

History of Texas Chili - Fact and Legend

Chili con carne was officially designated the state food of Texas by the State Legislature in 1977, but to most Texans, the fact that a genuine "bowl of red" can only be found in Texas has never been in doubt.

It is generally accepted that, despite its Spanish name, chili con carne (chili peppers with meat) originated in San Antonio Texas. According to a popular theory, Texas chili is an adaptation of a spicy stew that was introduced to the region by immigrants from the Spanish Canary Islands, who came to the area now known as San Antonio in 1731, in what was then the Spanish province of Texas.

Supporting this theory, is the fact that all the spices used in the early versions of chili con carne: chili peppers, oregano and garlic, grow wild in southern Texas; except for the cumin, which was imported from the Canary Islands by the aforementioned Spanish settlers. These spices were boiled along with what ever meat was available to concoct a cheap, simple and satisfying peasant stew.

From the early days, chili was utilized as the perfect trail food. Cowboys on cattle drives took chili along with them on the trail. One simple method of doing this was to pound the beef, suet, chili peppers, and spices together to form bricks that once dried, were readily packed. The chili bricks could easily be boiled up in a pot of water, and served as a convenient, instant trail food. Alternatively, range cooks planted chili peppers, oregano and onions in mesquite patches located along the trail for future cattle drives (the mesquite bushes protected the herbs from foraging cattle). Here is one of the earliest versions of chili con carne on record, a range cook's recipe from the early 1800s:

"Cut up as much meat as you think you will need (any kind will do, but beef is probably best) in pieces about the size of a pecan. Put it in a pot, along with some suet (enough so as the meat won't stick to the sides of the pot), and cook it with about the same amount of wild onions, garlic, oregano, and chilies as you have got meat. Put in some salt. Stir it from time to time and cook it until the meat is as tender as you think it's going to get."

In time, chili con carne became popular in the small Texas towns that grew up along the cattle trails. In this way, the dish spread throughout the state.

The chili queens of San Antonio are another colorful feature of Texas chili lore. They were Hispanic women with an entrepreneurial spirit who made large pots of chili by day and, clad in brightly colored dresses, trundled their carts to San Antonio's Military Plaza, ladling out their vendibles from cast iron pots heated over wood or charcoal fires in the evening. This tradition started in the 1880s when San Antonio was host to soldiers of the Spanish army, who camped in Military Plaza; the fact that it was also a cattle town and a railroad town ensured that the chili queens had plenty of potential diners willing and able to tuck into their fiery wares. In 1887, the chili queens were moved to Market Square by the city government, where they remained a popular fixture of downtown San Antonio until 1937, at which time they were required to comply with the sanitation regulations set for all the town's food establishments. Many chili queens set up indoors so as to continue in business, but San Antonio lost one of its unique and colorful attractions.

Frank H. Bushick, the San Antonio Commissioner of Taxation, wrote an article about the chili queens that appeared in the July 1927 issue of *Frontier Times*. 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, unconscious or oblivious of the other."

The chili queens returned to San Antonio, after a fashion, in the 1980s, when the city began historic re-enactments of the chili queens as a tribute to the state food of Texas: chili con carne. The El Mercado Merchants sponsor the annual "Return of the Chili Queens Festival" held in Market Square during the May Memorial Day celebrations.

Of course chili con carne is not only popular in Texas. The piquant dish first got national exposure when it was served at the San Antonio Chili Stand set up in 1893 at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago Illinois, where it was a great hit with the crowds.

The Chili cookoff is a popular form of delicious, good-natured competition all over the United States. In fact, cookoffs officially sanctioned by the International Chili Society are held as far afield as Canada and the Cayman Islands. But the granddaddy of all chili cookoffs is the one held every year in Terlingua, Texas, established in 1967 with the help of Carroll Shelby, famous Texan and father of the Cobra sports car.

The first Terlingua chili cookoff was held to answer a challenge thrown down by H. Allen Smith, a writer from New York who had written a story with the title, "Nobody Knows More about Chili than I Do" for the August 1967 issue of Holiday Magazine. In the article, he claimed 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." And, to add insult to injury, his recipe included beans!

Beans are not considered to be an ingredient of genuine Texas chili. As the title of the unofficial anthem sung every year at the Terlingua cookoff would have it: "If You Know Beans About Chili, You Know That Chili Has No Beans." Texas chili champion Homer "Wick" Fowler, not being able to stomach this outrageous claim, challenged the presumptuous New Yorker to a showdown, and the great chili cookoff was born. Unfortunately, the results were inconclusive as the third judge excused himself from service after he had spat out the spoonful of chili he had tried to swallow all over the referee's foot. According to a witness, Sports Illustrated writer Gary Cartwright,

"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."

So the first chili cookoff ended in a tie, but the Texans haven't given an inch on the issue of beans in chili, at least at sanctioned chili cookoffs. The first rule of the International Chili Society's Official Contestant Rules and Regulations states that:

The following rules and regulations for cooks at the World's Championship, State, Regional and District Cookoffs are as follows:

1. Traditional Red Chili is defined by the International Chili Society as any kind of meat or combination of meats, cooked with red chili peppers, various spices and other ingredients, with the exception of BEANS and PASTA which are strictly forbidden.

The second rule of the official Chili Cooking Rules of Chili Appreciation International, the organizers of the Terlingua Chili Cookoff says:

2. NO FILLERS IN CHILI - Beans, macaroni, rice, hominy, or other similar ingredients are not permitted.

Be that as it may, even many Texans enjoy beans in their chili. Chili con carne is the kind of dish that invites creativity and experimentation and an infinite number of delicious variations are possible. But, even though there are almost as many chili recipes as there are stars in the sky, not all of them qualify as the genuine article from the Lone Star State. I'll leave you with a quote:

"Chili concocted outside of Texas is usually a weak, apologetic imitation of the real thing. One of the first things I do when I get home to Texas is to have a bowl of red. There is simply nothing better." - Lyndon B. Johnson, the 36th President of the United States.