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## **PICK A PECK OF PERFECT PEPPERS FOR CINCO DE MAYO**

Hot Pepper Breeder at Seminis Vegetable Seeds Heats Things Up

Terry Berke, senior hot pepper breeder at Seminis Vegetable seeds, knows how to eat hot peppers. He also knows how to convince your friends to eat a hot pepper on a dare this Cinco de Mayo.

“Most of the capsaicin, the natural chemical that makes hot peppers hot, is concentrated in the middle of the pepper,” Berke explains. “So if you dare your friend to eat a hot pepper you should bite off the very tip to demonstrate it’s not that hot, and then pass it to them to try. Their next bite will be right into the middle of the pepper, making it, of course, much hotter for them.”

Berke knows so much about hot peppers, because he’s spent the last 11 years breeding new varieties of peppers. Before he worked on peppers, he didn’t even like spicy food. Now he eats peppers every day.

Seminis, a wholly owned subsidiary of Monsanto Company, currently produces more than 24 types of hot peppers. These include the Cinco de Mayo favorites, anchos and jalapeños, and many other lesser-known but equally spicy varieties. Berke spends his days working to improve the peppers offered by Seminis.

He’s selecting for peppers that are darker green, larger or that have other attractive colors like bright-orange, red, white or yellow. In some cases, he’s making Seminis peppers hotter, and in others, he’s taking the heat out. Seminis developed the first “heat-free” jalapeño in the 1990s; a pepper that has lower levels of capsaicin, providing a pepper with all the flavor of a jalapeño and very little of the heat.

“The trend is for milder peppers in the U.S.,” said Berke, although he is looking into a hotter jalapeños because pepper producers have complained that some jalapeños aren’t as hot as they used to be. He attributes this to the development of better farming practices. “The more you stress a pepper while it’s growing, the hotter the pepper will be. As farming practices have gotten better and farmers have introduced drip irrigation systems, the plant isn’t stressed as much, and therefore the peppers turn out milder.” The opportunity to mix hot peppers and sweet peppers together gives pepper producers more options for salsas and other packaged foods.

A lot of what drives Berke’s breeding program is what consumers want when they’re at the super market. Although the breeders stay away from changing the flavor profile, one thing they can select for is color.

“One trait we’re working on is a darker green Serrano,” said Berke. “The trend for hot peppers is darker color. I can make a very nice light green Serrano that’s high in yield, with excellent firmness and good disease resistance, but no one will buy it because it’s light green. They want dark green. I can’t explain why, I just know I have to meet what the market demands.”

For peppers that are harvested when they’re orange, the breeders select for a brighter orange. For those that are harvested white, Berke’s team selects for creamier whites instead of pale greens or pale yellow. Berke’s working on a white variety of cherry pepper for a holiday pack.

Regardless of which colored pepper you bite into this Cinco de Mayo, chances are you'll reach for a glass of water soon after. Instead, Berke recommends drinking a glass of milk *before* you chomp down. Since capsaicin and milk bind to the same receptors on your tongue, drinking milk ahead of time will saturate those receptors with milk. The capsaicin will have fewer receptor sites to bind to and your hot pepper salsa won't taste quite so hot.

#### About Seminis

Seminis is the world's leading developer, producer and marketer of vegetable seeds. Its products are designed to reduce the need for agricultural chemicals, increase crop yield, reduce spoilage, offer longer shelf life, and create better-tasting foods and foods with higher nutritional content. Seminis has established a worldwide presence and global sales and distribution network that spans 150 countries and territories.

#### About Monsanto

With headquarters in St. Louis, Missouri, Monsanto Company is a leading global provider of technology-based solutions and agricultural products that improve farm productivity and food quality. For more information on Monsanto visit the company's Web site: [www.monsanto.com](http://www.monsanto.com)

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