Getting All Fired Up for National Curry Week

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Although it was not used in Indian cooking before the Columbian Exchange of the 15th and 16th centuries, it is difficult to imagine the nation's favourite dish without the chilli pepper in at least one of its almost 2,000 varieties. Today, having swiftly taken this fiery fruit to its culinary heart, India is now the world's largest producer, consumer and exporter of chilli peppers. Guntur in the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh produces 30% of all the chillies produced in India. Andhra Pradesh as a whole contributes 75% of India's chili exports.

Early native Americans had been using chillies for a long time and archaeological evidence has been found that chillies were gathered from around 7,000BC and cultivated from around 3,000BC, predating the ancestors of the Mayans, the Olmecs, by about 1,000 years. The Mayans, whose civilisation occupied the area between the two Americas - now known as Guatemala, Mexico and Belize - are known to have used chillies medicinally for stomach disorders. There are more than 1,600 varieties of chilli plants, and it is closely related to the tomato, the potato and deadly nightshade.

The heat of the chilli can be affected by the climate and soil where it is grown and by its ripeness and this is measured using the Scoville Scale, devised by German chemist, Wilbur Scoville, at the beginning of the 20th century. In 2011, the Dorset Naga hit the headlines when it was declared the world's hottest chilli by the Guinness Book of records. However, the drive by chilli growers to increase the fire-power of their product has meant that it has rapidly slipped to mid-division in the chilli heat league.

The current top ten are:

	Country of origin	Name	Scoville Heat Units
1.	USA	Carolina Reaper	2.2m
2.	Trinidad	Trinidad Moruga scorpion	2.0m
3.	India	Bhut Jolokia	1.58m
4.	USA	7 Pot Primo	1.47m
5.	Trinidad	Trinidad Scorpion Butch T	1.46m
6.	England	Dorset Naga Viper	1.4m
7.	England	Infinity chili	1.2m
8.	Trinidad	Seven-Pot Habanero	1.1m
9.	Bangladesh	Naga Morich	1.0m
10.	India	Bhut Jolokia Chocolate	0.95m

However, chilli is not just a pretty sting. Nutritionally, it is high in vitamin A and a source of vitamins B1, B2, niacin, sodium, phosphorous, potassium, calcium, iron, magnesium and zinc and, by weight, capsicum peppers contain between 6-9 times the amount of vitamin C than a tomato. This is good news indeed, as both vitamins A and C are powerful antioxidants, believed to protect against various forms of cancer and cardiovascular disease. Researchers at numerous universities around the world, such as Oxford, Harvard, Washington, Purdue and Adelaide, have discovered that the chilli can help combat heart attack and stroke, as it appears to extend blood coagulation time, preventing harmful blood clots, and that it may also help to cut triglycerides and decrease bad cholesterol levels, when used in conjunction with a diet low in saturated fats. That should heat up your National Curry Week!

More chilli facts can be found at:http://www.menumagazine.co.uk/book/azchillis.htm

The 18th National Curry Week will take place from 12-18 October 2015 supported by Sainsbury's, Amira Rice, Bhai Cider and Kingfisher Premium Lager Beer.

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