
The Surprising (and Speculative) History of Chili

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Chili is classic American comfort food. Even though it varies from place to place — namely in the Southwest and Midwest — people everywhere agree that this hearty dish isn't just a stew, topping, or bulky soup: It's chili.

Chili con carne (chili with meat) is the official state dish of Texas, but where did chili originate? And how? That's as much of a question as whether it should contain beans.

Where Did Chili Originate?

Early stories

People in the Americas farmed chile peppers as far back as 10,000 years ago, scholar Kelly Urig says in *New Mexico Chiles: History, Legend, and Lore*. The dish we know as chili calls on red chile peppers (like ancho peppers, guajillo peppers, and spicier cayenne peppers) for its signature heat and reddish color.

One early chili origin story comes from a 1568 account by Bernal Díaz del Castillo, a Spaniard, who tells the story of Aztecs who stewed sacrificed conquistadors with chile peppers, tomatoes, and spices. Was it chili? Perhaps. It was more probably a version of mole poblano.

A legend from the 17th century attributes the first chili recipe to a Spanish nun, Sister Mary of Agreda, who never left the convent but whose spirit was said to have visited the Jumano (native peoples who lived in west Texas) while her body remained in Spain, in a trance. In return, she reportedly received a Jumano recipe for a venison stew with chile peppers, tomatoes, and onions.

Chili and the American frontier

The earliest description of chili comes from an 1828 journal. Recounting a visit to San Antonio, J. C. Clopper writes about it as "a kind of hash with nearly as many peppers as there are pieces of meat — this is all stewed together."

Historians often cite Texas as the birthplace of chili con carne. But how did chili crop up in Texas? And who can take the credit?

A likely case comes from Dallas oil executive Everette Lee DeGolyer, a chili connoisseur who became a historian in his later years. DeGolyer's findings suggest that chili became popular campfire fare among cowboys on the cattle trail (most of whom were Mexican) and gold-seekers (called forty-niners) on their way to California. As evidence, DeGolyer points to a journal from a forty-niner, dated from 1849 to 1850:

I will tell how beef is prepared for a long journey. Take twenty-five pounds of beef and pounds of lard and of pepper, and procure the assistance of one or more Mexicans, and they will, by the process of cutting and pounding, so mix these articles that no fear need be apprehended of its preservation in all kinds of weather, and salt and pepper and lard become useless, as those ingredients are already a part of every meal you make on this mixture. A small pinch of this meat, thrown into a pan or kettle of boiling water with a little flour or corn-meal thickening, will satisfy the wants of six men at any time; and it is a dish much relished by all.

George W. B. Evans, Mexican Gold Trail: The Journal of a Forty-Niner

In short, beef, fat, chile peppers, and seasoning were combined into blocks, dubbed "chili bricks," which were stored in saddlebags. Plunging part of a chili block into a pot of boiling water transformed it into a convenient, filling meal.

Others suggest that a group of women first concocted the dish: the *lavanderas* (washerwomen) who traveled through Texas with the Mexican Army in the 1830s and '40s, washing clothes and cooking for the soldiers. It's said their large washing pots doubled as cooking pots to stew venison or goat with chile peppers.

Another theory credits a small population of immigrants from the Canary Islands, then a territory of Spain, who Spanish colonists brought to San Antonio in 1731 to counter France from spreading its territory west of Louisiana. Chili resembles Canarian cooking in its use of dried cumin, and it's said Canarian women in Texas were known for cooking a spicy stew.

Chili Around the United States

San Antonio

Regardless of how chili first came to be, one group popularized it as a San Antonio staple. Mexican women known as the Chili Queens cooked and sold chili at San Antonio's Military Plaza as early as the 1860s, Texas historian Robb Walsh says. Soldiers, travelers, cattlemen, and others congregated at the plaza for the dish, the granddaughter of one of the last Chili Queens told NPR. Customers often ordered chili with tamales or with beans and a tortilla.

Outdoor chili stands remained fixtures of San Antonio through the 1930s, when the local government began shutting them down, citing sanitary reasons. The last chili stands closed in the early 1940s.

The Midwest

A San Antonio chili stand at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair introduced many to the Texas-born dish. Soon, chili parlors began cropping up all over the Midwest and elsewhere in the United States. For example, the first written mention of chili in Oklahoma dates to 1897, and recipes for the dish appeared in community cookbooks in 1903 and 1905, according to the Oklahoma Historical Society.

Over the following decades, regional variations of chili developed. In 1922, Macedonian immigrants opened Empress Chili in Cincinnati. They drew inspiration from the chili parlors Americans were familiar with to sell a Mediterranean-style stew over spaghetti. Empress Chili put Cincinnati on the map as another chili destination.

Other Midwestern takes include Indiana's Hoosier Chili, Oklahoma Chili, Illinois's Springfield Chili, and Missouri's Kansas City Chili.

New Mexico

Unlike "Texas red" chili, New Mexico's version uses the Hatch chile, grown in the town of Hatch, and gets the name chile verde (green chili) from this key ingredient. Though chili and chile verde share similarities, the dishes developed apart from each other. Chile verde hails from northern Mexico, and it consists of pork chunks, green chilis, onions, and tomatillos.

Types of Chili Today

The International Chili Society, which holds the World Championship Chili Cook-off, divides chili into the following categories: traditional red, chili verde, homestyle chili, and veggie chili.

As purists would have it, traditional red (chili con carne) hasn't changed much over the years. It still consists of meat, red chili peppers, and spices — no beans, rice, pasta, or other fillers, aside from vegetables, according to ICS criteria.

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