

The Unofficial History of Texas Chili

There are just about as many theories of how and where chili originated as there are unique family chili recipes. But, it seems understandable that the original chili recipes would be devised where there was a plentiful supply of chili's key components, red meat and chile peppers. The meat (venison, bison, and beef) was available on the plains of Texas. So were the wild chili peppers.

Several legit histories of Texas Chili are available. The primary one arose from the "Chili Queens" on Military Plaza in San Antonio, from the mid-19th Century through the early 20th Century. These business ladies sold a meat dish called "Chili Con Carne", referring to the chili pepper and beef combination. And of course, frijoles (beans) were available (as should be) as a side dish.

The spread of chili throughout Texas and the nation began with the cattle drives of the mid-late 19th century. Every cattle drive had chili as a chuck wagon staple, since the native peppers and onions were abundant along the trails.

But stories are spread that the beef was too valuable and was limited to be used as food on the cattle drive, so extra protein came from a pot of beans along side the chili pot. The cowboys then mixed the chili and beans together in a tin plate. It is said that some trail cooks planted pepper seeds, oregano, and onions in mesquite patches (to protect them

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chili on a regular basis. They say that the Texas version of gruel was a stew of the cheapest available ingredients; tough beef that was hacked fine and chiles and spices that was boiled in water to an edible consistency. The “prisoner’s plight” became a status symbol of the Texas prisons and the inmates used to rate jails on the quality of their chili. The Texas prison system made such good chili that freed inmates often wrote for the recipe, saying what they missed most after leaving prison was a good bowl of chili.

Texas chili spread nationally when Texans from San Antonio set up a chili stand at the Chicago Exposition in 1893. People from across the nation arrived at the fair to try new things, and among those was Texas Chili. The news of the popularity of the Chicago Fair Texas chili stand spread and chili parlors popped up in towns all over the United States, where local chili cooks tried their own recipe; some not standard to the Texas Bowl of Red.

By the 1920s, chili joints were common all over the West, and by the depression years, there was hardly a town that didn’t have a chili parlor. The chili joints were usually no more than a shed or a room with a counter and some stools. Usually a blanket was hung up to separate the kitchen. By the depression years, the chili joints meant the difference between starvation and staying alive. Chili was cheap, and crackers were free.

Some wonder why the chili parlors vanished after the depression era; but the canning of chili and the availability in

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crackers you wanted. He later opened a meat market where he sold his chili in brick form, using the brand name of Lyman's Famous Home Made Chili. In 1921, he started to can chili in the back of his market and named it after his pet wolf, Kaiser Bill and called it Wolf Brand Chili (a picture of the wolf is still used on the label today). In 1924, Davis quit the chili business when his ranch was found to have lots of oil.

He sold his operations to J. C. West and Fred Slauson, two Corsicana businessmen. To draw attention to the Wolf Brand Chili, the new owners had Model T Ford trucks with cabs shaped like chili cans and painted to resemble the Wolf Brand label. A live wolf was caged in the back of each truck.

The other reason that chili parlors vanished was the commercial packaging of chili spices. These packaged spices assisted in bringing the preparation of chili back to the family home. There is some disagreement about the origin of manufactured chili powder. The two men generally credited with marketing the first commercial chili powder blends were William Gebhardt and D.C. Pendry.

Pendry ran a Mexican grocery supply company in Ft. Worth, Texas. Pendry began manufacturing and marketing his blend of chili powder in about 1890, encouraging its use by people who were unfamiliar with it by supplying recipes to restaurants in the area. William Gebhardt was a German immigrant to New Braunfels, Texas. Gebhardt ran the Phoenix Cafe, attached to his buddy's saloon, now called the Phoenix Saloon. Gebhardt served chili in his café, flavored with his own blend of chili powder. Gebhardt started selling the blend

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As the depression weakened and the economy grew, chili lost some of its magic. There were, however, true believers who raised the lowly bowl of red to cult status. Most notable was CAS (Chili Appreciation Society), that started up around Dallas in the early 1940's. Once a month or so, a group of these Chiliheads (mostly the Dallas Press Club) would gather to consume and tout the virtues of chili. They were serious in a humorous way. They wrote songs and poems about chili. They came up with rituals like The Crumbling of the Crackers to make their meetings entertaining. They distributed recipes to every part of the known world to spread appreciation of their favorite food. With George Haddaway as Chief Chili Head and Wick Fowler as Chief Chili Cook, the Society gained international status in a well-documented investiture ceremony held in Mexico City on April 7, 1964 and later when Wick Fowler, as a war correspondent, made chili for the troops in Viet Nam. CAS then became CASI - Chili Appreciation Society International.

The first recorded chili contest was conducted October 4, 1952 at the State Fair of Texas. The contest was labeled as a world championship chili contest and the rules stipulated no beans. Joe E. Cooper, author of a definitive book on chili called, *"With or Without Beans"*, was named chairman of the contest. "One purpose of the contest", Cooper said, "is to restore chili's lost prestige in things gastronomic. The noble institution of a bowl of chili must not be abandoned to perish on the vine." "Real, sure-enough Texas-style chili must have the strength to chin itself and possess the authority of a Marine buck sergeant." Mrs. F.G. Ventura of Dallas was

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lore. It is the book all the chili authors refer to.

In the early sixties, chili was a hot subject. Vice President and later President, Lyndon Baines Johnson shared his appreciation for chili with the world by publicizing his personal recipe, Pedernales Chili. Frank Tolbert, a columnist for the Dallas Morning News continued to stir the pot, with weekly columns about chili and CASI. Tolbert also had an article published in the *The Saturday Evening Post* titled, *A Bowl of Fire Called Chili*. Tolbert also pinned a book about chili, *A Bowl of Red – A natural history of chili con carne*. Chili continued to be the primary subject in Tolbert's columns until his death in the mid-1980's. Frank's family continues the tradition of the chili parlor started by Frank in the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

Another milestone moment for Texas chili came in 1962, when the recipe for Frito Pie appeared on millions of bags of chips: "Heat can of chili, pour into bag of Fritos, and sprinkle with grated cheese, and chopped onions." That formula has been followed by high school football stadium concession stands ever since, as well as Texas school lunch programs, not to mention Frito pie aficionados.

Fifteen years after the Texas State Fair's event, the gauntlet was thrown when H. Allen Smith wrote an article for *Holiday Magazine*, titled "Nobody know More About Chili Than I Do". Frank Tolbert and Smith began a war of words in the press about chili. The challenge was finally accepted by Wick Fowler, Chief Cook for CASI. In October 1967, at the ghost

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Allen Smith and Wick Fowler were pitted against each other. Victory was not gained by either man, as the cookoff ended in a tie as the final judge called off the judging, stating his taste buds had been ruined. This event rekindled the love for Texas chili and again chili went national with many articles written about the contest and the Terlingua CASI events that followed each year.

In 1977, chili manufacturers and members of the Chili Appreciation Society International successfully lobbied the Texas state legislature to have chili proclaimed the official "state dish" of Texas “; in recognition of the fact that "the only real 'bowl of red' is that prepared by Texans.” Chili became the official state dish of Texas when Governor Dolph Briscoe signed House Concurrent Resolution No. 18 (HCR 18) on May 11, 1977.

Since the first happening in Terlingua in 1967, the chili cookoff industry continues to grow and gather new lovers of chili - the official state dish of Texas. Families continue to gather around the dinner table and share grandma's or grandpa's chili recipes. At Texas' Friday night football games, halftime snacks still consist of a bag of Fritos and chili. And some fifty plus years later, every weekend hundreds of chiliheads gather at a CASI- Chili Appreciation Society International sanctioned chili cookoff to find out who cooked the perfect bowl of red for that day.

Kent Finlay, the late singer, songwriter, and owner of Cheatham Street Warehouse, a Texas historical music hall in

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didn't come from Mexico. Chili was God's gift to Texas or maybe it came from down below. And chili doesn't go with macaroni and dammed Yankee's don't go with chili queens; so if you know beans about chili, you know that chili has no beans."

.....history compiled by Richard Knight, Lifetime member, Chili Appreciation Society International

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