

The Seasonin' In Gulliver's Medicine Chest

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Anyone who reads the Tom Quest series is well acquainted with the unrivaled character of Gulliver. They will also be familiar with Gulliver's ever-present and always entertaining "medicine chest", which contains far more items of interest and usefulness than Batman's utility belt. One of the most remarkable constituents of the chest is Gulliver's collection of seasonings and spices, which its owner understatedly describes as "salt an' pepper, an' seasonin'." (*Sign of the Spiral*, p. 105) These are in compartments "one through six inclusive".

There are several episodes in the eight-volume Tom Quest series in which Gulliver prepares a meal with what he calls "authority", drawing from his selection of "seasonin'" to create that quality for his incendiary edibles. Each such episode is skillfully described, in which an incautious individual discovers the danger of consuming one of these creations.

In the first such recounting (*Sign of the Spiral*, pp. 105ff), Gulliver scoops several handfuls of frijoles into lard cans for serving.

"Beans?" asked Whiz.

Gulliver gave the reporter a slow wink. "The way I fix 'em," he said, "they'll be like nothin' yo' ever et."

And a page later, when Whiz "forks up a mouthful," we learn

It was like white-hot lava. The reporter felt his tonsils shrivel from the touch of something searing; from lips to esophagus he felt like a blast furnace; tears sprang into his eyes and rolled down his sunburned cheeks. It was as if someone had filled his mouth with molten metal...

Chewing placidly, Gulliver passed a mug of water without comment.

Whiz gulped until the mug was empty. Then he found a weak, thin voice that had little resemblance to his own. "Oh," he breathed. "Oh, my!"

Gulliver swallowed with a gulp and pointed at the beans with his fork. "That there," he boasted, "is food that's got authority."

"It's distillate of T.N.T.," gasped Whiz.

"It's seasonin' that does it," Gulliver said smugly. "I got a friend that sends me pepper powder all the way from Mexico City."

In *The Telltale Scar* (p. 66) Gulliver is able to purchase his "spices" in a store in Miami, but it is not unreasonable to assume that this is a specialty shop with privileged imports from Mexico. And in *The Clue of the Cypress Stump* (p. 15) we learn that the "friend in Mexico City" is "a half-breed gal" who has made him some "Tabasco sauce" which Gulliver describes as "the liveliest I ever et." (Never mind that Tabasco sauce is actually made in Louisiana, although using ingredients that come from Mexico. Perhaps Gulliver is merely using the term to describe generic hot sauce.)

Now we could leave it at that and simply enjoy the expertly recounted scenes in which the unwary unwittingly swig these volcanic vittles and endure the unexpected eruptions which the reader anticipates with glee. I did so for years.

But one day, I paused and pondered. What *are* these seasonings? Are they fictional? Do they really exist? If so, just what are they?

The gift of a book called *Cooking with Spices* inspired me to investigate. I learned of the Scoville Scale that measures the spicy heat of peppers. The increment of measure is the Scoville Heat Unit, which tells you the concentration of a pungent compound found in chili peppers called a capsaicin. My cookbook calls this a "highly volatile oil" and urges chefs to wear rubber gloves when handling chilies.

Gulliver fans will want to know that the "seasonin' " that Gulliver's friend sends him truly exists. What packs of pungent peppers does Paquita Perez pick? Mexico is clearly the place to go, producing over 150 kinds of chilies, more than any other nation, with an ever-growing complexity of blends and methods of cooking, drying, pasting, and powdering. So stand back, here you go.

Your standard green bell pepper has laughable 0-100 heat units. A jalapeño reaches a maximum of a sneerworthy 8,000 SHUs. A really *muy caliente* cayenne pepper can reach as high as 50,000. But an habanero can max out at 350,000 SHU. For most people, powdered cayenne pepper is the best you can do at a spice rack in the grocery store, though some specialty shops might carry some habanero. In Gulliver's time, i.e. the time of the Tom Quest series (1947-1955), the world's hottest chili was the habanero; it held that title until 1999. Surely, unless Gulliver's Mexican friend had esoteric knowledge and sources for peppers, a high quality habanero was the seasonin' in his medicine chest.

To arouse Gulliver's attention today, you will do well to get the powder of a Carolina Reaper or Dragon's Breath, which get up to 2,500,000 SHU—that is,

FIFTY TIMES as hot as the hottest cayenne, or seven times the heat of the best habanero. These peppers have been specially developed by growers; they do not occur naturally. They are so hot that they severely restrict the arteries in the brain and cause super intense headaches that last for many weeks.

But—and get this—if you *really* want to open even Gulliver’s eyes, you will want the powder of the hottest pepper in the world today, only introduced to the world of pepperistas in September 2017. It is so diabolically dreadful that its name sounds like something out of a spy novel: Pepper X. That’s as high as you can go, for Pepper X tops out at 3,200,000 Scoville Heat Units, or more than NINE TIMES the heat of the world’s most scorching habanero.

Its sauce is commercially available. But be warned. Probably even Gulliver would only try it once.