

This Is Us

A History of the Chillini Chili Pod

In Illinois in the late 1980's, cooking in a CASI chili cookoff meant driving to Iowa, or farther west. It was just such a trip in the summer of 1992 that set in motion, the chain of events that led to the creation of the Chillini Chili Pod.

The "seed" for the Chillini Pod was planted in June of 1992. After driving five hours to a cookoff in Iowa, spending five hours there, and arriving home, after another five-hour drive, with nothing to show for the day, Bill and Cheryl Pierson were discussing their day with their youngest daughter. She suggested that maybe they should have a cookoff in Illinois, closer to home. This idea had some merit, but while the Piersons had attended several cookoffs, they had never been involved in organizing one.

The idea lay dormant for a couple of months, but in August of that year, it came up again. This time it was given some serious consideration. Cheryl's brother, Tom Klug, was enlisted, and the site and date selection process was begun.

Tom had recently returned from Colorado where he had been active in the Colorado Chili Pod. Bill & Cheryl were members of the Iowa Pod, so it seemed natural to have a Pod if they were going to have chili cookoffs. They decided that Bill & Cheryl would work on the chili cookoff and Tom would organize a CASI Pod.

On October 17, 1992, Illinois' first CASI chili cookoff was held in the parking lot in front of Batavia's City Hall. With thirty-three cooks present, the first Windmill City Chili Cookoff was a huge success. Many of the cooks in attendance that day are still active chili cooks in Iowa and Illinois. Tom Klug circulated a sign-up sheet among the cooks to see if there would be any interest in forming a CASI Pod. Many of the cooks expressed an interest in starting the Pod.

In January 1993, the people who had shown an interest in forming a pod were contacted, and invited to attend an organizational meeting set for February. On February 20, 1993, about twenty chiliheads gathered at the Moose Lodge in St. Charles, Illinois to form the Chillini Pod. After some discussion on CASI, pods, cookoffs, etc., it was determined that forming a pod was a good thing to do. Tom Klug was elected the first Great Pepper, with Cheryl Pierson as Pepper Popper. Susan Fleury (Weber) was elected Chili-scribe and Bill Pierson was voted Chili-penny and Regional Referee. The next order of business was to select a name.

Bill Pierson and Tom Klug favored the "Somewhere North of Texas (SNOT) Pod, but some of the new members felt that was disgusting! Gloria Stevens was pursuing an advanced degree at the University of Illinois at the time and came up with the idea of combining "Chili" with the University's nickname, "The Fighting Illini." Thus, "Chillini" came into being, and was selected as the name for the new Pod.

The next step was to organize our Pod Cookoff. The St. Charles Moose Lodge was a willing partner, and our first Pod Cookoff was set for May 22, 1993. Once again, some of the Iowa cooks came over to help out, and Myrl and Nancy Coultas from Tucson AZ were there to help as well. Myrl was a CASI Director at the time. All together, there were twenty-three cooks that day, and Cheryl Pierson won the cookoff to become the first Chillini Pod Champion. Cheryl also became the first Illinois resident to qualify for the CASI Terlingua International Chili Championship.

In the mean time, Bill and Cheryl Pierson set about to organize a state championship cookoff for that summer. The first Illinois State Championship Chili Cookoff was held on July 31, 1993 at Batavia's VFW Post. Once again, there were thirty-three cooks, and fittingly, Great Pepper Tom Klug was the first Illinois state champion.

So that was it, our first cookoff season concluded with three successful cookoffs and a lot of enthusiastic cooks.

The Chillini Pod was now running smoothly, but they still were not an "official" CASI Pod. This was to be taken care of at the annual CASI Great Peppers Meeting. The 1993 Great Peppers

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Meeting was held in Tucson AZ on September 11. Tom Klug traveled to Tucson to represent the Pod when it was welcomed into the CASI family.

The Chillini Pod had enjoyed a very successful first year, but the winds of change were beginning to blow. First, in early October, Great Pepper Tom Klug decided to return to Colorado. Cheryl Pierson succeeded her brother as Great Pepper, and Mike Stevens was elected Pepper Popper. Then, the Moose organization decreed that only Moose members could be in their lodge, forcing the Pod to find a new meeting location. An interim meeting place was found, and they met there until a permanent home was found at the St. Charles VFW, where the Pod still meets.

The culmination of the first season came with Bill and Cheryl Pierson competing in the Terlingua International Chili Championship on November 6, 1993. This was the beginning of great tradition of Chillini cooks competing at TICC. A tradition that has seen several of our members on stage.

The new Moose policy also forced a new location for the Pod cookoff. By time a suitable site was found, the second Pod cookoff wasn't held until August 28, 1994. Bill Pierson was the second pod champion.

Under Cheryl's leadership the Pod stabilized and continued to grow. The Pod cookoff finally found a permanent home at the St. Charles VFW, and several new cookoffs were developed. The Chillini Pod gained recognition as an active CASI Pod, participating in TICC and at the Great Peppers Meetings. In 1997 the Chillini Pod "adopted" a section on Kane county highway, from which it continues to remove trash. The highlight of the Pod's first decade was hosting the CASI Great Peppers Meeting on September 11, 1999, at the Pheasant Run Lodge in St. Charles.

That year (1999) also saw changes in the Chillini Pod: Bill Pierson became Great Pepper, and the number of cookoffs held in Illinois that year promoted the state to the nine-point level for TICC qualification.

The Pod continued to grow and develop cookoff opportunities, and in 2001, Bill Pierson was recognized by the chili world when he was voted CASI Great pepper of the Year. In 2006, we reached CASI's top level as a twelve-point state. That summer also saw another major change when Charles "Bill" Thomas was elected Great Pepper. The next year of change was 2009 when John Gastaldello was voted the Chillini Pod's Great Pepper

The Chillini Pod, now in its eighteenth year, is growing a more solid membership base, and continues to hold to CASI's ideals of Chili, Charity and Fun.