

New Mexico Chile Gets Certified-Product Safeguards

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Fresh green chile and chile products are displayed as state officials announce a new certification program aimed at protecting the reputation and integrity of New Mexico-grown chile during an event at The Range restaurant in Bernalillo, N.M., on Tuesday, Aug. 19, 2014. The restaurant is the first to sign up to participate in the program. (AP Photo/Susan Montoya Bryan)

BERNALILLO, N.M. (AP) — Idaho has its potatoes. Florida has its fresh fruits and juices. Vidalia is the name synonymous with the nation's most famous sweet onion.

Now New Mexico has its own trademark and certification program to protect the reputation and integrity of its signature crop: chile.

Gov. Susana Martinez, members of the New Mexico Chile Association and other officials unveiled the program before a packed room of chile aficionados gathered Tuesday at The Range Cafe, the first restaurant to sign up.

Martinez described chile as a way of life in New Mexico. Aside from being a part of breakfast, lunch and dinner, the chile industry contributes more than \$460 million every year to the state's economy and employs about 4,000 workers.

The governor said consumers — whether in New Mexico or New York City — shouldn't have to wonder whether they're getting real New Mexico-grown chile.

"Whether you prefer red, green or Christmas (a mix of both), you want to know that your chile was grown in New Mexico by farmers with generations of experience, in rich soil and the kind of intense sunlight that makes this flavorful food," she said.

The program builds upon on existing law that makes it illegal to advertise any product as New Mexico chile unless it's actually grown in the state. An independent

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auditor will certify whether restaurants, salsa makers and others in the hot pepper business are using New Mexico-grown chile before allowing them to post the certified logo on their labels and at their front doors.

The chile association also is developing a website where consumers will be able to find vendors who sell the real deal.

State agriculture officials said they have evidence from across the country that unscrupulous vendors have tried to pass off chile as New Mexican despite packaging that shows it comes from another country.

New Mexico's chile experts contend there's no mistaking the hot peppers grown here. Once a person tastes them or smells them roasting at farmers markets and grocery stores, the craving begins, they say.

Matt DiGregory, owner of The Range Cafe, said New Mexico chile is now as American as baseball and apple pie with it showing up on everything from pizza slices at the ballpark to dishes served at restaurants in cities thousands of miles away.

"The secret is out," he said.

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