

Saga Jolokia: Indian chili acquires a cult following in U.S

Washington: Nearly a decade after it was first discovered to be the hottest chili on earth, the Indian firecracker named Bhut Jolokia, aka Naga Jolokia, has acquired a cult following in the west among so-called chili-heads.

That's right; like Dead-heads, who idolize the rock group Grateful Dead, and gear-heads who worship all things mechanical, chili-heads revere some of the hottest chilies on the planet. And they don't come hotter than Bhut (or Naga) Jolokia, so-named because it is native to the fiery Naga tribe, and those who taste it are said to turn ghostly.

Measured at more than one million Scoville Heat Units (SHU), Bhut Jolokia is twice as hot as the previous champ -- California's Red Savina -- who it worsted earlier this decade (Mexican pretenders like Habanero were no match). Since then, the little hottie has become a legend among chili-heads, grown tenderly in hothouses across the country, discussed animatedly in the higher reaches of the spice world, and sold like gold and other precious commodity on the Internet. Last month, there were 92 Jolokia related items on eBay.

"Bhut Jolokia is a beauty," chortled John Hard, whose Ohio-based company CaJohn (after Cajun) sells the Indian chili in several forms, mostly sauces. "There are lots of pretenders cranked up with oleoresins, but BJ delivers both flavor and heat in a natural way."

Hard first heard of the fiery Indian chili after New Mexico State University's Chili-Pepper Institute followed up on the claims of the Indian Ministry of Defense and found that its assertion of having found the hottest chili in the world was true (It's not hard to guess what the MoD is using it for). Word quickly got around the esoteric (or, es-hot-teric) world of chili-heads, and before long, it was being grown with feverish passion.

It's a tough ask in the U.S, where the weather in most parts of the country is not exactly conducive to growing jolokias. Barbara Blankenship, a radiologist, and her husband Toby Morris, a fire-fighter, have just about managed to coax a few saplings in their greenhouse outside Seattle, a city better known for its cool, damp climate. "We wanted to grow it after reading about it in a cooking magazine," says Blankenship, an ardent gardener. "We got the seed from Seedrack.com down in Oregon and we now have five plants that are doing well."

Toby has a more involved explanation about why jolokia has become such a hot commodity. "I think Americans are pretty fascinated with things that are the oldest, biggest, whateverest," he says, recalling that he grew up with a copy of the Guinness Book of World Records. In the Fire Service, his colleagues were always trying to make the hottest chili (soupy dish); not always the tastiest, just the hottest. "Maybe it is that there aren't too many dragons for a guy to slay anymore and no frontiers to conquer?" He wonders.

But the Seattle couple's saplings are yet to bear any glowing results. John "CaJohn" Hard, who is also a former fire-fighter, has been quicker off the blocks. Last month, when he spoke to ToI, he had a jolokia plant that bore six chili pods.

But across U.S, and in fact, even in Europe (who would have thunk?) chili-heads are starting to crank them out with increasing success, says CaJohn. Most of the stuff is still imported from India though, from a company in Tezpur.

CaJohn has a whole array of Jolokia products, most of them priced around \$ 10 for a bottle. The first of them is called Holy Jolokia, but the rest, driven by the owner's spicy fervor, has lapsed into blasphemy.

When Hard came up with a Jolokia sauce and named it Nagasaurus, an artist who did the label for the bottle joked that it should be named "Naga-sore-ass." He did, and the sore-ass label now outsells the saurus by 40 to one. Next up, CaJohn came up with "Kiss my Bhut."

It's the beginning of Saga Jolokia.