Last week, a judge at the Fiery Foods Challenge, a spicy food contest held in conjunction with Texas-based festival, ZestFest 2011, was hospitalized after sampling an entry . The blind entry in the hot sauce category was described as a “nightmare in a bottle” by another of the contest judges. Speculators have suggested the sauce may have contained the extract capsaicin, the chemical that gives chile peppers their heat.

“Our best wishes for a swift recovery go out to the judge injured in the Fiery Foods Challenge this week,” said Dave DeWitt, owner and producer of the Fiery Foods and Barbecue Show in Albuquerque, New Mexico. “Safety is the most important thing when testing fiery foods. Chemical additives such as capsaicin only increase the necessity for proper precautions.”

“At the Fiery Foods Show, exhibitors are required to have warning signage at their booths and to taste only on the end of toothpicks,” said DeWitt.

In addition to producing the Fiery Foods Show—the largest hot foods trade show in the country, DeWitt also hosts the annual Scovie Awards, a contest that judges the best food products in the hot foods industry. Judges who participate in the superhot category of the Scovies (including products containing the capsaicin extract) are required to sign a waiver before the contest and to test products separately, overseen at all times by a designated monitor.

Judges at the Scovies are provided with several different, thick coolants, such as yogurt and ice cream—the same cooling agents that members of the public should use when tasting fiery foods. Dairy and alcohol products are particularly effective in counteracting the heat associated with chile peppers; capsaicin dissolves in the fats contained in dairy. Water is a relatively useless cooling agent. Other methods used to combat the heat from peppers include tasting small samples in order to gauge heat levels, and building a tolerance to heat over time before tackling superhots.

With the proper precautions, the general public can avoid overexposure to the “fire” in fiery foods and enjoy the spice of life.

Extras:

Check out this video from Dave DeWitt on how to avoid chile pepper burnout!