

When we moved into our temporary home in 2021, it took me a while to wrestle the new space into usefulness. We'd come from a very large home, with an expansive kitchen that included a walk-in pantry, multiple drawers to hold all my kitchen goods, and even a couple of spare floor to ceiling cupboards for overflow.

Our temporary home has exactly 6 drawers, 7 cupboards, and one small pantry that's located around the corner from the kitchen. Now, this isn't a complaint Dear Reader, please know that. I am very grateful for the home we abide in, it's locations and the quietness of our neighborhood. I love that I am a quick stroll to the walk track, that I can see foxes, squirrels, deer, and coyotes if I'm observant enough.

Still, there's a sense of wrapping your head around how to make things fit into smaller spaces. And so began the long tedious job of settling in and making what we had work. It all came together rather quickly, save for the pantry. It suddenly became the dumping grounds of anything people had no clue where else to put it.

One needed to open the door with great caution, for you never knew if a loaf of bread would hit you in the face. Or perhaps a toaster. And that was only if the last visitor to the pantry actually had the foresight to close the door. Often they did not. Which resulted in onions, potatoes, and water bottles scattered across the floor.

I reached a point where I decided I was going to rope that pantry into usefulness or have lost a gallant fight in trying. So, I did the only thing I could think of and I made my way into town to select buckets, baskets, lazy susans, and anything else I thought just might be helpful in my attempt to fix the problem. And one of those new fangled label maker machines. I do believe they are meant for far more than labels: stickers, t-shirt adornments, and so on. But, for my purposes it became a rather expensive label maker.

Then, I spent the next 48 hours rearranging, labeling, and coersing the pantry into submission. Living in a small home meant that there was precious little space to do anything else. Pantry contents had to be shifted off the counters to make dinner, and then off the table to eat the dinner. Then again out of the way of the door so we could actually get out of the house.

Yet, when all was accomplished there was a perfectly organized and labeled pantry, and the threat that, “If you don’t put things where they belong I will find the most horrible chore in all the world to assign to you. Forever.” (Which, in my book, is dusting, but never mind that idle threat.) The fact that things were labeled meant that people actually knew where to return items, and life carried on with few hiccups.

Until I realized that one of the spice mixes I was purchasing contained an allergen. Life with food allergies is always a precarious balance, often buttered with frustration. One must constantly read food labels because companies change recipes or change suppliers making their items no longer safe.

All of this resulted in a mad scramble to find safe spices. Which led to a bulk order of cayenne pepper. Now, I’m not going to lie here, I have no idea why anyone in their right mind needs a whole pound of this stuff. Especially in our home where I rarely use it because one of my sons has a very, very low tolerance to anything hot. Yet, there it was, so I did the only logical thing I could think of. I grabbed an empty canning jar, poured it inside, put the lid on, and instructed someone to put it into the spice basket in the pantry.

Then two terrible things happened. First came the terrible week of migraines I endured which meant that I couldn’t think straight. I wasn’t permitted to use glass cups lest I should drop them and cut myself, and I made strange statements as I struggled to get the words out of my mouth in the right order. Or, worse yet, I thought I said things that I’d only imagined I’d said.

Secondly, someone didn’t put the cayenne away after mixing up a fresh batch of chili powder. And upon seeing a reddish spice on the shelf where it did not belong, and not being able to think or see clearly I never thought to check what it was. I simply picked it up, tossed it into the fiesta box and closed the pantry door.

A week later, I’d lost track of time sitting up here in my little writing nook. The only thing bringing me back to reality was the fact that it was pitch-black outside. The children from across the street had long since disappeared into their homes, and the street lights were on. Which is when I realized dinner should have long since been on the table, or at the very least

bubbling away on the stove.

In a mad scramble I flew down the stairs and instructed my youngest to begin making tacos. The eldest was to cook the quinoa, and I was going to make a mad dash to the grocery for vegetables to top this odd Mexican dish, which has precious little to do with Mexico, before their cooking was over.

Being slightly migranal still, my husband offered to join me. Suggesting I could stay in the car and listen to my audio book while he did the shopping. This saved me the effort of putting on proper footwear, and changing out of the ragged sweater I was wearing, so I readily agreed, and off we went.

I answered the texts and video chats dutifully while my husband hunted down lettuce that everyone would eat. I told him that the lentils are often on the top shelf and for some bizarre reason, their labels are always turned away from the customer so just hope for the best. And, yes it was perfectly fine to get a desert, and no it didn't have to be safe for everyone.

Once home again, I noticed an odd smell seeping through the door into the garage, "Does something smell weird to you?" I asked. My husband often calls me the "super sniffer" because I'm hypersensitive to every scent known to mankind. I've been known to wake up complaining that I can smell the neighbors foul laundry soap. (Apologies to my neighbors who think it smells delightful. I just struggle with scents.)

As for that particular pesky smell, my husband said he smelled nothing other than dinner cooking, and in we trotted with the groceries. Yet, the smell inside was decidedly not the scent of taco meat, it was familiar, but I couldn't place it with my migraine fog.

"Mom, do you think the meat is bad?" my youngest asked. He has a thing about food being off. It's not that I've ever fed him spoiled food before, or even slightly spoiled food before. It's more the weird black pepper allergy he has, that took us years to figure out. It caused a lot of ugly nights where he couldn't keep his food down. So, anything that might possibly cause him to feel ill is immediately questioned.

"No, I don't think so," I answered, throwing lettuce at his brother.

I got *the look*. The one that says, "you may be my mother, but is this one of those moments where you're trying to fool me into eating spinach?" Not that I have ever fooled my kids into eating spinach, considering I won't eat the vegetable either unless it's 100% raw and ripped up in my salad, blended in my smoothies, or chopped in my slushies.

"Fine," I said in exasperation, "I'll prove it." I slid across the small span of space to the stove, picked up a spoonful of the offending smelling taco meat and thrust it into my mouth. It no sooner hit my tongue than I knew exactly what that smell permeating my home was, cayenne!

My hands began waving wildly in the air as I spat the meat out. I took the two steps to the sink, shoved the gawking child out of my way, and let the more meat tumble down the drain. I flicked the faucet on and began trying to spray cold water into my mouth, but it tasted like dirt. I ran for the fridge and grabbed ice cubes to suck on.

All the while three wide eyed people were staring at me, one tapping his foot with *the look* still firmly on his face, "I knew it," he said, "It's bad."

"Hot," was all I could gasp before rushing for a pot of dairy free yogurt, "so hot!" Half a tub of yogurt later, drowned by half a glass of ice water, and I could finally speak, "You used the wrong spice," I hissed, choking on the heat in my throat, "that was cayenne, not chili powder! I need more ice chips."

There we all stood, in the middle of a very tiny kitchen, my mouth on fire, my migraine suddenly gone. My husband asking how he could help. One child continuing with *the look*. The other trying to permanently erase the image of his mother spitting food out of her mouth from his mind.

And then the child with *the look* said, "Well, if you'd just label these jars this would have **never** happened!"

Yes, the most unorganized person in our home suggested I label jars. The same person who actually said I was getting carried away when I started labeling everything I could. The same person who did not put the jar of burning hot cayenne pepper in its proper place.

“Yes, well...” were the only words my mouth seemed to form, “tomorrow. Tonight I have to go get more meat to fix this whole crazy mess. But first, give me some more ice chips!”



The jar of terrifyingly hot pepper is still unlabeled. I know, I can see your face as you read that statement. Yet, it's true, the jar is still unlabeled. It is, however, up in the box it belongs in. The large jar of homemade taco spice mix is now appropriately labeled.

This isn't the first time I've had such an accident with cayenne either. Many years ago when my soon to be in-laws arrived in the US we were all gathered at my parents small farm house. My father-in-law intent to learn the rules of baseball, my mother-in-law happy to help in the kitchen. I'd made a pot of soup. Spicy Potato Soup to be exact. Only, there'd been a slight accident with the cayenne pepper. The kind where the lid fell off while I was measuring out it's contents— over the pot of soup.

My father-in-law, much like my eldest son, can't handle heat well. So it was nixed for him and if memory serves correctly eggs and toast were provided along with many answers to the rules of the baseball game he was intently watching.

My mother-in-law, however, dug into that pot of soup with as much vigor as my husband did. They were both sweating and quite red in the face but assured me it was very delicious despite the extensive heat.

For many years afterwards my mother-in-law would rank spicy food on a scale of “Dad can eat it vs That Potato Soup Incident”. As for my husband, he's been asking for that soup for months now, preferably as spicy as it was that day.

Perhaps I should go make him a pot.

The Reluctant Author.