

Street Beef/Commentary: Beware the scorpion that stings both ways

By CODY BLOOMSBURG of the Tribune

For a video of Bloomsburg's pepper experience, go to lntribune.com

He kept his wares in two latch-lid glass jars. At the outset of the interview, the 37-year-old custodian pulled three baggies of dried peppers from them and laid them on the table in the Tribune break room.

We were adults, but it felt like we were two kids sitting in a basement with a stash of cherry bombs between us. Odds were good one of us was leaving hurt.

"Any one of the three of these is going to mess you up," Ted (The Fire Breathing Idiot) Barrus said of his peppers. That said, by his logic, I might as well tangle with the king - the last bag on his left.

It held the Trinidad Moruga Scorpion, recently given the crown as the hottest pepper in the world after some of its ilk scored 2 million heat units on the Scoville scale. A jalapeno, not even worthy of a spot in his jars, hits 8,000 at best.

I clung to the idea I was just going to do a story on Barrus because he's a guy from Pullman who just appeared on "ABC World News" with Diane Sawyer for his Internet videos of eating peppers. I was trying to find a way out of dancing in the flames myself.

To buy time, I kept asking Barrus about his rise to chili-head fame.

He started about a year ago watching videos of famous pepper guys from all over the world: Neil Smith of Australia, a man who calls himself "Darth Naga" of the United Kingdom and Jim Duffy of the U.S.

Barrus had grown super hots, like the ghost pepper, for about four years. But he ate his first about a year ago when his friends said they wouldn't eat anymore until he tried them.

He did and said he got hooked on the endorphin rush that comes after the pain. Now, he's eating ultra hots, like the Moruga, or reviewing hot sauces about twice a week and earned his nickname from the U.K. forefather.

Chili heads are a growing subculture, and Barrus has found his place among them.

He said the worst part of eating the ultra or even super hot fruit is the next day: "Giving birth to the sun," as he put it.

As much as I steered the conversation toward him, it kept coming back to me and the peppers.

I asked about the stomach cramps I get after I put too much crushed red pepper on my pizza. He said it wouldn't be any worse, and the initial burn would last about 10 or so minutes. I asked if we should get some milk to wash this all down, but he assured me all would be fine.

Tribune photographer Barry Kough popped into the break room to tell us he had video and lights set up in the studio if we were ready to eat some peppers.

I was on the hook.

Before we ate, Barrus relayed what we were in for: "It's going to be severe pain on an epic scale."

My face might go numb, my body might tingle. I might giggle.

After I threw the pepper in my mouth, according to the challenge he invented, I had to chew for 30 seconds and then not drink anything for five minutes.

It turned to dust with the first crunch, fire by the third or fourth.

My face felt numb at around 3 minutes and 20 seconds. The rest of the time I pounded the table with my fist and made jokes when I could speak. I didn't giggle, though.

At the end, there was a brief moment I caught a glimmer of the rush Barrus must feel. I asked him if I had won, bested the challenge, and he said "yes."

"I win," I said. Of everything Barrus had told me before, my two words were the grossest misinformation uttered that day.

After Kough shot a wrap-up video, I could feel the pain start in the top of my stomach.

Barrus said that was the first time he ate a dried Moruga and done the challenge without drinking milk right after. He also said he had slid me the biggest one after I asked for the smallest.

I laid on the studio floor and thought about what my dad said when I mentioned I might be doing something like this: "(Expletive deleted), don't do that, kid. It'll ruin your guts."

I stood up and made for the bathroom. Things were blurry. I puked in the sink.

Then I went to the stall. I stood at the door, looking at the toilet, not sure if would be any relief. Better safe than sorry, though.

I dropped trou and sat down. Nothing. Like Sherman, the pepper felt no need to start its march to the sea until it was done with Atlanta.

That's when I started seeing white flashes. The world melted and sounds stopped. My stomach hurt like nothing I had ever felt. To say I had cramps would be like saying Chernobyl had a leak.

I was screaming, "Help, you have to help me," and beating on the wall.

Kough came into the bathroom. I had my pants up, but not buttoned. My eyes felt very bleary. I told him to call an ambulance.

I heard Kough and Barrus talking. Kough said something like, "He says he wants an ambulance."

Their floating voices seemed scared.

Barrus and Kough came into view and coaxed me to my feet. To an outsider, it would look like a bad scene from a company party - Cody hit the sauce too hard and Kough had to drag him out of the can to get him in a cab.

They took me to the break room, where I laid like a detoxing heroin junkie - a convulsing, sweat-drenched mass in blue jeans and a white undershirt at the foot of the sink.

They brought me milk.

I chugged the first half of the bottle and purged into the sink. I rinsed and repeated until the milk was gone. There was some relief afterward. I stood for awhile, my eyes and words worked again.

The pain came back, though, and I was out of milk. I laid back down. I writhed, I screamed. Kough went to get more milk.

Before he could get back, I had Barrus plunder the staff fridge. He found yogurt.

Still on the floor, I jammed handfuls of raspberry Greek yogurt into my mouth.

Kough got back with more milk. Barrus called a 14-year-old boy, a sort of apprentice of his, who just started doing video pepper reviews and goes by the YouTube name "Bandgreen." Bandgreen said I should just pass out.

Barrus made a point to tell me that was advice from a 14-year-old boy.

He also told me the chemical that makes peppers hot had caused my body to think it had been poisoned and go into lockdown. Capsaicin cramping, he called it, adding he had seen it once before and that guy did pass out.

I kept hitting the milk and the sink. But nothing worked. Kough made the call - it was time to go to St. Joseph Regional Medical Center. I agreed.

As I shuffled toward the stairs, Barrus asked if he was going to be arrested.

~~At the emergency room, they weren't exactly sure what to do with me. It isn't every day a~~
fool of my caliber stumbles in the door after eating some scorpion pepper. But they
straightened me out with heavy pain killers, anti-nausea drugs and activated charcoal.

When I left, I thanked one of the nurses who saved me from myself. She handed me my
discharge papers with only two words of instruction from the doctor: Avoid peppers.
They were highlighted.