

The Colorful History Of The Chili Cook Off



by Steven Doyle

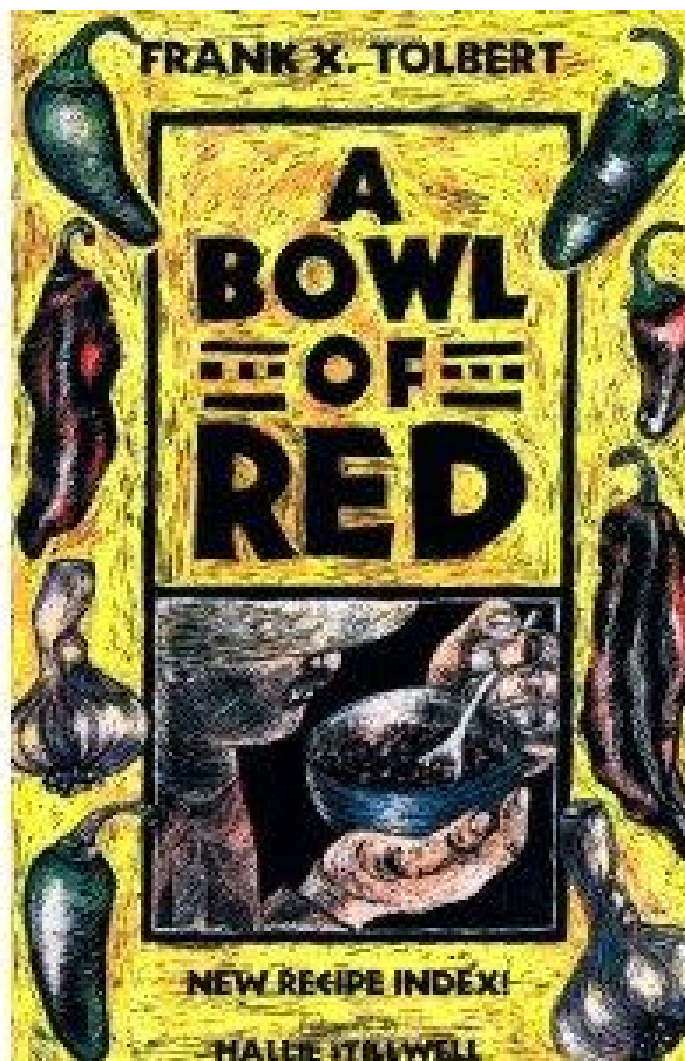
The first weekend in November over 10,000 people, fondly referred to as chili-heads, converge onto the tiny former mining town in the Texas desert called Terlingua. Each year at this time the town with a population of no more than a few dozen play host to two of the [largest chili cook-offs](#) in the world. That's right, two.

It all first began in 1967 and organized by Texas historian and chili aficionado Wick Fowler and car manufacturer Carroll Shelby as a means to settle a storied feud between two journalists; namely Frank X. Tolbert who wrote for the Dallas Morning News, and a gentleman by the name of H. Allen Smith who wrote a scathing article in Holiday Magazine entitled "Nobody Knows More About Chili Than I Do".



Tolbert insisted that he had the best bowl of red, much to Smith's consternation, and this is how legends are born. Each week the two wordsmiths wrote scathing missives to each other in the press insisting they were the chili king. At one point Tolbert described Smith as a "know-nothing maker of vegetable stew".

Tolbert had actually been known as an expert in the field of chili-making since 1952, which is when the first known chili cook off took place at the State Fair of Texas, a tradition that continues to this day. In 1962 Tolbert wrote a column in *The Saturday Evening Post* titled "A Bowl of Fire Called Chili". In that same year Tolbert penned the book that is still considered a bible for all chili-heads called "A Bowl of Red".



There were many interested parties watching from the sidelines, namely one Carroll Shelby. You might remember Shelby best as the designer of the Mustang Cobra. He was one bad ass car maker. He also acquired some land in the west Texas desert around Terlingua where the original chili battled field was laid out.

The chili contest was set to be held in an unbiased location of Terlingua. There the judges met at high noon on October 21, 1967. The judges selected were Hallie Stillwell, Floyd Schneider and Dave Witts. David Chasen of the eponymous Hollywood restaurant was asked to judge, the man was very well known for his chili recipe, but he fell sick just before the contest.

The pots were ladled and the judges voted. Dave Witts took one taste and declared that “his taste buds were damaged beyond repair”, so he was out of the judging. Stillwell voted for Smith, Schneider voted for Tolbert leaving referee Wick Fowler to pronounce a draw at the very first chili cook off in Terlingua.



In the early 1970's there began a riff in the way the cook off was run. Probably more like who was gathering the most publicity. The world watched to see who would win the cook off each year, as it was big news. The brouhaha continued until two factions settled up in court in 1983 when a judge split the chili cook off much like Solomon would have.



The fractured cook offs are held the same weekend in November. One segment called the [Chili Appreciation Society International](#) is just two miles down the road

from the original site at Glen Pepper's Villa de la Mina ranch.

Today the two cook offs are polar opposites. The CASI cook off resembles more of a Spring Break in the desert, replete with their own fire and police department as well as a pop-up hospital. The Tolbert faction cooks in the Chihuahuan desert property behind the old Terlingua Store, which is where you will arrive first when coming into town. [The Original Terlingua Championship](#) is still operated by the daughter of Frank Tolbert.

Both cook offs hold true to the tradition of making a fine bowl of red and raise a significant amount of money for their respective charities.