

Red or Green? New Mexico Christmas Chile

Written by By Rachel Pfeiffer Sun Correspondent
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Chile brings Christmas to New Mexico all year LONG

They say Christmas comes but once a year, but some New Mexico residents enjoy Christmas all year long. While most people will choose either red or green chile when enjoying their favorite, flavor-filled dish, some instead choose Christmas, smothering the dish in a mixture of the two.

Finding a dish New Mexicans are unwilling to put chile on would prove difficult. Eric Peña, the manager of Grandpa's Grill, thinks about any food can be made more flavorful with a bit of chile.

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“People put chili on everything, whether it’s burritos, burgers, eggs, or even mashed potatoes at the Thanksgiving table,” he said.

New Mexico’s chile obsession dates back centuries. Either Captain-General Juan de Oñate or members of the Antonio Espejo Expedition brought chile to the region. Exactly when the plant was introduced isn’t clear, but by the early 1600s, chile farming had begun. Soon it flourished in the northern part of the state.

As chile farming continued to flourish, its popularity grew, eventually making it one of the most well-known products of New Mexico. Between 8,000 and 10,000 acres of chiles are harvested in New Mexico each year. In 2020, the New Mexico Department of Agriculture reported that 8,500 acres of chile were harvested, resulting in 68,000 tons of production.

The majority of the chile harvest is sold to processors. Green chile is typically harvested, peeled, then either canned or frozen. Red chile, on the other hand, is harvested when it is a bit dried. After being dried even more, it can be sold as a spice in powder, flake, or pod form.

While most people purchasing these products out-of-state might have a specific meal or two they use chile for, Sammy Chioda, owner of Sammy C’s Rock N’ Sports Pub & Grille, says that he doesn’t see any specific dish that the residents of Gallup gravitate toward more than others when it comes to chile.

“A lot of restaurants have their own unique way of doing their Southwestern Mexican platters,” he said. “When it comes down to chile, I don’t think there’s really one way of doing it.

“People have varied tastes, and that’s what makes it pretty cool,” Chioda explained. “That’s what makes the restaurants in Gallup unique. Everybody has their own style of how they make their chile.”

Peña agrees that all chile dishes seem popular, though Grandpa’s Grill’s breakfast burritos or burgers might very well be their most popular dish featuring chile.

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“Chile adds just that little bit of flavor and that little bit of flair to the dish,” Peña said.

Whether it’s green, red or Christmas, Chioda believes that Gallup residents have a culinary heritage they can be proud of.

“Chile is one of the neat things that makes New Mexico so unique. I think Gallup has some of the best Mexican food you can find in New Mexico. We have some awesome restaurants in Gallup,” he said.

No restaurant was willing to share their recipes for chile dishes. However, we were able to get some pictures from Sammy C’s Rock N’ Sports Pub & Grille.

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