

Chili History, Legends and Recipes

The only thing certain about the origins of chili is that it did not originate in Mexico.

Charles Ramsdell, a writer from San Antonio in an article called San Antonio: An Historical and Pictorial Guide, wrote:

“Chili, as we know it in the U.S., cannot be found in Mexico today except in a few spots which cater to tourists. If chili had come from Mexico, it would still be there. For Mexicans, especially those of Native ancestry, do not change their culinary customs from one generation, or even from one century, to another.”

If there is any doubt about what the Mexicans think about chili, the Diccionario de Mejicanismos, published in 1959, defines chili con carne as (roughly translated):

“detestable food passing itself off as Mexican, sold in the U.S. from Texas to New York.”



17th Century:

Chili History, Legends and Myths:

Where does a legend begin and how does it become part of history? You be the judge!

There are many legends and stories about where chili originated and it is generally thought, by most historians, that the earliest versions of chili were made by the very poorest people. J. C. Clopper, the first American known to have remarked about San Antonio's chili carne, wrote in 1926:

“When they have to pay for their meat in the market, a very little is made to suffice for a family; this is generally into a kind of hash with nearly as many peppers as there are pieces of meat – this is all stewed together.”

According to an old Southwestern Native American legend and tale (several modern writers have documented – or maybe just passed along) it is said that the first recipe for chili con carne was put on paper in the 17th century by a beautiful nun, Sister Mary of Agreda of Spain. She was mysteriously known to the Natives of the Southwest United States as “La Dama de Azul,” the lady in blue. Sister Mary would go into trances with her body lifeless for days. When she awoke from these trances, she said her spirit had been to a faraway land where she preached Christianity counseled others to seek out Spanish missionaries.

It is certain that Sister Mary never physically left Spain, yet Spanish missionaries and King Philip IV of Spain believed that she was the ghostly “La Dama de Azul” or “lady in blue” of Native American Legend. It is said that sister Mary wrote down the recipe for chili which called for venison or antelope meat, onions, tomatoes, and chile peppers. No accounts of this were ever recorded, so who knows?

18th Century

1731 – On March 9, 1731, a group of sixteen families (56 persons) arrived from the Canary Islands at Bexar, the villa of San Fernando de Bar (now known as the city of San Antonio). They had emigrated to Texas from the Spanish Canary Islands by order of King Philip V. of Spain. The King of Spain felt that colonization would help cement Spanish claims to the region and block France's westward expansion from Louisiana.

These families founded San Antonio's first civil government which became the first municipality in the Spanish province of Texas. According to historians, the women made a spicy “Spanish” stew that is similar to chili.

19th Century

Some Spanish priests were said to be wary of the passion inspired by chile peppers, assuming they were aphrodisiacs. A few preached sermons against indulgence in a food which they said was almost as “hot as hell's brimstone” and “Soup of the Devil.” The priest's warning probably contributed to the dish's popularity.

1850 – Records were found by Everrette DeGolyer (1886-1956), a Dallas millionaire and a lover of chili, indicating that the first chili mix was concocted around 1850 by Texan adventurers and cowboys as a staple for hard times when traveling to and in the California gold fields and around Texas.

Needing hot grub, the trail cooks came up with a sort of stew. They pounded dried beef, fat, pepper, salt, and the chile peppers together into stackable rectangles which could be easily rehydrated with boiling water. This amounted to “brick chili” or “chili bricks” that could be boiled in pots along the

trail. DeGolyer said that chili should be called “chili a la Americano” because the term chili is generic in Mexico and simply means a hot pepper. He believed that chili con carne began as the “pemmican of the Southwest.”

It is said that some trail cooks planted pepper seeds, oregano, and onions in mesquite patches (to protect them from foraging cattle) to use on future trail drives. It is thought that the chile peppers used in the earliest dishes were probably chilipiquo, which grow wild on bushes in Texas, particularly the southern part of the state.

There was another group of Texans known as “Lavanderas,” or “Washerwoman,” that followed around the 19th-century armies of Texas making a stew of goat meat or venison, wild marjoram, and chile peppers.

1860 – Residents of the Texas prisons in the mid to late 1800s also lay claim to the creation of chili. They say that the Texas version of bread and water (or gruel) was a stew of the cheapest available ingredients (tough beef that was hacked fine and chiles and spices that was boiled in water to an edible consistency). The “prisoner’s plight” became a status symbol of the Texas prisons and the inmates used to rate jails on the quality of their chili. The Texas prison system made such good chili that freed inmates often wrote for the recipe, saying what they missed most after leaving was a really good bowl of chili.

1881 – William Gerard Tobin (1833-1884), former Texas Ranger, hotel proprietor, and an advocate of Texas-type Mexican food, negotiated with the United States government to sell canned chili to the army and navy. In 1884, he organized a venture with the Range Canning Company at Fort McKavett, Texas to make chili from goat meat. Tobin’s death, a few days after the canning operation had started, ended further development and the venture failed.

1893 – The Texas chili went national when Texas set up a San Antonio Chili Stand at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago.

1895 – Lyman T. Davis of Corsicana, Texas made chili that he sold from the back of a wagon for five cents a bowl with all the crackers you wanted. He later opened a meat market where he sold his chili in brick form, using the brand name of Lyman’s Famous Home Made Chili. In 1921, he started to can chili in the back of his market and named it after his pet wolf, Kaiser Bill and called it Wolf Brand Chili (a picture of the wolf is still used on the label today).

In 1924, Davis quit the chili business when his ranch was found to have lots of oil. He sold his operations to J. C. West and Fred Slauson, two Corsicana businessmen. To draw attention to the Wolf Brand Chili, the new owners had Model T Ford trucks with cabs shaped like chili cans and painted to resemble the Wolf Brand label. A live wolf was caged in the back of each truck. Today the company is owned by Stokley-Van Camp in Dallas, Texas.

Chili Queens:

1880s – San Antonio was a wide-open town (a cattle town, a railroad town, and an army town) and by day a municipal food market and by night a wild and open place. An authoritative early account is provided in an article published in the July 1927 issue of Frontier Times. In this article, Frank H. Bushick, San Antonio Commissioner of Taxation, reminisces about the Chili Queens and their origin at Military Plaza before they were moved to Market Square in 1887. According to Bushick:

“The chili stand and chili queens are peculiarities, or unique institutions, of the Alamo City. They started away back there when the Spanish army camped on the plaza. They were started to feed the soldiers. Every class of people in every station of life patronized them in the old days. Some were attracted by the novelty of it, some by the cheapness. A big plate of chili and beans, with a tortilla on the side, cost a dime. A Mexican bootblack and a silk-hatted tourist would line up and eat side by side, [each] unconscious or oblivious of the other.”

Latino women nicknamed “Chili Queens” sold stew they called “chili” made with dried red chiles and beef from open-air stalls at the Military Plaza Mercado. They made their chili at home, loaded it onto colorful chili wagons, and transported the wagons and chili to the plaza. They build mesquite fires on the square to keep the chili warm, lighted their wagons with colored lanterns, and squatted on the ground beside the cart, dishing out chili to customers who sat on wooden stools to eat their fiery stew.

In those days, the word “chili” referred strictly to the pepper. They served a variation of simple, chile-spiked dishes (tamales, tortillas, chili con carne, and enchiladas). A night was not considered complete without a visit to one of these “chili queens.”

1937 – In 1937 they were put out of business due to their inability to conform to sanitary standards enforced in the town’s restaurants (public officials objected to flies and poorly washed dishes). Unable to provide facilities, they disappeared overnight. The following is reprinted from the San Antonio Light of September 12, 1937:

Recent action of the city health department in ordering removal from Haymarket square of the chili queens and their stands brought an end to a 200-year-old tradition. The chili queens made their first appearance a couple of centuries back after a group of Spanish soldiers camped on what is now the city hall site and gave the place the name, Military Plaza. At one time the chili queens had stands on Military, Haymarket and Alamo plazas but years ago the city confined them to Haymarket plaza. According to Tax Commissioner Frank Bushick, a contemporary and a historian of those times, the greatest of all the queens was no Mexican but an American named Sadie.

Another famous queen was a senorita named Martha who later went on the stage. Writing men like Stephen Crane and O. Henry were impressed enough to immortalize the queens in their writings. With the disappearance from the plaza of the chili stands, the troubadours who roamed the plaza for years also have disappeared into the night. Some of the chili queens have simply gone out of business.

Others, like Mrs. Eufemia Lopez and her daughters, Juanita and Esperanza Garcia, have opened indoor cafes elsewhere. But henceforth the San Antonio visitor must forego his dining on chili al fresco.

They were restored by Mayor Maury Maverick in 1939, but their stands were closed again shortly after the start of World War II.

1980s – During the 1980s, San Antonio began staging what they call “historic re-enactments” of the chili queens. As an tribute to chili, the state dish, the city of San Antonio holds an annual “Return of

the Chili Queens Festival” in Market Square during the Memorial Day celebrations in May, sponsored by the El Mercado Merchants.

Chili Powder:

Chili historians are not exactly certain who first “invented” chili powder. It is agreed that the inventors of chili powder deserve a slot in history close to Alfred Nobel (1833-1896), inventor of dynamite.

DeWitt Clinton Pendery:

1890s – The Fort Worth chili buffs give credit to DeWitt Clinton Pendery. Pendery arrived in Fort Worth, Texas in 1870. It is said that local cowboys jeered his elegant appearance (he was wearing a long frock coat and a tall silk hat) as he stepped onto the dusty street. It is also said that he was initiated into the town by a bullet whipping through his coat. He casually collected his belongings and continued on his way, earning immediate popular respect.

By 1890, after his grocery store burned down, he started selling his own unique blend of chiles to cafes, hotels, and citizens under the name of Mexican Chili Supply Company. Pendery’s products are still sold today by members of his family . Pendery wrote of the medicinal benefits of his condiments and its acclamation from physicians: selling his own brand of “Chiltomaline” powder to cafes and hotels in the early 1890s

“The health giving properties of hot chile peppers have no equal. They give tone to the alimentary canal regulating the functions, giving a natural appetite and promoting health by action of the kidneys, skin and lymphatics.”

William Gebhardt:

1894 – San Antonio buffs swear that chili powder was invented by William Gebhardt, a German immigrant in New Braunfels, Texas (near the town of San Antonio). Gebhardt ran the Phoenix Cafe, attached to his buddy’s saloon, now called the Phoenix Saloon.

According to the The New Braunfels Herald-Zeitung newspaper article (Phoenix Saloon Back in Business), February 19, 2010:

The Phoenix Saloon was reputedly the first bar in Texas to serve women, though not wanting to taint their reputation; female patrons would sit in the beer garden and ring a bell for service. . . There was a deer pen, an alligator pit and ring for fighting badgers at the original Phoenix Saloon. There was even a parrot sitting on a perch by the front door that was taught to say, “Have you paid your bill?” in German. . . A multitude of proprietors ran the saloon until Prohibition forced it to close on June 26, 1918.

During this era, chile peppers were only available after the summer harvest, as chili was only a seasonal food. Gebhardt solved the problem of availability by importing Mexican ancho chiles from farmers in far-off San Luis Potosi, a Mexican town more than 500 miles to the south, so that he could serve chili year-round. His orders for chile peppers were always large because he had to stock up on a full year’s supply and then figure out how to store thousands of chile pods.

William Gebhardt spend years perfecting the spices for the chili he served in his cafe. At first, Gebhardt ran the chile peppers through a home meat grinder three times. Later, according to a description of the time, Gebhardt “concocted a chili powder in a crude mill by grinding chile peppers, cumin seed, oregano, and black pepper through an old hammer mill, feeding a little of this and a little of that to the mill.” What came out was put in little-necked bottles and then packed in a box for retail trade.”

At first he called his chili powder “Tampico Dust”. In 1896, he changed the name to Gebhardt’s Eagle Brand Chili Powder. In 1896, William Gebhardt opened a factory in San Antonio and was producing five cases of chili powder a week, which he sold from the back of his wagon as he drove through town. He was also an inventor, and eventually patented thirty-seven machines for his factory. By 1899, Gebhardt had trademarked his Eagle Chili Powder.

In 1923, Gebhardt produced a small 32-page cookery pamphlet on Mexican-American cookery called Mexican Cookery for American Homes. This pamphlet was so successful that new editions of it were regularly published through the 1950s. In addition to recipes, the booklet proposed sample menus that included Gebhardt products into otherwise mainstream meals.

In 1960, the company was acquired by Beatrice Foods (now owned by ConAgra Food, Inc.) and is now known as Gebhardt Mexican Foods Company. The blend today is unchanged and is still one of the most popular brands used.

20th Century

Chili Joints:

Around the turn of the century, chili joints appeared in Texas. By the 1920s, they were familiar all over the West, and by the depression years, there was hardly a town that didn’t have a chili parlor. The chili joints were usually no more than a shed or a room with a counter and some stools. Usually a blanket was hung up to separate the kitchen.

By the depression years, the chili joints meant the difference between starvation and staying alive.

Chili was cheap and crackers were free. At the time, chili was said to have saved more people from starvation than the Red Cross. The Dictionary of American Regional English describes chili joints as: “A small cheap restaurant, particularly one that served poor quality food.”

Cincinnati Chili:



Cincinnati style chili is quite different from its more familiar Texas cousin. It is unique to the Cincinnati area.

1922 – The Cincinnati Style Chili was created in 1922 by a Macedonian immigrant, Tom (Athanas) Kiradjieff. He settled in Cincinnati with his brother, John, and opened a hot dog stand with Greek food called the Empress, only to do a lousy business because nobody there at the time knew anything about Greek food. So, it is said, that they called their spaghetti chili.

He created a chili made with Middle Eastern spices which could be served a variety of ways. His “five-way” was a concoction of a mound of spaghetti topped with chili, then with chopped onion, then red kidney beans, then shredded yellow cheese, and served with oyster crackers and a side order of hot dogs topped with shredded cheese. Check out my recipes for Cincinnati-Style Chili 1 and Cincinnati Chili 2.

Springfield Style Chili:

People of Springfield, Illinois take their chili very seriously. They even spell it differently than the rest of the United States. This peculiar spelling of “chilli” in Springfield originated with the founder of the Dew Chilli Parlor.

1909 – Legend has it that the Dew’s owner, Dew Brockman, quibbled with his sign painter over the spelling and won after noting that the dictionary spelled it both ways. Other folks believe the spelling matches the first four letters in Illinois.

At one time, there were more than a dozen chilli parlors and even more taverns and local cooks who served this version of chili.

1993 – Illinois State Senator Karen Harasa introduced Senate Joint Resolution No. 89 in the Illinois General Assembly. This resolution, which was passed unanimously by both houses of the Legislature, proclaimed Illinois as the “Chilli Capital of the Civilized World” and recognized that the spelling is C-H-I-L-L-I. The Governor was further “authorized and requested to issue a proclamation calling upon the people of Illinois to commemorate this designation with appropriate celebrations.” Naturally this outrages Texans!

Chasen’s Chili:

Chasen’s Restaurant in Hollywood, California probably made the most famous chili. The owner of the restaurant, Dave Chasen (1899-1973), ex-vaudeville performer, kept the recipe a secret, entrusting it to no one.

1936 to 2000 – For years, he came to the restaurant every Sunday to privately cook up a batch, which he would freeze for the week, believing that the chili was best when reheated. “It is a kind of bastard chili” was all that Dave Chasen would divulge.

Chauffeurs and studio people, actors and actresses would come to the back door of Chasen’s to buy and pick up the chili by the quart. Other famous people craved this chili such as comedian and actor Jack Benny (1894-1974) who ordered it by the quart. J. Edgar Hoover (1895-1972), former Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), who considered it the best chili in the world, and Eleanor

Roosevelt (1894-1962) wife of the 32nd President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt, sought the recipe but was refused (a complimentary order was dispatched to her instead).

It is said that Chasen's also send chili to movie actor Clark Gable (1901-1960), when he was in the hospital (he reportedly had it for dinner the night he died).

During the filming of the movie Cleopatra in Rome, Italy, famous movie star, Elizabeth Taylor, had Chasen's Restaurant in Hollywood, California send 10 quarts of their famous chili to her. She supposedly paid \$200 to have it shipped to her in Rome.

The original Chasen's restaurant closed in April of 1995, and the new Chasen's on Can Drive closed permanently in April of 2000.

Chili Competitions – Chili Cook Offs:

So passionate are chili lovers that they hold competitions (some local, some international). One organization is the Chili Appreciation Society International which has approximately 50 "pods" or clubs in the United States and Canada and supports over 400 sanctioned chili cook offs involving thousands of participants each year. Chili competitions are held on a circuit each year (much like the system used for tennis and golf competitions).

1952 – Most present day historians write that the first World's Chili Championship was the 1967 cook-off in Terlingua, Texas (see 1967 below). Ranger Bob Ritchey of Texas proved this theory wrong. He researched and found several newspaper articles about the 1952 Texas State Fair Chili Championship. On October 5, 1952, headlines of The Daily Times Herald of Dallas, Texas said "Woman Wins But Men Do Well in Chili Event."

On October 5, 1952 at the Texas State Fair in Dallas, Texas. Mrs. F. G. Ventura of Dallas won the Texas State Fair contest and her recipe was declared the "Official State Fair of Texas Chili Recipe" and first ever "World Champion Chili Cook." Mrs. Ventura held her title as World Champions Chili Cook for fifteen years.

The event was planned by Joe. E. Cooper (1895-1952), ex-newspaper man, to help promote his newly published book on chili called With or Without Beans – An Informal Biography of Chili. It was a no-holds-barred affair as to ingredients, except that beans could not be used. The contestants numbered fifty-five with five judges. Joe E. Cooper is quoted as saying: "Besides that, it'll take a lot of judges because after the first two or three spoonfuls of good, hot Texas-style chili, the fine edge wears off even an expert chili judge's taste buds... It'll be a hot job but one that no true Texan will shirk."

Unfortunately Joe. E. Cooper never lived to see how popular chili cook-offs would become. He died three months later on December 12, 1952.

1967 – The most famous and well known chili cook-off took place in 1967 in Terlingua, Texas. Terlingua was once a thriving mercury-mining town of 5,000 people and it is the most remote site you can choose as it is not close to any major city and the nearest commercial airport is almost 279 miles away. Just getting to Terlingua requires a major effort. It was a two-man cook-off between

Texas chili champ Homer “Wick” Fowler (1909-1972), a Dallas and Denton newspaper reporter, and H. Allen Smith (1906-1976), New York humorist and author, which ended in a tie.

The cook-off challenge started when H. Allen Smith wrote a story for the August 1967 Holiday Magazine titled Nobody Knows More About Chili Than I Do, which claimed that no one in Texas could make proper chili. Smith contended that “. . . no living man, I repeat, can put together a pot of chili as ambrosial, as delicately and zestfully flavorful, as the chili I make.” His article included his recipe for chili that included beans.

Of course, this offended many Texans who would never consider adding beans to their chili. When Frank Tolbert (1912-1984), famous journalist and author of A Bowl of Red, saw Smith’s article, he started open warfare in the press with a column he wrote for the Dallas News. A reader suggested that Fowler answer the challenge, which he did. The cook-off competition ended in a tie vote when the tie-breaker judge, Dave Witts, a Dallas lawyer and self-proclaimed mayor of Terlingua, spat out his chili, declaring that his taste buds were “ruint,” and said they would have to do the whole thing over again next year.

According to Gary Cartwright, writer for Sports Illustrated, the blindfolded judge number three, David Witts, was given a spoonful of chili which he promptly spit out all over the referee’s foot. “Then he went into convulsions. He rammed a white handkerchief down his throat as though he were cleaning a rifle barrel, and in an agonizing whisper Witts pronounced himself unable to go on.”

State Food of Texas:

1977 – The chili manufacturers of the state of Texas, successfully lobbied the Texas legislature to have chili proclaimed the official “state food” of Texas “in recognition of the fact that the only real ‘bowl of red’ is that prepared by Texans.”

Did You Know?

Will Rogers (1879-1935), popular actor, cattleman, banker, and journalist, called chili “bowl of blessedness.”

It is said that Will Rogers judge a town by the quality of its chili. He sampled chili in hundreds of towns, especially in Texas and Oklahoma and kept a box score. He concluded that the finest chili (in his judgment was from a small cafe in Coleman, Texas.

Jesse James (1847-1882), outlaw and desperado of the old American West, refused to rob a bank in McKinney, Texas because that is where his favorite chili parlor was located.

Mrs. Lady Bird Johnson had “chili pangs” for President Lyndon Johnson’s, 36th President of the United States, “Pedernales River Chili” and had cards printed with the LBJ chili recipe. “It has been almost as popular as the government pamphlet on the care and feeding of children.”

Eleanor Roosevelt (1894-1962) wife of the 32nd President of the United States, Franklin D. Roosevelt, sought the Chasen’s Chili recipe but was refused it (a complimentary order was dispatched to her instead).

It is said that Chasen's also send chili to movie actor Clark Gable (1901-1960), when he was in the hospital (he reportedly had it for dinner the night he died).

The following song has become the anthem at every Terlingua Cook-Off, where no chili with beans recipes are allowed to compete.

If You Know Beans About Chili, You Know That Chili Has No Beans

by Ken Finlay, singer, songwriter, and owner of Cheatham Street Warehouse (a music hall in San Marcos), written in 1976.

You burn some mesquite and when the coals get hot, you bunk up some meat and you throw it on a pot.

While some chile pods and garlic and comino and stuff, then you add a little salt till there's just enough.

You can throw in some onions to make it smell good.

You can even add tomatoes, if you feel like you should.

But if you know beans about chili, you know that chili has no beans

If you know beans about chili, you know it didn't come from Mexico.

Chili was God's gift to Texas (or maybe it came from down below).

And chili doesn't go with macaroni, and dammed Yankee's don't go with chili queens; and if you know beans about chili, you know that chili has no beans.