

SPOTLIGHT

Last year the world's most northerly chilli farm was in hot water. Now it's winning growing listings, packing its own products and poised to go national. **Rob Brown reports**

HOT STUFF

Think chillies, think fiery furnace? Think again. There's a lot more to this fierce little fruit than mere oral combustion. And Dan May - owner of the world's most northerly chilli farm - is on a mission to spread the word. Chillies' culinary potential goes far beyond just packing a peppery punch, he says.

All you need is a little imagination. Oh, and a powerful backer. May seems to have both. Despite going head to head with such powerful brands as Tabasco and Encona, his Trees Can't Dance range of chilli products is winning growing shelf space after the business went into liquidation and was later rescued by John Pike (of Phileas Fogg Foods fame) early in 2010. Now May is gaining ground as a food manufacturer in his own right. He's even penned a cookbook featuring his more imaginative recipes, such as chilli ice cream.

"For me chilli is all about the different flavours," says May. "In the UK we still seem to think of chilli as something that

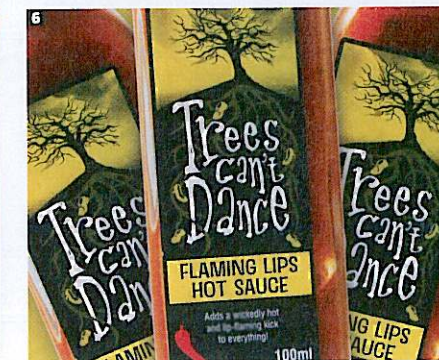
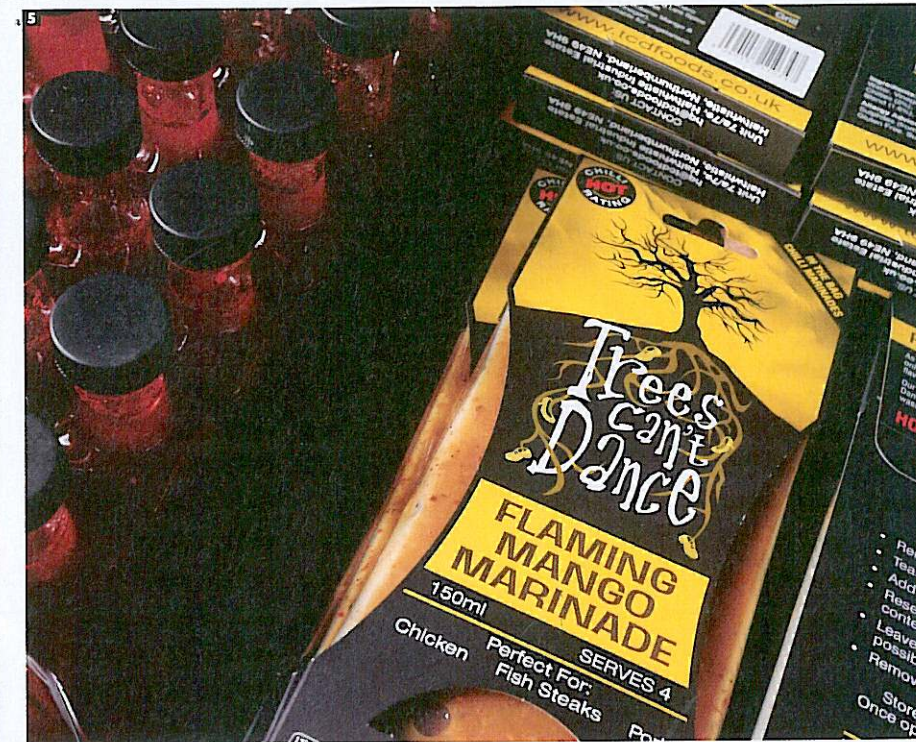
is hot, and of course it is, but there's so much more to it than that. Chillies have a whole range of qualities. Our products are intended to be more culinary."

Chillies of one sort or another are a recurring motif in May's life. In the early nineties he worked as a roadie for rock band (wait for it) the Red Hot Chilli Peppers, before developing a taste for the real thing working as a photographer in the fruit's native Central America. In 2005, after his return to the UK, May's peppery passion led him to try growing his own, in Northumberland of all places.

And so Trees Can't Dance - named after a Mexican proverb - was born. Six years on and the range (including African Hot Sauce, Plum Dipping Sauce and Flaming Mango Marinade) is available in 300 Sainsbury's and 100 Tescos across the UK, independents, and in markets as far afield as the UAE (exports now account for roughly 35% of May's business). In July, weeks after the launch of May's book, the brand's first-ever national press and online ad campaign will kick off, with one simple aim.



"We're not looking to pack cheap own-label sauces. We want people who put as much quality in their products as we do"



"We want to take Trees Can't Dance from being a relatively successful regional brand to the next stage, where people will recognise it at a national level," he says. "We'll be pushing our uniqueness. We want to be known for making high-quality, culinary chilli sauce and other products."

May has his work cut out. Pushing premium products in a decidedly chilly economic climate would be an uphill struggle for anybody, but for a company that turned over just £250,000 in 2010 and up against the giants of hot sauce, the task seems all the more challenging. Still, May is nothing if not ambitious. By the end of year he hopes to have tripled sales and doubled them again by 2013.

And he's got a few tricks up his sleeve to help him achieve this. Not only is May in talks with Asda about new listings but Trees Can't Dance sauces will shortly be going into larger bottles (220ml, up from the current size of 100ml) to encourage shoppers to view the range as a regular table sauce and win the line greater stand-out on supermarket shelves.

1. May watches over a production line at his newly opened production plant in Haltwhistle, Northumberland

2. All of May's chillies are grown under cover in the wilds of Northumberland. Despite the weather the peppers are thriving

3. Developed with the help of a £36,000 RDA grant, the Trees Can't Dance facility is "going flat out", says May

4. One of the only glass-filling facilities in the region, the plant is attracting attention from producers looking to outsource production

5. Flaming Mango Marinade is one of three marinades in the Trees Can't Dance range

6. Flaming Lips Hot Sauce, one of eight Trees Can't Dance sauces, which range from the sweet to the downright scorching

7. Where it all began: May first started selling his chilli products in farmers markets. Now he's supplying the UK's biggest retailers

Of course, May's peppers also need to turn a profit. To this end, some of the inefficiencies that led to much of the company's previous difficulties have been rectified with the investment of £90,000 in a new production plant in Haltwhistle last year (40% of the funds came from the regional development agency One North East).

"There was no one else in the region we could use for production - we were having to get the product packed into glass down in Newbury," says May. "It's the packing into glass that everyone needs. We now have two or three local suppliers looking to use our facility. But we're not looking to pack cheap own-label sauces - we want people who take as much care and put as much quality into their products as we do." He is also in the process of getting BRC accreditation as a third-party manufacturer. Tesco has already visited the site and given it its seal of approval, adds May, giving him further cause for optimism.

So, maybe trees can't dance, but it looks like they are going to shake things up a bit.