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Conquering The Carolina Reaper Requires Self-Deceit, Milk, And A Lot Of Barf

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Photo: [Victor Llorente](#)/Deadspin

In the same way strip malls pipe in the smell of luxury, the NYC Hot Sauce Expo must pipe in the smell of pain. The ambient tang of hot sauce greets every visitor at the door. How the mere consumption and sale of hot sauce could suffuse a huge, high-ceilinged space with its odor defies explanation. But my nostrils were

beginning to tingle and my sinuses were beginning to clear just five steps into the venue, the warmest imaginable welcome for an iron-stomached idiot.

The second thing I detect after entering the convention is the sheer amount of milk. Milk in cafeteria-style half-pints, milk in whipped-cream cans aimed directly into mouths, milk splashed forensically near the garbage can, and milk cascading down chins. The room contains a disconcerting volume of milk.

Nobody told me this was the milk expo, I wonder, questioning the point of all this dairy, only to answer that question just a little later, in the most self-destructive possible fashion.

The booths are manned by pepper farmers, sauce vendors, beef-jerky jerkers—all manner of spiced snack purveyors, from all over the country. It's an oasis of free samples. The aisles are full of capsaicin junkies, some equipped with holsters and bandoliers for their favorite bottles. Their collective energy is potent: wrap-around sunglasses, pepper-printed apparel, old war stories about chili conquests. The expo is a subtlety-free zone, infused with the spirit of boardwalk T-shirts. Even the names of the sauces follow a rough template: select a wicked adjective (Heartbreaking, Screaming, Righteous, Voodoo), append it to a random noun (Felon, Dawn, Chili, Mimi), and call it a day. The permutations are endless.



Photo: Victor Llorente

Every pepper has its uses, depending on the desired flavor and degree of trauma. But this day's unavoidable star is the Carolina Reaper: lurid red pods, rumples and warty, ending in a pointy tail. It's possible to navigate this party without encountering the Reaper directly, to have plenty of pleasant and fulfilling conversations, but impossible to ignore it completely. It's the steady subject of whispers and boasts. The heat of peppers is measured in Scoville heat units. An everyday jalapeño might clock in around 6,000; habaneros are closer to 350,000. The Reapers here for public consumption are billed at 1,560,000. (Pepper X, developed by the farmer behind the Reaper, might be [coming for its title](#), though it's unfit to eat.) It's the ingredient in every seller's hottest fire. It will be used in

sauce for a wing eating competition later that day, and raw in a Reaper eating competition.



Photo: Victor Llorente

Despite the pepper's two-comma Scoville status, I figure the Reaper can't be much worse than the [war crimes I've previously enacted](#) on my stomach. After warming up on a dozen sauces made with lesser anchos, ghosts, and Scotch bonnets, I decide to meet the Reaper head-on—not in a sauce, mellowed out, but in its original form. Brett, the man at the pepper farm booth, is terse. I am curious about the farm's operations. He offers me a sliver of Reaper as if to end the conversation. It arrives on a tiny plastic spoon, thin red skin and a few seeds, roughly the size of a big toenail. I plop it into my mouth and chew. "That's hot," I

say. “Hottest pepper in the world,” he replies, walking away, well aware of what he has just done. The first five seconds are floral, even a little sweet. It would be dishonest to describe the “taste” after that point with any word besides “oblivion.” A spoon of boiling oil has been tipped down my gullet. Well after I’ve swallowed, someone keeps pouring in more spoons.

I walk away from the counter, not exactly sure toward what, just trying to escape my own neck. Then I beeline to the milk. Never again will I question the presence of milk, anywhere. I throw back one half-pint in a blink, talk to the milk lady for moral support, and grab another carton immediately. Milk is not a solution, but it does, fleetingly, address the symptoms, even as the pain level continues to escalate. This is what pepper deviants call the “climb.” With a pepper this potent, the heat builds for about 15-20 minutes, then you spend about five minutes suffering at the summit, then a 15-20 minute “descent” back to normalcy. Shambling through the crowd, a haze of vape smoke, tattoos, and dairy products, I finally break outside into fresh air and slump against a glass door. There I summit.

My memory is hazy, but my audio diary from those minutes includes:

[00:03:33] Snot’s dripping. I’m honestly looking for a small dark place. To be quiet. Some ice cream. And. The pain is.

[00:03:55] Lingerin

During my ordeal, an entire dog show—a chihuahua beauty pageant, to be precise—took place on the stage. I hadn't even realized. Here are those dogs.



Photo: Victor Llorente

Nice dogs.



Photo: Victor Llorente

As soon as I am capable of speech beyond a dissociated wet blabber, some 45 minutes later, I return to the pepper farm booth to talk to Brett about my experience. A tank-topped lug is thanking Brett for providing lime juice, which helps with the capsaicin cramps that had him doubled over. The burn is gone from my mouth and throat but now I too feel a dull placeless ache in my torso, a distant cousin of the sack-tap. After I share my own Reaper experience, Tank-Top asks whether I was the voice he heard in the bathroom, hollering, “Why is this happening to me?” which is the point at which I resolve not to use the restroom at this venue for any reason.

The contestants in the wing eating competition would likely soon join that lost soul in the restroom. The wing sauce has been concocted by a New Jersey-based couple who go by Creator and Createss, he in a full-leather Mad Max cosplay, she in a blue medical gown with a surgical mask and two layers of latex gloves. (Rule of thumb: If the chef wouldn't touch it with one pair of gloves, reconsider touching it with your mouth.) Everyone competing signs a waiver.



Photo: Victor Llorente

The Createss tells me the sauce contains a mix of peppers: “cayenne, habanero, piri piri, scorpion, Reaper, and Reaper.” The final touch is a dusting of additional pepper powder. Neither architect will ever eat their invention. “I only build the

bomb, I don't drop it," says the Creator, who prefers his actually edible sauces.
"I'm a flavor guy, but I know how to hurt people."



Photo: [Victor Llorente](#)

The wings are doused, then parceled out into cartons of 10.



Photo: [Victor Llorente](#)

The first person to strip all the meat off every wing in their carton is crowned winner. “Eat the Creator’s meat,” he howls into a microphone, egging his victims on. “Suck the bones of my meat.”



Photo: Victor Llorente

The Creator claims that in the past he has seen people projectile vomit and, on one occasion, defecate on stage. Nobody here suffers a fate that extreme, but they do suffer. Some only make it through three wings. (I tasted the sauce, and while the raw Reaper might've permanently warped my palate, I suspect I could've made it to four.) Some openly weep. One competitor later tells me his beard began to retain sauce, like a cruel sponge, scalding his skin.

The winner was awarded a trophy containing actual toilet paper.



Photo: Victor Llorente

Note the chili meat chart tattoo.

As deluded and self-destructive as these people are, they're junior varsity compared to the day's true jocks, the Reaper eaters. This is a different tier of masochist, and they are nearly all practiced capsaicin athletes. I ate a slice of one Reaper and was out of commission for 45 minutes. Greg Foster, a ruddy, gregarious Californian, can eat 22 whole peppers in a minute and live to do it again. The elite eaters, who have put real work into their chili-chewing mechanics and tolerance levels, are gunning for his world record: 120 grams of Carolina

Reaper. His feat may never be surpassed, as the peppers escalate in lethality every growing season.

The competition has simple rules. The Reapers are weighed beforehand. Eat as many of them as you can—chewing, not swallowing whole, a clear choking hazard—in exactly one minute. Any partially chewed peppers still in your mouth at the end of that one minute must be spat out. The spat-out pepper paste is then weighed along with the uneaten peppers, and the difference between the pre- and post-competition weights is your score. You must then stand there for one additional minute, basking in the pain, without access to any other food or drink. This is sports.



Photo: Victor Llorente

The pain is inconceivable for a civilian. Even these veterans aren't sure they want to go through with this.

"The last month: butterflies in my stomach, anxiety, am I really going to go through with this," Foster says. "What am I, insane? Obviously, because I'm doing this voluntarily." The peppers skew hotter every year. He says he sampled one of the competition-tier Reapers yesterday and figured he was fine. Five minutes later, he burst out the door to puke on the pavement. Foster's convinced they're over 2 million Scoville heat units.

The pregame rituals vary. Foster tells me he's hydrated thoroughly and loaded up on bananas and Tums. Anyone attempting to eat Reapers on an empty, uncoated stomach is asking for the paramedics, he explains. (He has in fact seen a man convulse in the fetal position after a competition in Portland. The paramedics asked *him* what to do.)

Wayne Algenio, the previous world-record holder before Foster wrested it away in 2016, is a bubbly, bespectacled dude with a stomach stretched to capacity by his competitive eating career. He treated himself to a pregame meal of mashed potatoes, heavy cream, and half a bottle of Pepto Bismol, that classic menu. "That's gonna help with the poops," Algenio says. "I'm not even worried about that. A lot of people worry about that [the poops]. With Pepto Bismol, it's like, no [worries]."



Photo: Victor Llorente

Algenio and Foster banter and rib each other, trying to keep things light, but the prevailing sensation is one of dread.

“I’ve got to start meditating here in a second, kind of separate mind and body, because the ordeal we’re going to go through here in a few minutes is nothing short of self-immolation,” Foster says. “I mean, literally, you’re setting yourself on fire at a level that is hard to describe.”

The main difficulty lies in the fact that the body, which is smarter than the mind, does not want to consume these peppers.

“What you really have to focus on when you’re eating the peppers is your body is trying to gag on it. And the real focus is trying to swallow it while your body is rejecting it. And it’s so hard because the peppers get hotter every year,” Algenio says. “Last year was such a great mindset. But the moment I bit into the peppers, I knew it was hotter than every previous year. Because I usually have at least 10-15 seconds before you would feel the initial burn. But the moment I bit into it, I felt it.”

A successful showing requires a confident start, as Foster explains. “If I can get the first two peppers in and down without gagging, hiccuping, coughing, or choking, I’m good. Because it’s that initial shock to the system that’s really the most intense.” To take a stab at the record, you need to have one pepper down the hatch, every 2.5 seconds. “Your jaw’s gonna get tired, it’s gonna be blazing hot, you’re going to be questioning your sanity. If you start going into any of those dark places, you’ve already lost.”



Photo: Victor Llorente

The competitors file out onto stage one by one. The relative amateurs flame out; one man can't even ride out the additional minute of pain and is disqualified for premature milk consumption.

Foster comes out on stage with blue gloves, chomping on a stick of butter, which he then tosses over his shoulder before hunkering down at the table. Just before competition, he says, he's so zenned out that he can't hear or see the crowd; he's only keyed into the sound of the countdown. He throws back pepper after pepper, and when he's done, his face is the hue of a perfect raspberry.

Foster stays stoic, but other eaters showcase the full range of the human experience. Eyes go pink. Tears stream down cheeks in anime-wide strips. Mascara migrates across the face. One contestant, over the course of competition, makes expressions that I would otherwise associate with despair, confusion, malice, and heartbreak.

Almost all of them are actively engaging in combat with their own gag reflexes. This translates to a queasy, cobra-like, bobbing dance as they compete. The people on stage warily walk around the competitors after they're done, reading their body language suspiciously for any sudden movements, keeping clear of a certain blast radius.



Photo: Victor Llorente

By the end of competition, milk represents absolute salvation. One competitor is so disoriented by pain that someone else has to pry open the carton for her. Algenio, after a respectable run, stomps the stage and howls at the ceiling in the purgatorial minute before he's permitted the cow's blessing.

But the odyssey isn't complete. There's one more crucial phase: purging.

"Soon as you get off stage, chug as much water, chug as much milk, just build that pressure up, get to a trash can, and push it all out," says Foster, who assures me that it hurts just as bad coming up as it did going down. Another climb begins.

“I start coming off it. And then it goes right back up [after vomiting]. Because it’s all coming right back out. And then it’s ice cream, and heavy cream, and lime juice, and ice cream and heavy cream, and lime juice.”

And that stays down?

“No man, I’m not keeping heavy cream and ice cream down, that’s just to cool me down, and then I’m so full of all that dairy and curdled lime juice, it comes right back out.”

Foster describes the scene backstage as “bedlam.” By the time I go back to investigate, most of the competitors have finished emptying their stomachs into trash cans, and a custodian is mopping something off the floor.

The winner is announced: Wayne Algenio, with 95 grams. Foster comes in second place with 90 grams. Nobody else came close to those two marks, and even those two couldn’t come within striking distance of Foster’s record. Algenio emerges, his shirt soaked in milk (and possibly other fluids), spreading the flag of the Philippines.



Photo: Victor Llorente

Even after he is crowned champion, Algenio says he can't help but feel a sense of futility. The world record feels untouchable now. "I don't know if I should even keep trying at this point. If it just gets hotter every year. I don't think I'll come close to that record again," he tells me. It's his least favorite eating competition. Nothing else comes close.

"I try to change my approach every year, but, it's just—when you're up there, it's a different story, where you're fighting your body, where you're trying to swallow and your body is saying, 'No, don't do that. This is really bad.'" His plans for the rest of the day include another half-bottle of Pepto before dinner.

Other competitors are in higher spirits. Capsaicin causes the body to release endorphins. A neutron bomb of capsaicin invites a neutron bomb of endorphins. “I’m high as a kite,” says Foster, describing his state after every Reaper competition. “I’ve been sober seven years now, and this is about as high as I get.”

Some competitors, amazingly, want to continue consuming spicy food, even after regurgitating the Reapers. Cameron Michael Boyle, who competed in a cowboy hat and maintained a charming side-to-side-sway as he ate, like a boxer staying light on his feet, met up after the awards ceremony. He had eaten 26 grams and seemed to be in the middle of a remarkable journey.

“I’m fucking hyped. I’m ready for some more fucking hot sauce. I’m on the train right now, a euphoric state. All the endorphins are going right now, I’m ready to either go fight somebody or get some more fucking hot sauce,” he tells me, affably. So as not to be the person he fights, I thank him for his time, shake his hand, and go on my way—away from this place, away from any Reaper until, one day, the desire to self-immolate returns.



Photo: Victor Llorente