

Claudia Lee

### From a Classic Cheetos Fan to a Flamin' Hot Cheetos Fanatic

Right as the clock struck 3:30 PM, my friends and I exchanged reassuring glances. We were following through with the plan.

“Did you bring your money?” Fatimah asked as our group gathered outside of the 6B classroom. I pulled out a crumpled five-dollar bill from my pocket. “Good. What time is your mom coming to pick you up?”

“4:30 I think. Maybe 4:15 at the earliest,” I replied. I made sure to prepare, I didn’t want to ruin my first “outing” with the group. I would no longer be the goody-goody everyone thought I was.

We calmly walked past the hordes of silent students sitting in the cafeteria, heads down, eyes glued to their homework. Teachers stalked the walkways, readily available to help a struggling student or give a detention to a noisy one. After we made it through the front doors of our school, we walked to our final destination. It was my first time walking through the urine-smelling, hobo-filled streets of Downtown Oakland without my parents, yet everyone around me seemed so nonchalant. Finally, we made it: L & A Lakeside Market. I gave Fatimah my five dollars because I was too scared to go in. I told her to get extra since I was unsure of the next time I could “sneak out.” She returned after a few minutes, handing me two bags of Flamin’ Hot Cheetos. I hid one in my backpack and immediately opened the other.

No matter how many times I’ve eaten Hot Cheetos, the distinct fried and artificial “real cheese” smell makes me hungry. It smells like sixth grade. The nostalgic crackle of the plastic bag and excitement that surges are the same each time. I’ve eaten hundreds of bags of Hot

Cheetos. That day in sixth grade, I snuck out of study hall (which I always went to) and walked two blocks to buy chips from a liquor store. I became captivated by the bright red, spicy, powdery corn chip. Afterward, I frequently returned to the liquor store with my friends. Eventually, I worked up the courage to buy the Hot Cheetos myself. Sometimes after buying Hot Cheetos, we'd go to the teen section in the library (eleven-year olds in the teen zone?!) and read manga until I had to sneak back into study hall. I had joined the Flamin' Hot Cheetos "cultural phenomenon."<sup>1</sup>

Flamin' Hot Cheetos are one of the most popular snacks of our generation. Of the 192 people who participated in my Instagram poll, 100% were familiar with Flamin' Hot Cheetos and 80% had tried them before. "I had some for breakfast," one of my old classmates noted. "They're literally the best food in existence," another stated. Of the 135 people who participated in another poll, 15% would buy Hot Cheeto merchandise. Luckily, there are plenty of hoodies, bodysuits, shoes, and jewelry to go around for everyone. Last summer, Forever 21 debuted Cheetos x Forever. A few weeks ago, one of my classmates wore a retro black sweatshirt with the famous Cheetos logo surrounded by the trademark red, orange, and yellow flames. We loved her shirt. I told her it made me crave Flamin' Hot Cheetos and I'd probably go to Grill after class to get some. Forever 21 even has a 21% discount on their XX Flamin' Hot Lip Gloss Kit and Flamin' Hot Highlighter and Bronzer. When I scrolled through the online catalog, I jumped up and down at the sight of an additional 30% discount using "PREZ" (for President's Day). **I need this.** My boyfriend was dumbfounded: "I'm not kissing you if you put it on. The idea of that

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<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2018/02/23/the-flamin-hot-cheetos-movie-how-a-frito-lay-janitor-created-one-of-americas-most-popular-snacks/>

sounds abhorrent.” In 2014, superstar singer Katy Perry dressed as a Hot Cheeto for Halloween. Perhaps she used some of the XX Flamin’ Hot Lip Gloss to create such a fiery, intense look.

I discovered a hidden gem a few days ago: “Hot Cheetos and Takis” by Y.N.Rich Kids. As a true Hot Cheetos fanatic, it was only a matter of time until I found the sensational up-and-coming music group consisting of eight members of the ages 10-13. It’s the kind of song that gathers millions of views--17 million, to be exact-- for being catchy, ridiculous, cringy, or a mixture of the three. You’re sure it’s meant to be a parody but the singers take it so seriously that you question if laughing at them constitutes bullying. Similar songs are “Chinese Food” by Alison Gold and “Friday” by Rebecca Black. I excitedly showed my basketball teammates during dinnertime, expecting them to emulate my enthusiasm. Fortunately, I at least got one of the captains, Eva, to love the “cringiness”<sup>2</sup> of the song just as much as I do. I added it to our warm-up playlist. Some people on the team weren’t happy; most were embarrassed, but at least there were two who were enjoying themselves.

While many still aren’t Hot Cheeto aficionados, the wave is gaining followers by the day. Those who share a mutual love of Flamin’ Hot Cheetos carry a special bond. It fosters and strengthens friendships. Sharing Hot Cheetos with friends is the ultimate form of selflessness. Admittedly, I only offer Hot Cheetos to people I know who would decline. Red powdered fingers are the trademark of the cool kids. As Y.N.Rich Kids hollers, “I can’t get enough of them Hot Cheetos and Takis. Got my fingers stained red and I can’t get ‘em off me. You can catch me & my crew eating Hot Cheetos and Takis.”

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<sup>2</sup> This is not a real word.

What makes Hot Cheetos so enticing? Perhaps it's the surge of intense saltiness that immediately causes your mouth to water, making it much easier to nurse the chili powder off of the chip. Once you start munching on the fried chip, the corn adds a faint sweetness as the amylase in your mouth breaks down the complex carbohydrates into simple sugars. After swallowing the chip, the remnants are still loud and clear. Now, it's the chili's time to shine. At first, you feel slight tingles on your tongue. Then, the afterburn intensifies and you're faced with two options: grab ice-cold water to soothe the burn (which would make you seem weak) or grab another chip so the initial saltiness will distract you from the pre-existing pain. You choose the latter and you're now locked into a cycle of grabbing one chip after another. The more you eat, the less you feel, the less you taste. But you can't help it. You can't get enough of them. The perfect combination of salt, fat, acid, and spice makes each Cheeto more alluring than the last. The salt draws you in and intensifies the waves of flavor following it. The fat is essential in the frying process-- it allows the Cheeto to have that addictive snap and changing flavor profile with each bite. Those 38.5 grams of fat aren't good for nothing.<sup>3</sup> The acid and spice work in tandem to create a complex mouthfeel. The slight acidic afternotes balance the dominating salt and create the pathway for the spice to kick in. Its power forces the cycle to continue until you're left with an empty bag and a craving for more.

As addictive as Cheetos are, I still need to take breaks now and then. Sometimes the acidity and spice will damage my taste buds and my tongue stings when I eat anything else acidic. I used to eat Hot Cheetos almost every weekday, no matter if I had basketball practice, tryouts, or a game. Most of the time, my chest would burn when I ran. Other times, the 595

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<sup>3</sup> From a 3.25 oz bag

calories provided from a 3.25-ounce bag would last long enough for me to get through the warm-up. Shortly after, the 875 milligrams of sodium would start to make my throat dry, taking in enough gulps of water to feel it bouncing and flipping in my stomach as I proceeded exercising. Now, I only occasionally eat Flamin' Hot Cheetos as a pre-game meal and frequently eat them as a pre-workout meal. On Monday, February 17, 2020, I ate Flamin' Hot Cheetos as a pre-practice meal. I was slower and more fatigued than usual and looked drained. Some of my teammates asked if I was okay since I constantly snuck to the back of the lines in drills, avoiding exercise as much as possible.

On December 28, 2018, popular rapper Lil Xan was hospitalized after eating “too many Flamin' Hot Cheetos.” In BuzzFeed’s “People Learn Surprising Flamin' Hot Cheetos Facts While Eating Them,” Holly recalled, “I’d definitely get stomach ulcers eating them and I’d get random rushes of pain and I’m pretty sure it’s from Hot Cheetos... I’m still gonna eat them.” From January 3rd to January 5th, 2020, I had three straight days of fiery red diarrhea. The cause? A 5.5-oz bag of Flamin' Hot Cheetos Limon that I rationed because I couldn’t handle all the spice at once. (Clearly, one particular Hot Cheetos fan doesn’t know what “too much” means.) A few hours later, the burning pain in my-- you know-- and stomach cramps subsided and I was back again licking the fluorescent red powder off my thumb and index finger. As the saying goes, “I’m here for a good time, not a long time.”

Flamin' Hot Cheetos marks the age of confidence, rebellion, and independence. The pre-Hot Cheetos Claudia was a girl who only ate familiar snacks (Classic Cheetos) and only did things within her comfort zone. She’d stay after school every day doing homework in a silent study hall, waiting for her parents to pick her up. She was bland. Post-Hot Cheetos Claudia

adapted to what she ate: dynamic, bold, complex, and spicy. She plays whatever songs she wants during her team warm-ups and isn't afraid to sneak out of study hall to hang out with her friends. Throughout the years of her Cheetos journey, the same undertones of freedom carry on. Despite the physical toll it takes to eat Hot Cheetos pre-workout and (at times) daily, the feeling of freedom overrides the pain. If you really love something you need to make sacrifices for it. After all, Hot Cheetos aren't just a snack. They're a way of life.