



# HOT TOPIC

**Charlie Page hopes his passion for heritage and quality will see him take his hot sauce to the rest of Asia, and the world**

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**THE CHILI BUZZ** is a unique phenomenon: the pleasure pain of the intense sensation. Maybe it's the ultimate in Yin Yang balance; the burn of the initial taste, the satisfaction of the peppery warmth left behind. Charlie says, "It's like a drug. Once you've had chili on your food, you can't enjoy food without it."

It's an almost universal addiction and former ad-exec Charlie Page hopes to tap into that global market, but not with just any sauce, his is based on an old Vietnamese family recipe, although he comes from New Zealand.

Like so many entrepreneurs, Charlie traveled the world seeking his calling. He lived for three years in Japan and spent time in Thailand amongst others. He then settled in a job he didn't want. He was a high flying advertising executive, selling disposable products to people without disposable income. "I spent eight years grinding out nasty advertising and reality TV shows with branded content and telling myself I was doing well."

Eventually he couldn't take it anymore and decided to set out on his own, to do what he wanted to do. But how does a Kiwi with a passion for hot sauce become Saigon Charlie (*saigoncharlies.com*), representing Vietnam in the saturated global market for spicy condiments?

His infatuation with all things chili began while working in a restaurant in New Zealand. His boss gave him a taste and he realized how special these peppers could be. Charlie tells me, "She had lived in Mexico in a remote village on a mountain and had learned how to do jalapeños from her mother-in-law. The first time I had one of those bad boys I was hooked. The burn was intoxicating!"

After traveling, Charlie settled in Hanoi and began absorbing the local culture with the help of his Vietnamese born, by way of the US, partner. He started to learn about the rich culinary traditions of the country and the variety of influences that Vietnam has benefited from over the years. "We became a couple and I got more deeply immersed in Vietnamese culture. I learned about traditional food

preparations and, crucially, preservation techniques for food in a tropical climate that suffers damp, cold winters."

"Vietnam has had so many influences. They had China in the north, the Khmers in the south and the French and other European influences, not to mention the 54 ethnic cultures. So there's no definitive flavor that you could say is Vietnam."

There may be no definitive style, but there are years of tradition and the original recipe came from Charlie's wife's grandmother, as authentic a start point as any. "The very first batch of Saigon Charlie's was December 2013. My wife's grandma has a connection to the imperial court and the family farmed on imperial land. They used to grow chilies, onions, garlic and even wine for the imperial family so their recipe for chili sauce is actually a real old family recipe with imperial heritage."

It's a brave thing to take on a country's tradition and modernize, but Charlie believes this could help to preserve the authenticity of the recipe while selling it to a contemporary public. "Of course I'm not Vietnamese; I'm a Kiwi who's playing around with a really old family recipe. Keeping the traditional stuff from days gone by because that's where the traditional value is, but I'm adding to it, with modern techniques, such as using stainless steel and glass whereas they would have used clay pots. But preserving tradition preserves flavor."

The techniques for preserving foods are the backbone of many cuisines, and smoking of the chilies is key to the satisfying flavor in Charlie's sauce. Smoky flavors are universally loved, they take us back to our survival instincts, food roasting on a fire meant the hunt had been successful, it meant safety and freedom from hunger.

By using the traditional techniques to the recipe, the flavor of the sauce matches up to its heritage, giving it something unique and genuine that is hard to find in mass-produced products.

"The smoking aspect is the special thing about this chili sauce. In the countryside, in the hills of Vietnam, people live in stilt houses. My first five



## RED HOT CHILI PEPPERS

years here, I spent riding my motorbike around the northern mountains, staying with people who didn't have electricity. They don't have TV, they don't have mobile phones, they didn't have refrigerators but they had a central fire."

"They would hang the food in the rafters and the smoke from the fire would preserve the food after harvest, so they didn't starve in the winter. That preservation technique is millennia old. It's very simple, it's very effective, and it gives a very very good flavor to the chili."

He learned where to find the best chilies in Vietnam and their utility. Sourcing the right chilies is vital and the three main regions of Vietnam are represented in his three sauce varieties. Charlie explains: "We have Hanoi Heat, for the north. It's not too spicy, but has lots of savory flavors with a good sprinkling of pepper, just how the French-influenced north like it. Then there is Hue Way Hot, from the central region, because food from Hue is famously spicy, not sweet like their southern cousins—the Hue flavor is the emperor's standard. Finally there is Saigon Sweet 'n' Spicy for the southerners who like the heat, but with a little bit of honey to sweeten the burn. I don't use sugar; that is too crass. Honey from the forest tempers the sourness from the vinegar."

"I use small producers in the old

imperial city of Hue for the small bird's-eye chili and for the dried, smoked heritage cayenne variety. I source large juicy capsicums from the old French colonial area farms in the highlands of Dalat. The slender fresh cayenne I get from farms all around the south and the same with the onions, garlic, carrots. The black and white pepper I get from Phu Quoc, and the other secret herbs and spices come from similar small producers."

Of course making products in this artisan fashion, and in small batches comes with challenges, and consistency is something that is hard to achieve, but not necessarily always desirable says Charlie.

"As the fruit itself is dryer or more moist its flavor profile changes so no two batches of the sauce are the same; the color, or the sweetness, or the spiciness might be different. I think it's a reassuring thing. There's no e-numbers in there or chemicals or additives keeping it exactly the same. It's relatively consistent, but it's not always the same, I don't see that as a bad thing."

Charlie is always open to improving the recipe but feels he has got to a point where he is happy with it for the time being. "It's as good as I can get it at the moment with current techniques. There was a period of exploring. I think it's still important to explore. The last two months I've been playing



IMAGE PROVIDED BY CHARLIE PAGE

with tamarind and lemongrass. A year and a half ago I was playing around with a lot of different things and then slowly it's been refined. And now there's quite a stable idea of what a north, a south, and a central chili sauce are."

There are other challenges too. Charlie is very aware of the difficulties that lie in taking on the 'big boys' of the industry; the shelf-stable mass-produced brands that are ubiquitous on restaurant and household tables alike. They have the budget, infrastructure and buying power that small producers cannot compete with. Given his past he is all too aware of the power of conglomeration and wealth.

Charlie remarks upon the explosion of popularity of Sriracha sauce four years ago, and the way it glamorized entrepreneurship. "A friend of mine sent me an article that was making fun of these big corporate execs who were abandoning their careers to go and make chili sauce which is very funny because that's exactly what I was doing."

In practical terms, the company is very much a one man show at this stage. Charlie employs an assistant but still takes a hands-on approach. "I grade chili, wash bottles, chop, stir, grind, mash, fill, seal, label, invoice, deliver all myself. I am at the absolute limit of my time and energy at the moment. I can only just do 900 bottles a month."

On the future, Charlie is optimistic about expanding throughout Asia. "I have customers in Singapore, wanting exclusive import and distribution rights, same for UAE and am quietly hopeful of a deal in the Philippines for next year. It is an eclectic mix of customers but they all have one thing in common—they love the product, they like what I am doing and their customers buy the sauce because they also love it."

I wanted to know why he chose the name Saigon Charlie's. His explanation is as simple as the name itself. "If you want people to remember your product, it's best to match the name with the product exactly. Why make things more complicated? It's made in Saigon, my name's Charlie. How simple is that!" This sums Charlie up. ■

