

Real chefs,

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SOLUTIONS



California dairy products: the perfect foil for hot and spicy foods

There's no denying that restaurant patrons have become more adventurous in recent years. Driven by a mix of cultural exposure, flavor innovation, and social media, once-exotic global cuisines reliant on chili peppers for their flavor foundations are finding their way onto mainstream menus.

According to Datassential, the spicy food revolution is reshaping American dining. The firm's 2025 Spicy Food Trends report claims that 95.3% of restaurant menus now feature spicy food options*.

However, not everyone feels they're able to enjoy this hot trend. Because diners have varying levels of heat tolerance, many who might otherwise be eager to explore these new flavors don't feel that they can.

Real California Milk to the Rescue

As menus heat up, many chefs are discovering a culinary trick long used by cooks from cultures that are accustomed to cooking with hot peppers: cool and creamy dairy products have a magical (and scientifically valid) effect when eaten with hot and spicy foods. Casein, a protein in cow's milk, binds to and helps remove capsaicin, the compound in peppers that gives them their heat. This, for instance, is why spicy curries have long been served with a side of yogurt or Dahi, and why many Mexican dishes incorporate sour cream.

When it comes to cooking with peppers, Real California dairy ingredients can soften the heat and let the flavor come through. Chef Afrand Nikoukar, Senior Manager of Culinary at Chipotle, appreciates this ability. "In my experience," he says, "we're all looking for more complex heat—not just pure spice. At Chipotle, we build that balance with real ingredients."

The latest sauce created by Chipotle's culinary team, Cilantro Lime Sauce, is a perfect example of leveraging dairy and heat in harmony. "We start with charred jalapeños for a smoky, vibrant heat," says Chef Nikoukar.

"Then we layer in fresh cilantro and finish with a tangy sour cream base. The dairy doesn't just cool the spice—it rounds it out and carries the flavor of the peppers in a way that feels clean, balanced, and craveable."

Chef Jason Triail, Senior Director of Culinary Innovation at The Habit Burger Grill, says that lately he's been drawn to peppers like Aji Amarillo, Fresno, and Morita. According to Chef Triail, "They bring more than just heat—they bring identity."

Chef Triail uses crème fraîche or cultured crema with chili-forward dishes for balance, pointing out that rather than muting the flavor, dairy actually helps the pepper's character come through more clearly. "The key, Chef Triail says, "is controlled heat—building flavor and complexity rather than just intensity."

Not all heat-meets-dairy dishes feature global flavors, as evidenced by Chef and consultant Mike Castaneda's Nashville hot chicken-style mozzarella sticks. "The sweet, smoky, savory aspects are amazing together and the Real California Mozzarella makes the heat more palatable," Chef Castaneda says. He also uses Real California cottage cheese and Mozzarella with various spices and tomatoes to make low-calorie cheese sauces. "It's great for protein pasta mac and cheese when you're going for something satisfying that's also a little lighter."

As America's #1 dairy state, California produces a full range of quality dairy products for foodservice, ranging from butter, yogurt, kefir, sour cream, and crema, to a vast variety of fresh, soft, and hard cheeses—all of which help tone down the heat and bring out the flavor of chili peppers and peppercorns. In this way, Real California dairy makes it possible for on-trend operations to turn up the heat without leaving any of their diners out in the cold.

To find out more about California dairy products, visit us at
realcaliforniamilkfoodservice.com

