Fight Over Odor At Sriracha Plant Heats Up

The Associated Press

IRWINDALE, Calif. (AP) — It looked like things were really starting to heat up for this little Southern California factory town when the maker of the Sriracha chili sauce known the world over decided to open a sprawling 650,000-square-foot factory within its borders.

Getting the jobs and economic boost was great. Getting a whiff of the sauce being made wasn't, at least for a few Irwindale residents. So much so that the city is now suing Huy Fong Foods, seeking to shut down production at the 2-year-old plant until its operators make the smell go away.

"It's like having a plate of chili peppers shoved right in your face," said Ruby Sanchez, who lives almost directly across the street from the shiny, new $40 million plant where some 100 million pounds of peppers a year are processed into Sriracha (pronounced "sree-YAH-chah) and two other popular Asian food sauces.

As many as 40 trucks a day pull up to unload red hot chili peppers by the millions. Each plump, vine-ripened jalapeno pepper from central California then goes inside on a conveyor belt where it is washed, mixed with garlic and a few other ingredients and roasted. The pungent smell of peppers and garlic fumes is sent through a carbon-based filtration system that dissipates them

before they leave the building, but not nearly enough say residents.

"Whenever the wind blows that chili and garlic and whatever else is in it, it's very, very, very strong," Sanchez said. "It makes you cough."

Down the street, her neighbor Rafael Gomez said it not only makes him and his kids cough and sneeze, but gives them headaches, burns their throats and makes their eyes water.

If the kids and their dog are playing in the backyard, he brings them inside. If the windows are open, he closes them.

"I smelled it a half a mile away the other day when I was picking my kids up at school," he said.

The odor is only there for about three months, during the California jalapeno pepper harvest season, which stretches from August to about the end of October or first week of November.

"This is the time, as they are crushing the chilis and mixing them with the other ingredients, that the odors really come out," said City Attorney Frank Galante, adding Irwindale officials have gotten numerous complaints.

City officials met with company executives earlier this month and, although both sides say the meeting was cordial, the company balked at shelling out what it said would be $600,000 to put in a new filtration system it doesn't believe it needs. As company officials were looking into other

alternatives, said director of operations Adam Holliday, the city sued. The case goes to court on Thursday.

"We don't think it should have ever come to this," Holliday said.

In one respect, Huy Fong is a victim of its amazing success.

Company founder David Tran started cooking up his signature product in a bucket in 1980 and delivering it by van to a handful of customers. The company quickly grew and he moved it to a factory in the nearby city of Rosemead. When it outgrew that facility two years ago he came to Irwindale, bringing about 60 full-time jobs and 200 more seasonal ones to the city of about

1,400 people.

He says his privately held business took in about $85 million last year.

His recipe for Sriracha is so simple that the Vietnamese immigrant has never bothered to conceal it: chili pepper, garlic, salt, sugar and vinegar.

"You could make it yourself at home," he told a visitor during a tour of the plant on Tuesday.

But, he added with a twinkle in his eye, not nearly as well as he can.

The secret, he said, is in getting the freshest peppers possible and processing them immediately.

The result is a sauce so fiercely hot it makes Tabasco and Picante seem mild, though to those with fireproof palates and iron stomachs it is strangely addicting. Thirty-three years after Tran turned out his first bucketful, Sriracha's little plastic squeeze bottles with their distinctive green caps are ubiquitous in restaurants and home pantries around the world.

Even Galante, who is suing Huy Fong Foods, speaks highly of the sauce.

"It is a good product. The city has no issue with the product," he said. "They just want them to upgrade, as good neighbors, and not negatively affect the residents."

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