



# Spice Up Your Summer

Salemme Pepper can bring the heat to any dish

Written by **AMY S. WHITE** / Photographed by **WINTER CAPLENSON**

In homeopathic medicine, there is a theory called the law of similars. Very basically, it proposes that like can be cured by like. I'm not a doctor, homeopathic or otherwise, but this theory might explain why I love to eat spicy food in the summertime. In my summer kitchen, heat is an antidote for heat, and one of the most fiery yet flavorful spices I've cooked with is one grown exclusively here in Connecticut, a spicy little red number called the Salemme Pepper.

Several generations of the Salemme family grew this unique pepper species in their home gardens, first in Italy, then in Connecticut, to use in their own dishes. But thankfully, Tom Salemme and his sons Mike and David were persuaded that this family secret was too good to keep to themselves. Instead of a few plants, they grew a few dozen, drying the peppers in their home dehydrator, and gifting jars of the precious flakes to relatives and friends. Many of these grateful and enthusiastic recipients encouraged the Salemme family to market and sell their pepper to the public, and in 2006, they founded the Salemme Pepper Company – which now runs out of Milford, with Tom as the Executive Spice President.

## CHILI-MARINATED FLANK STEAK

Courtesy of Chef Lise Jaeger, Chef for Hire, LLC

Makes four to six servings

Ingredients:

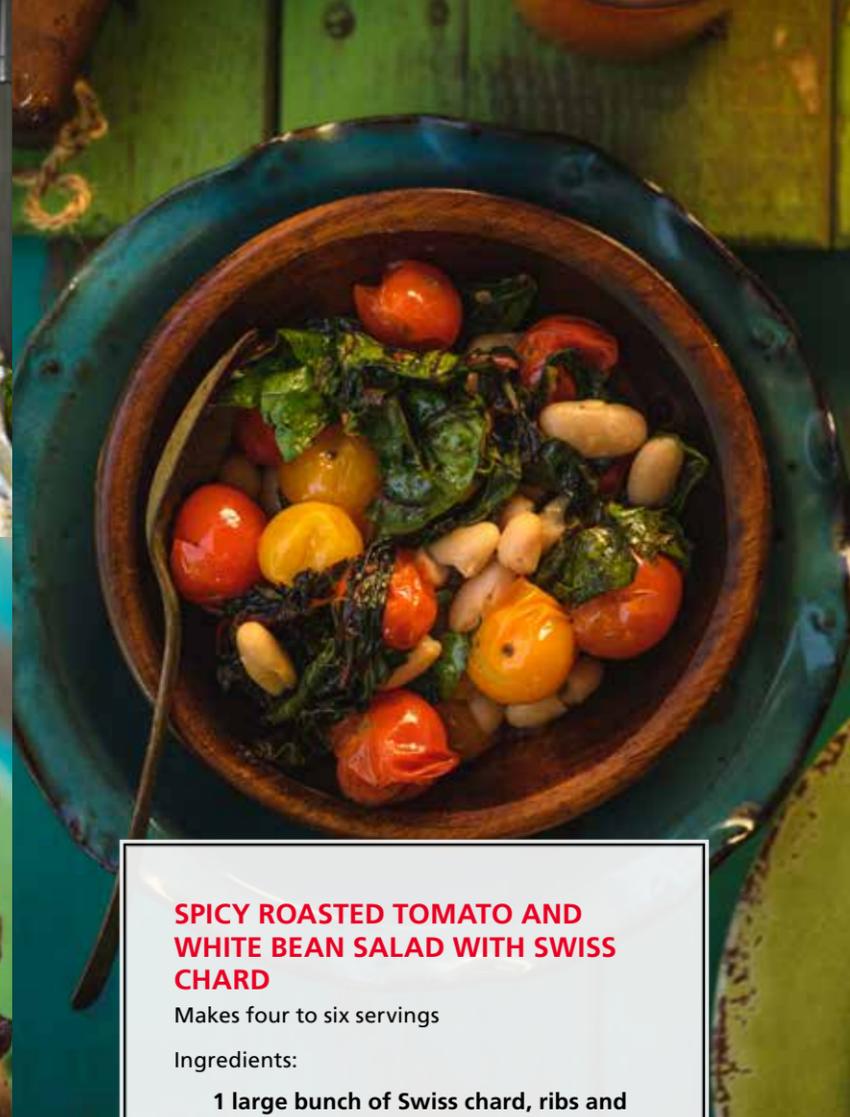
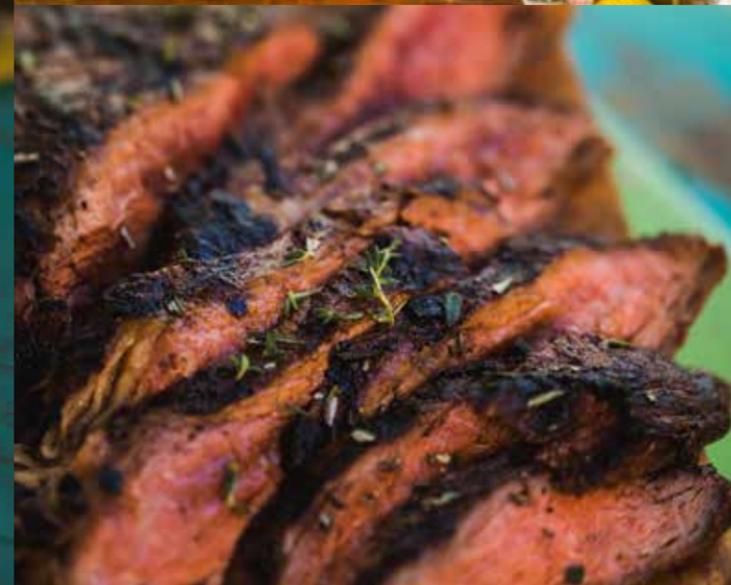
- 1 cup red wine vinegar
- 1 cup olive oil
- ½ cup chili powder
- 1/3 cup garlic powder
- 1/3 cup Hungarian sweet paprika
- 1 tsp Salemme Pepper (coarsely ground variety)
- ¼ cup brown sugar
- 1 Tbsp kosher salt
- 1 white onion, diced
- 3 bay leaves
- 3 sprigs fresh thyme
- 2 sprigs fresh rosemary
- 1-2 lbs flank steak

Preparation:

Whisk together the vinegar, olive oil, chili powder, garlic powder, paprika, Salemme Pepper, brown sugar and salt in a medium bowl; the mixture will be thick. Add in the onion, bay leaves, thyme and rosemary. Place the steak in a large glass baking dish or zip-type bag. Spread the marinade over the steak and turn or toss to coat thoroughly. Marinate for at least one hour or up to two days in the refrigerator.

Heat the grill to medium-high heat. Brush the grill rack with oil. Scrape most of the marinade from the steak and grill to desired doneness, about 5-8 minutes per side, depending on the thickness. For medium-rare, the internal temperature should be 125-130 degrees. Transfer the steak to a cutting board and allow to rest before slicing on a diagonal.

**A LOT AT STEAK:** This dish brings the beef ... and plenty of spicy flavor.



**FLAKES OF FIRE:** Salemme Peppers, grown only in Connecticut, can add a welcome heat to a wide variety of foods, from salads and meat to cookies and cocktails.

These days, the company grows as many as 50,000 plants in a partnership with Joe Arisco at T & D Growers in Cheshire. Mike describes the plants as “compact, bushy small peppers, about a half inch long – bright, bright red, and very beautiful!” He says that when the peppers are ready to be harvested in the fall, the growers rely on family and friends who volunteer to help with the work. Each pepper plant is pulled from the ground whole, hung in greenhouses to dry, then cleaned and picked by hand. The peppers are cleaned again, and then are desiccated, ground, and packed into jars that sport the Salemme Pepper Co. label. And yes, they are definitely hot, with a Scoville heat unit higher than a habanero. Mike says, “Yes, it’s about the heat, but also there’s a different flavor. It’s not what you find at your average pizza parlor.”

That heat and flavor are why fans, including myself, rave about Salemme Pepper and foodies adore it so much that the company usually sells out of its annual yield. It has shown up in popular cocktails like the Forth and Clyde at New Haven’s 116 Crown, and local products such as the Firefly, a savory shortbread cookie produced by Savor Fine Foods in Thomaston. But other than the workers at the nursery

and the volunteers during harvest season, Mike explains that whole company is made up of his father, his brother, and himself, exclaiming with a light chuckle, “And we all have day jobs!” But he adds that this labor of love gets them away from their respective computers and offices: “There’s a saying that in the spring, your hands should smell like dirt. This is how we do that.”

Mike also hints at the possibility of expansion, that perhaps there’s more in store for the Salemme Pepper Co., and soon. He says, “We are thinking up different products, growing more than we have in the past. It may be a big year for us. It’s aligning with our personal lives as well.” That’s something to look forward to, indeed.

The recipes in this article have all been inspired by Salemme Pepper, which has been the only red pepper flake to grace my kitchen since I bought my first bottle at the suggestion of the staff at the now-closed Caseus cheese shop. The first is my own summer salad that I think is great for picnics and barbecues, as it is best served at room temperature. You’ll find the pepper really converges nicely with the garden-fresh summer vegetables in that one. The second is a versatile marinade that comes courtesy of

personal chef and caterer Lise Jaeger of Chef for Hire, LLC in Middletown. I use it here to give a hot pepper kick to grilled flank steak, but it works just as well with pork loin or chicken. Finally, award-winning Connecticut mixologist Mary Quinn shares a refreshing cocktail she created especially for *Seasons Magazines*. It features the pepper contrasting beautifully with some seasonal tropical flavors. Serve all three together for a spiced-up summer supper that is sure to help you beat the heat.

Salemme Pepper can be purchased online at [salemmepepper.com](http://salemmepepper.com). The one-ounce jars come in two varieties – coarsely ground or finely ground – and cost \$8 plus shipping. 🍷

*Amy S. White is a teacher by day and wannabe chef by night. She lives to eat and loves to write about it. In summer, she spends her afternoons eyeing her neighbor’s garden, plotting what to cook next. Read more by Amy at [www.amyswhite.com](http://www.amyswhite.com).*

### SPICY ROASTED TOMATO AND WHITE BEAN SALAD WITH SWISS CHARD

Makes four to six servings

Ingredients:

- 1 large bunch of Swiss chard, ribs and stems removed, leaves torn into bite-sized pieces
- 2 cups grape or cherry tomatoes
- 2 large sprigs fresh oregano
- 2 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
- 2 Tbsp olive oil
- 1 tsp kosher salt
- ¼ tsp Salemme Pepper (coarsely ground variety)
- 1 tsp freshly ground black pepper
- 1 15-oz can cannellini beans, drained and rinsed

Preparation:

Wash and chop the Swiss chard into bite-sized pieces. Place the chard leaves, tomatoes, oregano, and garlic slices in a large baking dish. Drizzle with olive oil and season with kosher salt, Salemme Pepper and black pepper. Bake at 425 degrees for about 20 minutes, or until the tomatoes burst slightly. Add the beans and bake for five more minutes to heat them through. Allow to cool to room temperature and serve.



**MIXING IT UP:** Mary Quinn prepares a refreshing cocktail she created especially for *Seasons Magazines*.



### SALEMME ALL DAY

Created by United States Bartenders' Guild member Mary Quinn, who can currently be found behind the bar of The Cook & the Bear (West Hartford)

Makes one cocktail

Ingredients:

- 3-4 fresh basil leaves
- 1 oz Hotel California Anejo Tequila
- 1 oz Hotel California Reposado Tequila
- ¼ oz Orange Curaçao Liqueur
- ¾ oz pineapple/mango purée or juice
- ½ oz lime juice
- ¼ oz rich demerara syrup (\*see below)
- 1 pinch Salemme Pepper (coarsely ground variety)
- Sprig of basil for garnish

Preparation:

Muddle the basil leaves gently in a cocktail shaker. Fill shaker with ice and add the remaining ingredients. Shake well and serve in a glass garnished with a basil sprig.

\*To make rich demerara syrup, heat two parts demerara sugar and one part water until it becomes syrupy.

## PERFECT PAIRINGS

By SCOTT CLARK

**P**airing beverages with hot and spicy foods can be daunting, not least because of the many layers of flavors and ingredients involved. By following a few simple guidelines, we can find an array of drinks that not only work with “hot and spicy,” but actually (and more importantly) enhance both.

The prevailing flavors of this type of cuisine tend toward a combination of hot, spicy, sweet, sour, bitter and, often, an added richness from the incorporation of butter or dairy ingredients. These are the aspects to focus on when choosing a match, and not whether the dish is based on beef, chicken, fish, or vegetables.

Chilis add flavor and sweetness to dishes, in addition to heat, although capsaicin, the chemical that gives chilis their heat, is soluble in alcohol. Alcohol elevates the spicy sensation brought on by capsaicin so, if you're not careful, you'll end up feeling the burn — and just the burn. After all, when your mouth is on fire, it's difficult to taste anything else, so opt for wines and low-alcohol beer. Cocktails and summertime go together like spicy food and summertime — but cocktails and spicy food? That match-up is a bit trickier to navigate. But don't despair! There's hope yet for this pairing, whether your tittle of choice is sweet and fruity, citrusy, or bone dry.

### WINE:

The wines most suited to this spectrum of flavors are those that are medium to low in alcohol, refreshing, and have a crisp acidity. Acidity provides an enhancing contrast to both heat and richness, while also lifting the many layers of flavor in the dish. Little or no oak treatment is another rule I adhere to when choosing a white wine. Heavy oak dominates and can really dumb down the flavors.

### WHITES

Fruity, aromatic and off-dry whites are some of the best options to consider. Sweetness from the residual sugar in off-dry wines offers a contrast and balances the heat and spicy flavors. The sweetness also serves to showcase the many different flavors in the dish.

Fruity and aromatic dry whites are also excellent candidates. These wines can give the impression of sweetness that works to balance and complement heat and spice.

### REDS

For red wines, the things to watch out for are alcohol and tannin. I find that low to medium tannin wines work best, as wines with a lot of tannin can accentuate bitterness and overpower the dish. As a rule, look for reds that are fruitier and/or spicy in style and have a good level of acidity.

### BEER:

Of all the alcoholic beverage options out there, beer is probably the best at quelling the heat and quenching chili-induced thirst. For starters, beer tends to be fairly low in alcohol — five to seven percent ABV, compared to 10 to 15 percent for wine and 40 percent for spirits. Carbonation also helps remove the fiery heat of capsaicin

from the palate. But not all beers are created equal, just like not all spicy foods are created equal. The key to finding the best suds for the dish at hand is to pair like with like. When the weight and mouthfeel of a beer matches the dish it is served alongside, something fantastic happens — complementary flavors in both the food and beer are accented, making the combination far better than the sum of its parts.

### COCKTAILS:

Sweet and fruity flavors are actually spicy food's ideal mates, as the sugar mutes the burn brought on by high-proof spirits and spicy food, and adds refreshment. Cocktails don't have to be syrupy-sweet to quench the fires of spicy food: Bright citrus flavors offer similar relief. Classics like gimlets, greyhounds, and even lemon drops are perfect, thanks to lively citrus that tames the flames.

Herbal cocktails, like gin-based martinis or a Vesper, are ideal because they combine lively floral aromatics with a clean finish that preps palates for the next bite. Sake and wine-based cocktails create a similar effect, and their lower alcohol content doesn't highlight capsaicin's burn.



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