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300 SAUCES, ONE DAY: JUDGING AUSTIN'S HEAT FEST

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GET IT WHILE *It's Hot*

Hoarding the spicy stuff isn't just for insiders

Text and Photos by Nick Lindauer

A fiery obsession is sweeping the globe. "It started out as a money thing," says one devotee. "The problem is, that as the bottles arrived at my door, I found it extremely hard to let them leave." "It was never really an intentional thing at first," says another obsessed fan. They're not talking about a club drug, pyramid scheme or potent cocktail. They're talking about hot sauce. People collect things from sugar packets to ticket stubs. So why not the spicy stuff? And perhaps more to the point, why not you?

Collecting on the Web

As with other collectibles, the internet has accelerated the hot sauce boom in several ways. "This collecting really took off when I stumbled across the Sweat 'N Spice website a couple years ago," says Chuk Hell of The Hot Zone Online. "Until that point, I just bought hot sauces and salsas I found in stores. Online shopping opened my eyes to the fact that there is a huge variety of hot sauces out there. And I wanted to try them all!" Websites also make it easy for collectors to exchange information, trade bottles and chat with fellow hot sauce fanatics.

UnBEARable Hot Sauce by Mild to Wild

Paul Razysinski

Paul Razysinski's collection

Rare Birds

Hot sauce–focused websites have also made rare bottles more accessible: if there's a bottle you're looking for, chances are that someone on the internet can help you find it. Consequently, prices have generally dropped as more sauces have come within reach of the average collector. eBay does a brisk business in hot sauce, as collectors try to turn bottles around for a profit. Additionally, websites have spurred a growth in the collectible market for many manufacturers. Defcon Zero was not considered a collectible until it debuted on the Hot Sauce Blog, on which it came to light that only 24 bottles had been made. Suddenly, the diminutive bottle of habanero extract was a collectible. The success of that release spurred the eventual production of the first glow-in-the-dark hot sauce bottle, Defcon Zero Batch #3.

Made for the Trophy Shelf

But while any hot sauce can be deemed a trophy, some bottles are produced with the intent to make collectibles. What was once simply a vessel for the fiery stuff can now become a unique work of art. "I think collector bottles allow the creator of the item to let himself go and use some imagination," says John Dilley, the creator of Defcon Sauces. Certain bottles can cost $15 to $200 when bought directly from the manufacturer, and can increase in value almost overnight. Aftermarket prices on these collectibles range from $50 to $10,000 depending on the maker, the number of bottles made, the condition and the actual number on the bottle. Collectors typically buy two bottles of a collectible hot sauce, one to keep on display and another to sell or trade to support the fire-eater's habit.

Joining the Cult

Cult-favorite bottles often lure new collectors into the fold. "I have been collecting since '98 but not seriously until '01 when I got the Blair bug. I remember seeing a picture of a 3 am in a catalogue and was hooked ever since," says Eric Nanista, referring to a Blair limited-edition sauce. Nanista owns the prototype Blair's Caldera bottle, the only one in the world. He paid $1675 for it, and has never regretted his choice. "My

For the first time at ZestFest, in 2006, a collector badge was available for purchase. These badges allowed manufacturers to pinpoint collectors in the crowd and connect with them as only chileheads can—over a bottle of hot sauce. The success of the badge and positive feedback from the event has only further spurred collectors' inclusion at fiery food shows and festivals across the country.

Collector bottles allow the creator of the item to let himself go and use some imagination

favorite collectible is anything Blair puts out," he says. "They are some of the most unique bottles out there."

Stumbling into Fame

While some hot sauces are marked as collectible from the start, others reach cult status by serendipity. Inner Beauty Hot Sauce used to be commonplace, but after production ceased, the sauce became a collector's item. "I started collecting hot sauce about 15 years ago, when someone gave my uncle a bottle of Inner Beauty," says Ed Rome, aka ChileheadEd. "It was too hot for him so he gave it to me...I was hooked!" Tabanero Hot Sauce originally entered the market with the word "Tabasco" on the label but was quickly pulled and replaced with a Tabasco-free label (Tabasco hot sauce has trademarked the name, so it's forbidden for other sauces to call themselves Tabasco). Like stamps with a misprint, the first-run Tabanero bottles are now highly collectible.

Live and In Person

Hot sauce collecting isn't just a stay-at-home hobby, though. Collectors often travel to shows like ZestFest to meet up, strike bargains, trade and share information with their fellow sauce

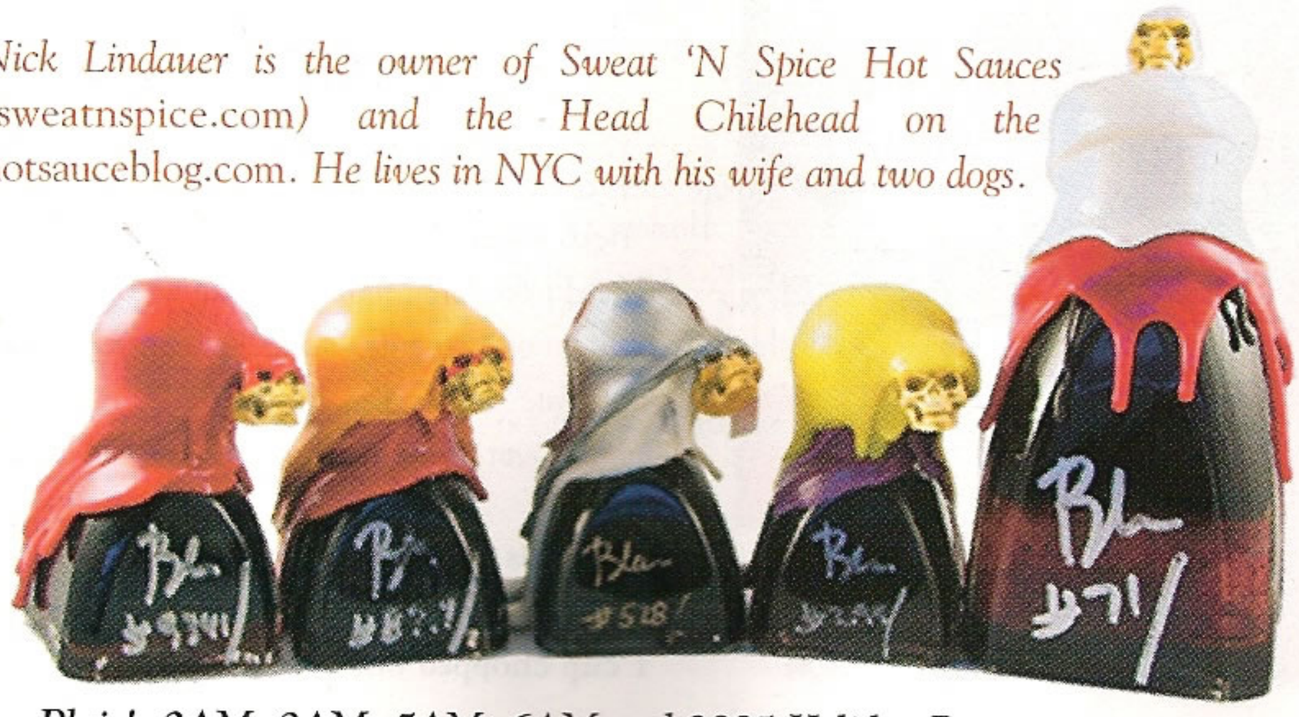
Most Sought-After Collectibles

- Blair's Special Encore Reserves
- Blair's Gold Skull Firecrackers (only 4 exist)
- Blair's Pre AM Reserves (prototype sauces before Blair officially launched the 2AM and 3AM Series)
- Dave's 1994 Private Reserve
- CaJohn's Limited Edition
- Defcon Zeros (Prototype and Batch 1 especially. Batch 3 is the only glow-in-the-dark hotsauce to date!)

If you have more than 5 bottles of hot sauce, you're part of the chilehead collector family

fanatics. A word to the traveling collector, however: wrap your sauces carefully, and be sure that airport security knows what you're packing. One eager collector checked his bag on the way back from ZestFest 2006 with a CaJohn's hot sauce bottle shaped like a grenade inside. Security was not happy. He won't be making that mistake again. No matter how you started collecting and what you collect, if you have more than 5 bottles of hot sauce, you're part of the chilehead collector family. The first step is recognizing you have a hot sauce problem. The second step is getting online and discovering what your next hot sauce purchase will be.

Nick Lindauer is the owner of Sweat 'N Spice Hot Sauces (sweatnspice.com) and the Head Chilehead on the hotsauceblog.com. He lives in NYC with his wife and two dogs.



Blair's 2AM, 3AM, 5AM, 6AM and 2005 Holiday Reserve

Where to find more information online

The Hot Sauce Blog
hotsauceblog.com

The Hot Zone Online
thehotzoneonline.com/blog

The Hot Pepper Forum
thehotpepper.com

Sweat 'N Spice Hot Sauces
sweatnspice.com

Peppers
peppers.com

Blair's Sauces & Snacks
extremefood.com

CaJohn's Fiery Foods
cajohns.com

Defcon Sauces
defconsauces.com