

# Tasting the Fire

*How to handle the heat and other tips on tasting hot sauces and salsas*

by Elizabeth Pollock

**T**ake a heartfelt hint from a master taster of high-heat sauces: Don't try too many in a row. At last summer's Fancy Food Show, Rick Bayless, chef-owner of Topolobampo and Frontera Grill in Chicago, went on a mad focused-tasting spree of barbecue sauces, making his way through about 60 in half an hour. "I ended up on my back out in the foyer, lying on a table, writhing in pain," he remembers wryly. "I thought I was going to have to go to the emergency room. I think it was heartburn from all the vinegar. It was actually fairly comical."

To avoid finding yourself in a similar situation when sampling hot sauces and salsas, keep in mind a few of Bayless's professional tips on reaping the pleasures of this intriguing, fiery category.

**Fancy Food: How many hot sauces or salsas should you taste in a row?**

**Rick Bayless:** Try not to do more than eight to 10, then take a couple of hours off, or your palate will flag very quickly. Also, realize that the heat from chiles is cumulative, so your last salsa or sauce will taste much hotter than your first one, even if it's not. You should wait at least 15 minutes if you really want to judge the heat level. You do have to be selective and only taste the ones that you think look good to you. Use your nose and your eyes to help you make the first cut.

**FF: What medium do you use for tasting hot sauces and salsas?**

**Bayless:** I always taste on a spoon. I never taste with chips or bread, because

I feel it really inhibits your appreciation of the salsa, and the tasting becomes more about the taste of the chip.

**FF: How much do you taste at a time?**

**Bayless:** A small spoonful of salsa, or half a small spoonful of hot sauce is the minimum I would take. It's important to take enough to be able to swish it around in your mouth, because different sections of the tongue appreciate certain aspects of flavor differently. The tip of the tongue tells you if there's any sugar; the main, flat part tells you if there's enough salt; the sides tell you about acidity; and the back tells you if there's any bitterness. So if you don't take enough, you'll have a very stilted perspective on the overall taste.

**FF: What combination of flavors do you look for?**

**Bayless:** Ask yourself, 'Is it a complete flavor, or does one element jump up and throw everything else out of balance?' You're not looking for bitterness except as a sign of something that's not made right. Personally, I don't like a perceptible sweetness, although there can be some sugar as a balance for both heat and acid. Any tangy element like vinegar should be in balance with everything else. And then, I look for a sufficient amount of salt to bring the whole taste together, especially if the sauce is made with tomatoes.

**FF: What's different about tasting hot sauces as opposed to salsas?**

**Bayless:** It's much harder to taste hot sauces, because they have a lot of vine-



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gar. They're incredibly pungent, hot and acidic. Since you know that ahead of time, you can put it out of your mind and immediately turn your attention to the flavors and textures.

**FF: What do you recommend for cleansing the palate between tastings?**

**Bayless:** I like plain old bread. Not toasted bread, not crackers, just the neutral taste you get from a French bread. And when you need to soothe your mouth from the heat, dairy products and sugar are the two things that really help. Frozen yogurt is probably the best. Just let the coolness waft over your mouth for a while and then go back to it ... slowly and carefully.