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Mild pepper fired up salsa sales An A&M researcher took the heat from jalapeno, and the nation cheered.

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From this cradle of agriculture along the U.S.-Mexico border sprang the mild jalapeno, the sort of hybrid that could only have originated where two distinct cultures are uniquely entangled.

But what few people realize is that it was all a wonderful, glorious accident.

Ben Villalon, formerly a scientist with the Texas A&M Agricultural Research and Extension Center here, never envisioned developing the world's first jalapeno without the world-famous sting.

"We never set out to take the heat out of the jalapeno," the Lower Rio Grande Valley native said 25 years later, shaking his head. "Never did."

It was a fluke. And people jeered back then, Texans and Mexicans alike, wondering why anyone would want to remove the heat from a hot pepper. Villalon was even gored with a "Burn Steer Award" from Texas Monthly magazine.

But the son of a Valley farmer-turned-scientist knew better. He knew it was all about flavor. And he was vindicated when the mild jalapeno, via mild salsa, became a hot sell.

"The mild jalapeno: I guess you could say we hit a home run with it," said Villalon, 66, tanned and robust in retirement.

A plant pathologist, Villalon was actually trying to breed a bell pepper that would be resistant to the tobacco etch virus and other diseases. During the 1960s, the virus was decimating pepper crops in the Valley.

"It wasn't unusual to see a 40-acre field of bell peppers be completely wiped out in two weeks due to viruses," Villalon said. "Our farmers were being devastated. We needed to develop pepper varieties that could grow in this area."

But of the 500 existing varieties, none was resistant to the virus. With the help of other plant breeders, Villalon stumbled upon several resistant hot serrano peppers grown around Tampico, Mexico.

"Those were the most resistant plants we could ever find," he said. "They developed no symptoms, nothing."

He immediately began crossing the bell peppers and the serranos. While he developed several lines of resistant bell peppers, he also had an unexpected result: a sweet pepper that looked like a jalapeno.

"We had these things, so we started making crosses with the regular jalapenos, and immediately we got into the no-heat jalapeno," Villalon said. "They were spinoffs of the program. But we didn't know yet that we had a gold mine in the heatless jalapeno."

That was around 1976. One serendipitous day that year, Villalon was standing in a hot jalapeno pepper field when Ralph Velasco Jr., then the president of Amigo Foods of San Antonio, made an offhand comment about a mild jalapeno.

"Velasco said that if we could come up with a uniformly mild jalapeno, he could sell \$2 million worth to the McDonald's hamburger chain immediately," Villalon said. "A light just went off, and I realized that such a pepper already existed."

Velasco, who now works as a private consultant in San Antonio, said his idea was that with a perfectly mild jalapeno to work with, he could then blend in the level of heat he desired.

"I thought it was a pretty neat idea," he said. "Most of the peppers I'd gotten from Mexico, I would can and sell and never got a resale on them because they were too hot."

That offhand comment sealed Villalon's fate.

"We spent the next 20 years trying to get the silly jalapeno flavor into the sweet jalapeno," he chuckled. "Most of the stuff

tasted like grass."

And flavor genes to a breeder are about as unpredictable as the consumer market.

"Flavor genes are very different from heat genes," Villalon said. "They're very complex, and it's a tossup as to what you're going to get."

Consumer markets are also fickle. For instance, the hot bell pepper, a commercial version of which was called the Mexipep, was a dud.

"It never went anywhere," Villalon said.

"Nobody accepted the hot bell pepper."

But the mild jalapeno, released in 1981, was an instant success in a food and seed industry warming to the idea.

"All hell broke loose," Villalon chortled.

Companies that produced salsas were now able to blend three grades of picante sauce. A stubborn Northeastern seaboard began snapping up mild salsas with the addictive jalapeno flavor. As their palates grew more accustomed, U.S. consumers moved on to medium and hot salsas.

"As every pepper lover knows, the longer you eat peppers, the higher your tolerance for heat and the hotter the pepper you crave," Villalon said.

By 1991, jalapeno-based salsas outsold ketchup as the nation's No. 1 condiment, said Rod Santa Ana, communications specialist with the Texas A&M program in Weslaco.

"The mild jalapeno had such an impact, not just on the agricultural industry, but on the cuisine of the country," Santa Ana said.

While other mild jalapeno lines have since been developed, Villalon has moved on to investigate the nutritional aspects of onion and garlic.

Packed with vitamins C and A, as well as antioxidants, they combine with lycopene-rich tomatoes to form traditional salsa, which Villalon calls a super-healthy "phytochemical cocktail."

And the much-derided mild jalapeno is directly responsible for that continuing research, said Villalon, who continues to keep an eye on the pepper-breeding program in Weslaco.

"The mild jalapeno got all the hoopla, all the spotlight, back in the '70s, but it was a minor thing," he said. "Yet it became a very important thing at the time. Financially, we were able to support the program for 25 years just on the words 'mild jalapeno.'"

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Caption: Villalon Ben Villalon, a plant pathologist retired from Texas A&M Agricultural Research and Extension Center, shows a virus-resistant bell pepper-serrano cross. Development of the mild jalapeno followed, leading to a huge increase in salsa sales nationwide. Hot peppers