

FINANCIAL REVIEW

HD RED HoT CHILLI PEPPER

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Alex de Wit was co-father of the world's hottest chilli. He tells Anne Hyland how he built a successful **business** out of being a heat geek.

Alex de Wit is one of the fathers of the atom bomb of chillies. His offspring, the Trinidad Scorpion Butch T chilli, has held the Guinness World Records title for the world's hottest chilli.

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It was born and bred in the tiny hamlet of Morisset on the NSW central coast, two hours north of Sydney, where I've arrived with some trepidation for a lunch that threatens to be hotter than hell.

De Wit's chilli topped the Scoville scale – the measure for the potency of chillies – at 1,463,700 heat units. The humble bird's-eye chilli we use in cooking is a mere fiery 100,000 to 225,000 units, while pepper sprays used to control riots score as high as 2 **million** units.

De Wit is a self-proclaimed heat geek, whose passion has led him to building a successful small **business**, known as The Chilli Factory, with his brother and sister-in-law. The effusively upbeat 47-year-old, dressed in jeans and a casual shirt that boasts "I survived the world's hottest chilli", is enthusiastic about my arrival and gives me a quick tour of their single-hectare patch amid the breaks in the rain that has been hammering down.

Next stop is the de Wit family "lab" where we're surrounded by bags and bags of chilli pastes. The pungent vapours are overwhelming and slowly, with increasing intensity, they begin to burn my nasal passages and make my eyes water. I cough and look for an escape but it's begun to rain heavily again. I'm stuck.

I ask de Wit a few questions, hoping it will distract my brain from the pain. He tells me his favourite chillies are the habeneros, which measure between 100,000 to 600,000 units on the Scoville scale. The Scoville test uses liquid chromatography to measure the concentration of heat-producing compounds in a chilli.

De Wit puts chillies on most of his food. The only exception is breakfast. In his culinary world, food tastes better with roughly chopped up chillies scattered over the top – even peanut-**butter** sandwiches. "I think of it as satay," he says. A clearer picture is beginning to form of the lunch to come.

De Wit says he's addicted to chillies and, when travelling far from home, a jar of chilli paste is one of the first items packed into his suitcase. On a five-week holiday last year that saw him return to his native Holland via **China**, he packed 12 medium-size jars of habanero paste, made by The Chilli Factory. Natural addiction

Some of the jars were for gifts but usually the recipient was asked to open it immediately so de Wit could have some. "If I don't eat chillies for a few days, I get a bit agitated. It's a natural addiction; you get an endorphin rush."

In transit in **China**, de Wit pleaded with airport officials to let him keep his chilli paste. "I managed to talk my way through with an open jar of habanero paste. I told them: 'It's medicine. I need this!'"

Where some people find chillies painful and numbing to the point of rendering taste or enjoyment impossible, others such as de Wit and his family find flavour and excitement in how chillies spice up the simplest of meals. For most of us, it's a fine line between pleasure and pain.

In the lab, de Wit introduces me to his brother, Marcel, a chef who founded The Chilli Factory with his wife, Connie, 14 years ago. The brothers were first exposed to chillies in Holland, which is surprising, as some might consider Dutch food bland. But its large immigrant Indonesian population exposed the de Wits to the pleasures of chilli, through pastes such as sambal oelek, in their youth. Of course, Christopher Columbus had preceded the Indonesians.

The rain has stopped and we head outside. There are few plants to see as it's the wrong time of year and, perhaps fortunately, there are definitely no Trinidad Scorpions in sight. De Wit says by February there will be rows and rows of new seedlings – about 3000 – that will be cossetted with heat blankets and fed worm poo. Still, it's a small area. The tonnes of chillies that the **business** sources for its pastes and sauces come from a farm near Bundaberg in Queensland where the hot, dry climate is more agreeable to chilli plants.

De Wit suggests we head to Absolute Thai, a restaurant he has chosen for lunch in nearby Tuggerah. As we leave, I **buy** a jar of Scorpion Strike made from the Trinidad Scorpion Butch T chilli.

Marcel is behind The Chilli Factory's famous pastes and sauces – supplied to 600 gourmet delis, butchers and Barbeques Galore stores – while Alex is the **company's** public face and salesman.

Their goal is to expand their products into 2000 stores nationally. It's a goal that could have been realised earlier had The Chilli Factory accepted a deal with Woolworths. Instead the de Wits twice rejected the supermarket giant's overtures to sell their pastes and sauces.

"We're never going to sell there. They've asked us twice. We've no interest. The largest **company** we deal with is Barbeques Galore. They're normal. They're not going to squeeze me for more." Brave call

It was a brave call as The Chilli Factory has had its challenges. "For the first eight years, we were paying ourselves the minimum wage. I would have made more money working at McDonald's. I remember my wife went to Bi-Lo to **buy** groceries and at the checkout she went to use her card and then rang me to say, 'Can you come and bring some money, there's no money in our bank account!' Marriages break up on that. It was a big leap of faith for all of us."

In recent years a stubbornly high Australian dollar has also challenged the operation, killing off their international sales, which were once 15 per cent of **business**. More recently consumer cautiousness is making it tougher. "We do feel the pinch at the moment because of the economy," de Wit says. "It's a bit harder to sell, but we're still selling."

After a short drive, Alex and I arrive at the restaurant, a characterless place adjoined to a Westfield shopping complex. Marcel, having just returned from a trip to Thailand, has told us the food is authentic. The restaurant is half full with the lunchtime crowd and we are quickly served. We opt to share dishes: the jungle curry with chicken, and the cashew nut and chilli jam with tofu. de Wit bamboozles the waiter when he asks for extra chillies, fresh ginger and garlic for the tofu dish. The answer is no.

De Wit persists and, reluctantly, extra fresh chilli is provided but no additional garlic or ginger. For now, the Scorpion Strike remains in my handbag and it stays there as de Wit regales me with horror stories of those who have overconsumed the Trinidad Scorpion Butch T chilli.

Our meals arrive within minutes of ordering. The tofu dish is garnished with lots of freshly chopped chilli. Soon both of us begin hiccupping and our noses start to run. "Yum," de Wit says. The heat is tolerable and produces a nice slow burn. After a few more bites, and hiccups, de Wit notes "the chicken is a little bit dry".

He tells of a message once left on their office answering machine after a customer ran into trouble. "The message was, 'This is the police. We have a customer who ate one of your sauces and has collapsed'," says de Wit, roaring with laughter. This is not meant to sound as callous as it does. de Wit says the customers who find themselves in distress, with their mouth, nose and lungs on fire, bring it upon themselves. They are typically the macho types, he says, out to impress their friends and who won't heed the warning to try only the smallest amount.

He says you can't do much except wait until the capsaicin, the compound in chilli that causes the burning sensation, passes. It's capsaicin that also causes the body to release endorphins. The scent of fear

De Wit must have smelt my fear and so pulls out another horror story. "I had two nurses come and visit our stall at the Brisbane Ekka [the Royal Queensland show] and they said they had a man come into their hospital's emergency section with stomach cramps after trying the paste. I asked them, 'What did you do?' They laughed and said they gave him muscle relaxant."

The de Wits' various pastes and sauces have claimed almost 100 awards and prizes. Before de Wit pulls out another blistering story about the Trinidad Scorpion Butch T chilli, I ask how they came to grow it.

The de Wits had begun a search for hotter chillies to make their pastes and sauces. When they first started 14 years ago, the hottest chilli they could lay a hand to was the habanero. "Up until seven years ago, we could not get hotter chillies other than the habanero, and that is the reason we started to grow our own."

It was in 2010 that the de Wits were given the seeds of the Butch T Trinidad Scorpion by the Hippy Seed **Company**. The Butch T stands for Butch Taylor, an American plumber who grows chillies for fun and has **sold** his seeds globally. "When we started to grow that chilli we knew it was hot but we never expected to get a record. We had a taste and Marcel nearly passed out. We were flabbergasted." Breeding, growing techniques and weather conditions all influence a chilli's potency.

Our dishes are removed and we request the bill. De Wit notes that his T-shirt is now a little outdated. His **company** lost their 2011 Guinness World Record to rival chilliheads in the United States last year, who grew Smokin' Ed's Carolina Reaper, which boasted an average of 1,569,300 units.

Graciously, the de Wits sell the Carolina Reaper paste for customers. But don't be fooled; they remain ruthlessly competitive. "We've done it once, why not do it twice?" de Wit says. "We were really close about two months ago. It has to be a good hot summer for the plants."

Fortunately, lunch has not been a tongue- blistering affair. But the hot concoction of the Scorpion Strike is still burning a hole in my bag. With de Wit's advice front of mind, I try the smallest amount on a teaspoon, gingerly putting it into my mouth. The pain is immediate and sears like a spear through my head. My eyes water and I walk around hoping the heat will soon subside. It doesn't. I have a glass of **milk** but that only mildly helps. The next day a patch on my tongue remains numb as if it's been scorched by a branding iron.

absolute thai Westfield Tuggerah, NSW Chicken Jungle Curry, \$18.90 Cashew nut and chilli jam with tofu, \$18.90 Extra chillies, \$1 Rice, \$4.90 Coke, \$4 Lemon and lime bitters, \$5 Total: \$52.70

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