to stuff down the familiar fruit. But she's not fast enough to beat the only boy at the table, an athletic high schooler who raises his fists in the air to audience cheers.

Alexandria smiles and takes a big swig of milk. She doesn't consider herself a loser. To be queen where chile is king, she says, is something "no Berridge has ever done.... It's a huge, huge thing – such an honor."