

TAMING THE HEAT

Pura Vida Chef Hector Santiago takes on peppers

Hector Santiago is the mad scientist behind Pura Vida's haute cuisine pepper preparation.

PHOTOS/SPARK ST. JUDE

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

Chef Hector Santiago is taming the heat at Pura Vida, his tapas restaurant in Poncey-Highland. Most diners are blissfully unaware of the elaborate experiments going on behind the scenes, but Santiago is analyzing peppers to find ways to control the heat and intensify flavor. Doing so allows him to use capiscums in new ways, showcasing their versatility.

Influenced by his travels and research, Santiago is creating dishes like Salmon Ceviche al Mango Verde with a “heatless” habanero sauce and Tuna Ceviche Neotradicional 2007 with *aji rocoto* and *aji amarillo* “caviar.” The Sunday Paper recently met with Santiago to learn more.

SPOTLIGHT
Q What sparked your interest in peppers?

A A Spanish chef did a project with aloe where he used it in dishes with foie gras, made aloe ice cream, used it as an emulsifier and as a setting agent. He basically took that aloe and dissected it. That inspired me. It's so smart to really know what you're cooking with. I started with peppers because they most define my cuisine.

Peppers are delicious and have many different flavors, but a lot of chefs are afraid to use them in haute cuisine because they really dominate the dish. I want more people

to be able to use peppers and in different ways. **What are you trying to accomplish as a chef?**

I'm cooking what they now call in Spain *cocina de autor*. It translates as “kitchen author” and means creating a signature cuisine. It's very personal. My cuisine is based on my experience, my taste—what I want to bring into the potluck of chefs.

Which peppers are you working with?

There are five families of peppers that are the most important for culinary purposes: *chilensis*, which includes the habanero; *frutescens*, which includes the Tabasco plant and Birdseye pepper; *annuum*, which includes bell peppers, jalapeño, pimiento and Serrano; *baccatum* or *aji amarillo*; and *pubescens* or *rocoto*.

I use all types on our menu. The first three families are available all the time but *aji* and *rocoto* aren't found in this country. I get them preserved from South America.

How do you create a “heatless” habanero sauce?

First, I clean out all the seeds and ribs. Then I blanch the flesh five times in very cold water with salt and leave them overnight. The next day I heat them five to seven times, depending on the pepper. I want to develop a scientific way to decrease all the heat but increase the flavor; I'd like to be able to soak them in a solution.

Habanero has beautiful notes of passion fruit, honeysuckle, Caribbean fruits and even pineapple at times. But you can only taste that for a quarter of a second. I want you

to taste that throughout the whole dish without burning. Right now I'm able to get 90 to 95 percent of the heat out. I'm experimenting with different types of habaneros to see which one gives more flavor.

It's not that I don't like heat, I do. It's that I want to have control of the pepper; I don't want the pepper to control me.

How do you measure heat?

Take a drop of pepper juice and add water by drops until you can't taste it anymore. Another way is to send to a lab, but I want to develop—with the help of some scientists—a simple way to measure the heat in the kitchen.

To me, heat is another flavor. They say there's sweet, sour, salty, bitter, and now the fifth, umami [a Japanese word meaning savory or meaty] or earthy. Heat should be the sixth. It's the same concept; something you can taste and feel in your nose.

Do you ever increase heat?

I make a nice hot poblano sauce because I love the grassy flavor of poblano. I increase the heat as much as possible so that it tastes almost like a jalapeño.

To do this I take the pepper, wash it and

then cook it whole. When you cook peppers with the ribs and seeds a lot of the compound that makes them spicy releases into the flesh. The sauce is basically a puree of the pepper.

Are any of your experiments at the farm level?

I'm working with a local farmer, Jeff Collins, to grow several varieties of peppers. We're trying to grow *aji* and *rocoto*, but it's not easy in this ecosystem.

We've been using the terms interchangeably, but what's the difference between chiles and peppers?

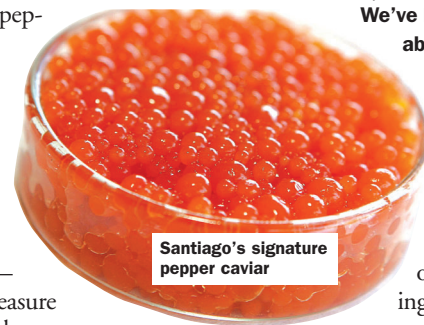
Different people call them different things. They're synonyms basically.

What's simmering for the future?

A book about my work with peppers. Two years ago I wrote the outline and since then I've been filling it with experiences, farming notes, menus and recipes. Hopefully, by the end of this year I'll finish. A few years down the road I can do an amendment with future findings.

I hope to get into roots. I'd like to study *sofrito*—the mix of peppers, onions and garlic that's the base of most stews and many items in Latin America. And then adobo, which is composed of many things. I've got a lot of work to do. There's too much to learn, I'll never know enough. That drives me: I need to keep on learning. **SP**

For more information about Pura Vida and Hector Santiago, visit www.puravidatapas.com.



Santiago's signature pepper caviar