

California Girl in Search of Hot Peppers

by Linda J. Engelman
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Anyone who has bitten into a bona fide Philly cheesesteak hoagie can tell you about hot cherry peppers.

"Hots," as they're commonly dubbed, are wet, spicy peppers, marinated in vinegar and glopped on top of cheesesteak sandwiches (or hoagies, as they say in Philadelphia). Combine them with thinly sliced steaks, fried onions, gooey cheese, and mayo, and you've got yourself a regional sandwich that is hard to match anywhere else in the country.

Growing up back East, I ate my share of hoagies, filled with everything from tuna to Italian deli, and always smothered in hots. We called our hoagies "subs" in Maryland. Where I live now, in California, they call subs "sandwiches" (of all things!), and they look at you with a blank stare if you ask for wet, hot cherry peppers as a topping.

For years, I've been searching for *hots* here in the Bay Area. I've looked in dozens of specialty grocery stores, and lots of gourmet food catalogues—all to no avail.

I knew that there must be a place online where I can purchase these pesky peppers. So I set out on a mission; to find a Web site where I can plug in my credit card and have a case of hot cherry peppers delivered right to my doorstep.

The quest turned out to be more difficult than I anticipated. Search engines got me nowhere. Neither did virtual shopping malls.

At one point, I came across a company Web site that advertised "exotic foods...spicy cherry peppers." Aha! But when I called, the guy who answered told me that they don't have a Web page. I told him "yes you do," and gave him the URL. I even read him the copy on the page, where it specified who to ask for when calling. "Impossible," he told me. "That was the name of our owner, and he died six years ago." Hmm...

I was back to square one. So I turned to Usenet newsgroups. I posted inquiries to nyc.food, pgh.food, and phl.food (that covered New York City, Pittsburgh, and Philadelphia) and to rec.food.cooking and rec.food.marketplace to reach gastronomes elsewhere. I was determined.

The newsgroup messages generated a slew of replies. Unfortunately, most of them came from folks who thought that jalapenos or pepperoncinis should do just fine. I had to explain that the type of pepper indeed made a difference, and so too did the way it was packaged, chopped and then sealed in water and distilled vinegar.

One lead came from a woman who pointed me to Sam McGee's Hot Gourmet Catalog (http://www.sammcgees.com/chili/hot_gourmet.html). It was a good idea—they peddle everything from Green Chili Pepper Jelly to Volcanic Curry Sauce—yet with all of this hot stuff, there were no ground cherry peppers.

Sam McGee's did offer a threaded message board area though. People there were chatting about everything from "preserving Habaneros" to "canning salsa." I posted a note and waited to see what would happen.

In the meantime, a guy (we'll call him Vinnie) saw my inquiry in nyc.food and sent me a note. He was looking for the same product. It turns out that he grew up near Philly and, like me, he now lives in the West and misses the tang of a big, messy sandwich loaded with hots. We joined forces and doubled our search efforts. Don't laugh, we all have our weaknesses.

Replies to my newsgroup posting continued to roll in throughout the week. Vinnie and I corresponded daily. He thought he had finally hit upon a match and he sent me to take a look at Porino's Gourmet Foods (<http://www.merchantsbay.com/porinos/gourmet.htm>). Sure enough, they offered hot cherry peppers right there on the front page. Unfortunately, they were marinated in oil, not in vinegar and water...different process, different product. I sent the bad news to Vinnie. And the search continued.

Finally one morning, I opened up my e-mail to find a note that read: "Saw your posting on Sam McGee's Hot Chili Talk bulletin board. Check out <http://www.salami.com/specialties.html>." Wouldn't you know it ...my cherry peppers were at a site called Salami.com, "Home of New York Italian Food Specialties."

Within two minutes, I had filled my virtual shopping cart with peppers and other goodies, and was on my way to the checkout counter. I entered my credit card number on their secure server, and shortly thereafter received a thank-you note and confirmation from a guy named Richie. Days later, a box of hot cherry peppers arrived at my doorstep.

I wrote to Vinnie with my success story. He and I still correspond occasionally. Last week we even shared a virtual lunch, California-style. Low-fat cheese, whole wheat bread, lite mayo, grilled onions, and plenty of hots. Oh and please—hold the steak.