

El corazón del chile

Chile peppers — wild and cultivated — recorded across the mountains of southern Mexico in CONABIO, the national biodiversity survey. The homeland of the chile, and of the dozens of local varieties its cooking is built on.



ESPECIES

- chiltepín silvestre
C. annuum var. *glabriusculum*
- cultivada
poblano · *jalapeño* · *serrano*
- habanero
C. chinense
- manzano
C. pubescens · *altiplano*
- pico de paloma
C. frutescens · *Tabasco*

The southern highlands of Mexico — the sierra country of Oaxaca, Puebla, Veracruz, and Chiapas — are one of the world's centers of crop domestication: a hearth of the chile, the bean, and the squash, with the maize homeland just to the west. Here the four grew together in the milpa, the field that has fed Mexico for millennia. Somewhere in these mountains, in river valleys where altitude changes by two thousand meters and a single ridge separates a dry canyon from a cloud forest, *Capsicum annuum* was brought from wild into cultivation. The rockshelters of Coxcatlán (▲) in the Tehuacán Valley hold some of the oldest known chile remains in Mexico; the cave of Guilá Naquitz (▼) in the Valley of Oaxaca preserves Mesoamerica's earliest squash domestication. Few geographies

in the hemisphere stack micro-climates so close together, and a crop under selection diversifies, splitting into local forms shaped by soil, rainfall, altitude, and the tastes of the community tending it. Mexico domesticated a single *Capsicum* species — *C. annuum*, the parent of the jalapeño, serrano, and poblano — but its kitchens reach for several. Mexicans also grow *C. pubescens*, the manzano of the tierra fría, an Andean domesticate; *C. chinense*, the habanero and its Yucatecan kin, from Amazonia; and *C. frutescens*, the pico de paloma of the Gulf lowlands, from South America. Within *C. annuum* alone, the named landraces run to dozens: the chillhuacle negro of Cuicatlán (■), dried and darkened, the basis of Oaxacan mole negro; the chile de agua of the Valles Centrales, eaten green; the

pasilla mixe of the Sierra Norte; the ancho and mulato of Puebla; the costeño of the coast. Each has its place at the table — fresh in salsas, dried in moles and adobos. Among them is the wild ancestor — the chiltepín silvestre, *C. annuum* var. *glabriusculum*. Small, round, hot, spread by birds rather than planted, it grows throughout the highlands and holds the broad genetic variation the cultivated forms draw on. The record was assembled by many collectors. The largest contribution came from Dr. Jesús Axayácatl Cuevas Sánchez, curator of the germplasm bank at Chapingo, who between 1995 and 2002 collected more than four hundred chile specimens for the Banco Nacional de Germoplasma Vegetal (◆). The accessions are documented and held for breeding and research.