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Hot Mama's Kamikaze Challenge scalds Eugene BY DANTE ZUÑIGA-WEST

Since the dawn of time, food has led humans to pursue the extreme. The first person to look at a woolly mammoth and suggest attacking it with sticks and sharp stones in the interest of cuisine was most likely a prehistoric radical. Likewise, whoever thought up the idea of peeling and then deep-frying bull testicles was probably a bit out there. Maybe not, who knows?

And who cares? Fringe decisions plus food is far safer than poor choices plus alcohol — arguably as entertaining — and spicy foods provide the perfect platform to go all out.

The Hot Mama's Wings Kamikaze Challenge isn't a good idea for the average experimental hot-sauce amateur. It's not a good decision for people who fear commitment. For this sort of thing, you need to be an extreme-spice enthusiast. You need to temporarily disregard your stomach. You have to go upstairs in your mind or visit Mr. Pain's neighborhood, on the toilet, possibly in the fetal position. This is about spicy food, but it's also about volition.

EW intern Andrew Hitz is a man of action. A Eugenean by way of Alaska, Hitz is accustomed to extreme temperatures and a living environment where local wildlife will crash through your front yard to eat your pets. He is also (by choice) vigilantly omnivorous, unafraid of plunging into the foulest waste receptacles the city of Eugene has to offer in search of his next meal.

Hitz will eat things that you will not. Where some see poison, he sees providence. What you call derelict, he calls dinner.

One can only imagine the type of resilience Hitz's digestive system has achieved. It is no small wonder he rose to the occasion.

No one knows what originally inspired the folks at Hot Mama's to challenge the community in such piquant fashion. There are rumors that Portland's cult-esque hot wings joint Fire on the Mountain inspired Hot Mama's owner Michael Marzano to take things one step further.

Fire on the Mountain's event, known as the El Jefe Challenge!, requires a contestant to eat 15 wings in five minutes. The brave soul is not permitted to use ranch or bleu cheese dip, can use only one napkin and must sign a waiver before going through with the ordeal.

The Kamikaze Challenge at Hot Mama's Wings doesn't require a contestant to eat 15 wings, only nine. But these wings — slathered in Hot Mama's signature kamikaze sauce — must be eaten in six minutes, there can be nothing to aide in the passing of said wings, and after achieving consumption within the allotted time frame of six minutes, the contestant is not permitted to imbibe any form of liquid for another six minutes.

If you can survive that, you win a T-shirt and bragging rights. Many have tried, and many have failed; Hitz excelled.

He was prepared, mentally and physically. The kamikaze sauce was so hot it burned the nostrils when inhaled at close range, but Hitz had no fear. Surrounded by cheering supporters, he tore into the wings as the stopwatch snapped on.

Hitz's approach was one of ravenous determination, devouring wing after wing with aggression and poise. Any chicken in the room would have been utterly terrified.

For those brief and heroic moments, Hitz transcended himself. He was Jordan dunking, Tyson in his prime, Prefontaine racing down the Hayward Field track — smashing record books. Hitz didn't need six minutes. He finished the nine wings in two minutes and 48 seconds. The room fell silent.

What happened next was a show of strength. It was with sheer grit that Hitz survived the subsequent six minutes. With kefir yoghurt drink at the ready, he stared off into the carpet, attempting to go to a happy place inside. The vinegar, salt, tomato paste, butter, onion, garlic, habanero peppers, chicken and cayenne pepper that is mixed with a special extra-spicy ingredient (that Hot Mama's Wings refuses to disclose) swirled and congealed within Hitz. He was sauced, and the fiery sensation within him was threatening to take over.

Aside from breathing deeply and cursing the editor who'd facilitated this endeavor, Hitz burned in silence. Six minutes later the stopwatch snapped off. Hitz drank his kefir to the sound of applause.

It took roughly two and a half hours for Hitz's internal homeostasis to reconstitute. Approximately five hours later he phoned his editor from somewhere on 13th Avenue and demanded transportation via car, after growling that he'd discovered it difficult to bike back home, given the state of indigestion he'd found himself in. His

battle with spices of the highest order had concluded, but the standard he set continues on.

So how hot do you want it, Eugene? Do you think you have what it takes to step up to the plate? Everyone has his own personal threshold for spice, ranging from mild to volcanic. Should you need to find a testing ground for that threshold, it appears the table has been set.

"Some people quit after one wing," Marzano says of the challenge. "Some people freak out. Some people come in, eat all of them and don't have any problems with it."

"It's all based on the person and how hot they like things."

Good luck. ■



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