

Chili Relations

I came to the weird world of chili cookoffs rather late in life—last year on the first Saturday of November, to be exact. I'd been invited to judge the twenty-fifth annual Terlingua International Chili Championship, and having heard many a wanton tale about this annual debauch, which is the granddaddy of all chili cookoffs, I immediately accepted. If nothing else, I might better understand why otherwise mature middle-class adults, most of them males, journey hundreds of miles to a ghost town in the Chihuahua Desert just to dress up like Gabby Hayes, go loco, and cook chili.

I phoned my friend Kirby Warnock, the publisher of the *Big Bend Quarterly*, to ask if he was going too. Yes, he had been invited to judge at Terlingua, he said. He then proceeded to burst my bubble by asking *which* cookoff I would be judging.

Come again?

“Which cookoff?” Kirby repeated. “There are two cookoffs. Didn't you know?” At that point I learned that although there is only one Terlingua, the community hosts two “original Terlingua international championship” cookoffs on the first Saturday in November within nine miles of each other.

As it turned out, Kirby was judging the Official Terlingua International Championship Chili Cookoff, conducted by what is known in chilidom as the Fowler-Tolbert faction, in honor of Wick Fowler and Frank X. Tolbert, two of the godfathers of the chili phenomenon. I was one of one hundred judges at the Chili Appreciation Society International (CASI) cookoff. Kirby voiced the opinion that the Behind the Store cookoff was far superior to the CASI cookoff. Otherwise, he wouldn't be judging it.

Determined to decide for myself which cookoff was best, I accompanied Kirby to the Behind the Store cookoff before going on to the CASI cookoff. In due course, I got a perspective of the most ridiculous, overblown, and irreconcilable political squabble this side of the Legislature.

As we motored in from Fort Stockton, Kirby gave me brief history of the split. In the beginning, or 1939 at least, there was George Haddaway, the Dallas publisher

of *Flight Magazine*, who used the name Chili Appreciation Society International in the unsolicited critiques he gave restaurants that served chili. One of Haddaway's chili reviews, delivered at the Baker Hotel in Dallas, was observed by a loose confederation of journalists, media mavens, public relations executives, and other idlers who gathered at the hotel's bar. They embraced Haddaway's ideals, especially his appreciation of chili, and informally adopted the Chili Appreciation Society International as their own.

In 1967 Frank X. Tolbert, a columnist for the *Dallas Morning News* and the noted author of the chili tome *A Bowl of Red*, was shooting the bull with other members of the Baker Hotel gang over bowls of chili cooked up by Wick Fowler, who they regarded as the best chili cook in all of Texas. Fired up by Fowler's chili and an inflammatory article in *Holiday* magazine titled "Nobody Knows More About Chili Than I Do," written by New York humorist H. Allen Smith, the Texans issued a challenge to Smith: They would put Wick Fowler up against him in a cookoff to be held in the ghost town of Terlingua in Big Bend. The Great Chili Confrontation, as it came to be known, was as much a test to see if the Dallas group could attract a crowd to the middle of nowhere as it was a culinary showdown. Tolbert, via his position with the newspaper, took the lead in hyping the event.

The first Terlingua cookoff attracted more than a thousand people to what amounted to a lost weekend for overgrown boys. Copious quantities of alcohol were consumed. All sorts of tomfoolery were not only tolerated but encouraged. Somewhere in the midst of it all, Smith and Fowler even cooked chili. The contest was declared moot after the tie-breaking judge allegedly gagged on a spoonful of Smith's chili. Still, the event was so much fun that everyone resolved to do it again the next year.

The PR was almost too effective. The first event had received so much coverage—including articles in *Sports Illustrated* and other national publications—that by the time November rolled around again, the organizers were greeted by an even larger crowd.

By 1970 the Terlingua cookoff had grown into an adult version of spring break, creating a cult of devotees big enough to justify other chili cookoffs around Texas and the nation. In short order there was even a monthly newspaper, the *Goat Gap Gazette*, devoted exclusively to cookoffs and the chili lifestyle.

And so it continued, well into the eighties—until the Great Terlingua Schism.

If you believe the CASI version of history, the split was a cooks' rebellion against the old guard, specifically Tolbert. If you believe the Tolbert faction, the breakup of the chili world was caused by showoffs, Johnny-come-latelies, and minor league cooks with absolutely no sense of chili history, much less respect for pioneers such as Tolbert, Smith, and Fowler and their Baker Hotel compadres Tom Tierney, Davie Witts, and Bill Neale. In truth, though, the answer boils down to something as simple (and complex) as blending coarse ground meat, spices, and seasonings into a bowl of red: It comes down to egos.

Tolbert, it seems, showed up at the 1982 cookoff with two Europeans whom he wanted to enter the competition. He was challenged by cooks who protested that they, unlike the foreigners, had earned their place at Terlingua by qualifying at other cookoffs. Since most of the cooks had invested thousands of dollars and dozens of weekends in hopes of earning a trophy, they wanted everyone to observe the same rules and regulations.

These complaints struck Tolbert as being so pissant that he organized his own cookoff in Terlingua the next year. After a series of legal maneuverings and dirty tricks that thoroughly divided the two groups into the cooks versus the Tolbert faction, two cookoffs were held on the same day in 1983. Tolbert then petitioned for trademark status for the term Chili Appreciation Society International.

By the time the trademark was issued in February 1984, however, Tolbert had died. The ensuing rivalry became more heated and contentious by the year, culminating in a 1988 lawsuit filed by the cooks' group, now known as CASI Inc., against the Tolbert faction over the use of the phrase "Chili Appreciation Society International."

U.S. federal district court judge Lucius Bunton urged both sides to settle their differences out of court, but after the two parties were unable to compromise, Bunton ruled that the Tolberts had no right to the federal trademark and instead awarded it to CASI Inc. Still, the good judge, cognizant of the fire storm into which he was walking, would not touch the issue of which organization had the right to claim itself as the "official" Terlingua cookoff. "The parties should see this as an issue of good sense and decency and not look to the courts," Bunton said. "This has not been an easy case for the court, but . . . better chili today than hot tamale." Aggravating that no-decision were legal expenses that cost both sides more than \$40,000 apiece.

In the four years since the suit was filed, perhaps the most damaging blow to the Tolbert camp was Wolf Brand Chili taking its sponsorship and its \$10,000 and

going over to SASI, which had purchased its own permanent site.

So which Terlingua chili cookoff was better?

Well, the Tolbert crowd out behind Arturo White's store was funkier, wilder, and more laid-back all at once, appealing largely to traditionalists who maintain a connection to the cookoff's origins. For example, Hallie Stillwell, who was one of three judges at the first cookoff in 1967, prefers attending the Behind the Store cookoff, where performers such as Gary P. Nunn, whose compositions defined the Texas progressive country music movement in the seventies, perform in the evening. "We stay up all night Behind the Store," explained one Tolbert supporter. "At CASI, they all go to bed by midnight, like they have something to do the next morning."

The CASI cookoff, on the other hand, boasted a considerably larger site, which accommodated three times the Behind the Store crowd and four times the number of cooks. Showmanship, a staple of all cookoffs, was considerably more elaborate here: One cooking crew erected a miniature golf course; another did a synchronized clogging routine in drag; still another conducted audience participation games, like the toilet plunger toss. And there was even a Warnock among the judges, Kirby's uncle, Barton Warnock, known as the naturalist of Big Bend.

The CASI cookoff's judging area and stage were far more spacious than those of Behind the Store but lacked a certain aesthetic appeal—it would be more appropriate in an industrial park. The Tolbert-sanctioned cookoff's sotol-roofed pavilion, the adobe walls of the compound, the rusted heaps of cars and trucks strewn among the boulders and creosote brush, and the backdrop of the Chisos Mountains of the Big Bend gave the Behind the Store celebration a distinctive Western atmosphere.

Behind the Store's happy misfit ambience was a sharp contrast to the CASI brigade's, whose Winnebagos, Bluebirds, and Allegros, neatly arranged in rows with flags and banners flying, recalled an upscale version of Woodstock.

Despite the emphasis on cooking, hedonism was more than tolerated at the CASI cookoff: One team offered free shots of tequila for one and all, and three young ladies roamed the premises, willing to oblige a pack of camera- and videocam-toting men yelling, "Show us your tits." But whether due to the new morality or the evolution of the cookoffs, the high jinks all seemed tamer than what goes on in a topless bar.

After I finished judging (FYI: Lukewarm chili, championship grade or not, is still lukewarm chili), I met some of the CASI directors, sampled the deli platter in the VIP lounge (no chili in sight), then drove back to Behind the Store to fetch Kirby, who was three sheets to the wind and angling for a snapshot of an alleged winner of the wet T-shirt contest, who was exposing *her* breasts to an approving crowd.

“See? Isn’t this more fun?” Kirby asked. Well, I reckoned, the breast exposure was certainly a little more spontaneous.

I eventually cajoled Kirby into the car, where we rifled through each other’s official judge’s goody bags while heading back to Fort Stockton. We agreed that there must be plenty of good times to be had in chili—otherwise the cookoff phenomenon wouldn’t have grown to the point that all sorts of towns and organizations all over the country host chili cookoffs as charity fundraisers (there’s even a Lone Star Vegetarian Chili Cookoff).

As the sun dipped behind the mountains in the review mirror, I realized that the concept of One Terlingua in chilidom is a pipe dream, at least for the immediate future. And maybe it’s better that way. At least chiliheads can choose what kind of wild, rugged individualist they prefer to be—for the weekend.

The Tolbert faction might be more steeped in history, but its determination to eschew rigid rules and structure at all costs increases the likelihood that it will gradually fade away with the memory of the original generation of chiliheads. Clearly, the future is with CASI, which raises more than \$5 million a year for charity and has emerged as the official cookoff sanctioning body, with some four hundred cookoffs a year.

That’s okay, I finally concluded. After all, as H. Allen Smith wrote long ago, “The chief ingredients of all chili are fiery envy, scalding jealousy, scorching contempt, and sizzling scorn.” In other words, if it wasn’t worth fussing over, it wouldn’t be chili. And that, podnuh, just wouldn’t be any fun at all.