taste buds

chef Larry Janes

What's hot or hottest in peppers

Just how hot is hot? In addition to finding new ways for making our ice cream fat free, chemists and food manufacturers are asking themselves that question while they debate the relative merits of how to measure the heat of a pepper.

The hot pepper has both tantalized and torched palates for thousands of years. But it was not until 1912 that a scientist named W.L. Scoville came up with a systematic method for measuring the heat in a hot pepper.

Under this method, a dried pepper is dissolved in alcohol, diluted with sugar water and then given to a panel of tasters who, sipping increasingly diluted concentrations of pepper extract out of shot glasses, are asked to determine the exact point at which it no longer burns the mouth.

The hotter the pepper, the more water required, and the higher the score on the Scoville scale.

For example, a jalapeno pepper has a Scoville rating of 1,500-4,500, according to a major Southern California spice manufacturer.

A bottle of Tabasco comes in with a rating of 4,500 while the hottest known pepper to mankind, the habanero, has a whopping Scoville rating of 150,000.

Ah, but scientists are now being questioned by, of all people, computers who have developed new technology that measures a pepper's capsaicin (pronounced cap-SAY-iss-in), an organic compound that gives peppers their heat. Supposedly, the capsaicin is a powerful chemical that irritates certain nerves in the nose and mouth.

NEEDLESS TO SAY, this debate has intensified as the hot pepper has become more common in the United States.

What begins to complicate matters here is that certain peppers have Scoville scales and capsaicin ratings that fluctuate dramatically from plant to plant depending on the area in which it was grown, the climate and, most importantly, the rainfall. Sounds to me like these scientists and computers wizards can't even find a common ground between peppers, let alone their heat ratings.

Not to be outdone, of course, are the psychologists who also are sticking their tongues in the fire with reports of a theory that supposedly proves people who eat hot peppers practice a behavior of "benign masochism," in which some people have a particular fondness for pain and other negative sensations when they realize these sensations are not harmful. My, how Freudian.

"People know when they bite into a chili pepper that it could make their mouth fall off. But they like pushing their limits. Some people actually like having their eyes tear and their noses run," says Dr. Paul Rozin, a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania.

There is still another theory that the hot pepper, like other painful stimuli, triggers the release of endorphins, powerful chemicals that elicit feelings of well-being.

I'M SETTING the record straight right now, folks. Yours truly would rather bite into a crisp red delicious apple than have to prove my virility with a pepper.

Experts do agree on one thing. Water will not cool the mouth after biting into an excruciatingly hot pepper. Not surprisingly, cold things work the best, especially alcoholic drinks and dairy products that contain lactic acid. I just knew there was a reason why I love Margaritas!

But for the teetotalers and lactose intolerants in our midst, never fear because the same authorities say that bread, corn, tortillas and rice also will do the trick.

My suggestion: Go with whatever soothes you. The thing to remember is the pain will eventually go away.

Celebrating St. Joseph's Day

Meatless dishes part of tradition

By Geri Rinschler
special writer

AMERICA LOVES holidays and celebrations. Just stroll through any card or candy shop during Valentine's Day, or Halloween — that is, if you can make your way through the aisles — and take note.

The cards, decorations and edible goodies become more plentiful and more elaborate each year. Commercially, American holidays are a huge success. But what about the family traditions and lore of family holidays? Is any of it being preserved or restored?

According to Peter Pellerito of Plymouth, there is one Italian celebration observed by some 400,000 Detroit-area Italian-Americans. It's St. Joseph's Day on March 19.

If you ask Italian-Americans across the country about the festivities or traditional foods of St. Joseph's Day, most of them will not remember the day with much significance, since it's celebrated primarily by Southern Italians and Sicilians.

As a second-generation Italian raised in the Detroit area, Pellerito has participated in many St. Joseph's Day celebration at the Holy Family Church.

"Until the mid-50s the Holy Family Church (in Detroit) was the center of the old Italian district. Then, the urban renewal programs broke up the old neighborhood" Pellerito said.

OLDEST OF six kids, Pellerito started cooking at the age of 13. He continues to love cooking. Now, as a husband and father of Billie, 4, and Sam, 7, Pellerito is committed to good cooking and carrying on the family holiday's traditional foods.

According to cookbook author Helen Barolini, "Festa, the Italian word for feast and holiday, perfectly expresses the special relationship between food and celebrations." In her recently published paperback, "Festa" — recipes and recollections of Italian holidays (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers) — she takes the reader through a calendar of Southern Italian holidays, with recipe collections and enchanted stories.

In the chapter on St. Joseph's Day, Barolini mentions there is a revival of the Sicilian custom known as preparing a St. Joseph's table. She explains that tables are sponsored by parishioners, and covered with feast-day specialties such as pizza rustica (a ricotta-cheese meat pie) onion tarts, oranges, marmalades, zeppoles, deep-fried pastries, biscotti, cannoli, rice fritters and more. After viewing, the foods are auctioned off, and proceeds go to charity.

As Pellerito recalls, the celebration at the Holy Family Church always included a meatless feast, prepared by parishioners and given to needy orphans, widows and beggars. "In the small villages throughout Southern Italy, everyone contributes what they can to this festival," he said.

A pageant also was an important part of the day as parishioners re-enacted St. Joseph and Mary looking for a place to stay for the birth to the Christ child, Pellerito said. Since the holiday always occurs during the Lenten season, dishes served never include meat.

DINNER AT THE Pellerito home usually begins with relishes, olives and raw vegetables served with a simple olive oil vinaigrette. Traditional dishes include a vegetable frittata, pasta with a tomato-bean sauce and crusty bread.

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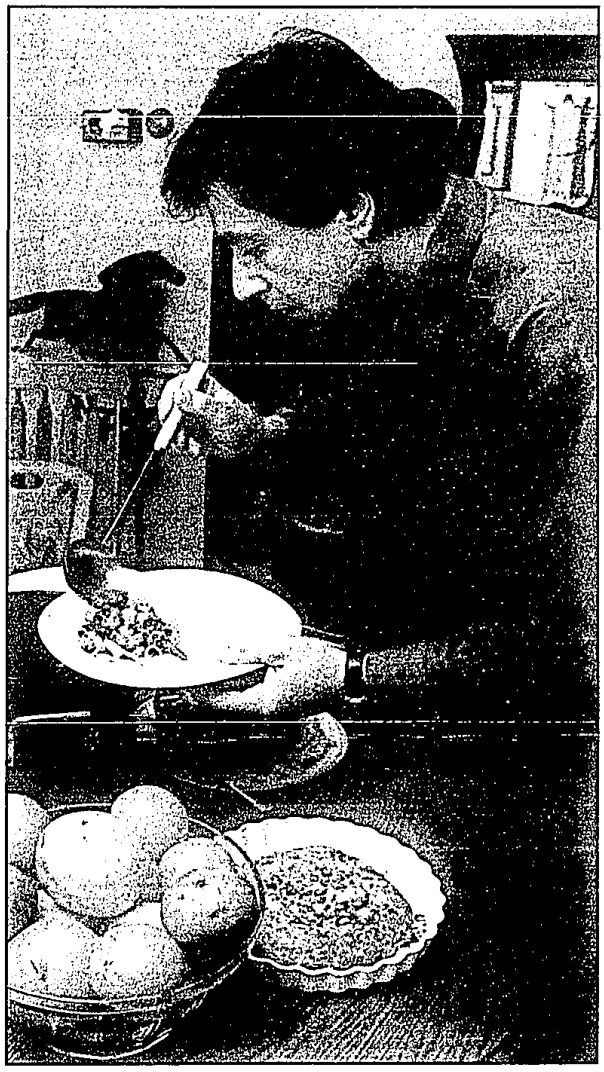

BILL BRESLER/staff photographer

Peter Pellerito of Plymouth ladles Pasta di San Guiseppi onto a plate. In the foreground is Ricotta Pudding (Budino di Ricotta) and a bowl of fruit.

An Italian restaurant with distinction

DISHING IT OUT By K.C.

With the recent proliferation of Italian restaurants, it's refreshing to find one that stands out distinctively in both atmosphere and menu.

We refer to Cafe Cortina in Farmington Hills which is characterized by a very formal, elegant setting. Dining here means being served distinctively separate courses by a waiter in a tuxedo. Dinner guests also dress for the occasion and conversations are quiet and reserved. Some patrons call a couple weeks in advance to reserve seating by the lovely fireplace. Tables have white tablecloths and candles. The aroma of fresh Parmesan cheese wafts throughout the room.

The menu is almost entirely in Italian. If you study it long enough, the English clues under the main courses will tip you off to the entirely Italian listing of appetizers — or you can ask the waiter for assistance. Ours was prepared to read and explain each item.

The menu is part of Cafe Cortina's charm — but it also can be disconcerting at first. Still, once you've tasted the exquisitely fresh, homemade dishes, you'll be hooked.

EVERYTHING IS made from scratch here, from the bread and breadsticks to the pastas and sauces. We tried not to fill up on the bread, which is a little heavier than Italian bread from a bakery, but it was hard to resist. The owners, Adriano and Rina Tonon, insist on freshness. They even butcher their own veal rather than buy it frozen. The only freezer they own is for ice cream.

The veal dishes are exquisite. We thoroughly enjoyed a rolled veal entree stuffed with seasoned broccoli tips and finished with a delicate wild mushroom sauce. Another exciting entree was trout stuffed with shrimp, clams, mushrooms and herbs — a wonderful combination in which the clams deliciously flavored the trout. The fish was cooked perfectly. It broke apart with the touch of a fork.

Another interesting entree was the saute of clams and lobster in a tomato sauce. There are traditional favorites too — from fettuccine Alfredo or spaghetti primavera to veal piccante and chicken cacciatora.

Even diners who prefer beef will find something of interest — whether a sirloin seared with peppercorns and then sauteed with white wine or tenderloin medallions sauteed with onions, mushrooms, tomatoes and sherry.

The menu changes periodically, and regular guests know they can call ahead and request a special dish. Recently, Tonon prepared a rabbit and polenta entree for a small group. After de-boning the rabbit, he added tenderloin, rolled it like a salami, baked it and then sliced it to rave reviews.

DOUGLAS SUSALLA

Adriano and Rina Tonon, owners, display some of the Italian specialties at Cafe Cortina in Farmington Hills.

Details: Cafe Cortina, 30715 10 Mile Road between Middlebelt and Orchard Lake roads, Farmington Hills. 474-5033.

Hours: Tuesday-Thursday 11 a.m. to 10 p.m., Friday, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m., Saturday 5-11 p.m., Sunday 1:30-9:30 p.m. Closed Monday.

Prices: Lunch $6.95-$11.95, Dinner $11.75-$21.95. All major credit cards.

Value: Excellent food in an exclusive setting.