

CHILI COOKOFF CONFIDENTIAL: WHAT MAKES A WINNER

It's chili-eating season. It's also the height of chili-cookoff season. But before you connect "eating chili" with "cookoff chili," understand that they are two quite different animals. That's right: Big-league chili isn't really meant to be eaten, except for one spoonful by a judge. Cookoff chili has become a rarefied beast, like a well-groomed show dog. Think of it as the NASCAR of the food world. It looks like chili on the outside, but under the hood it's a whole 'nuther thing.

"To improve your chili, remove an ingredient," says an old adage. That wouldn't leave much room for improvement in a classic bowl of competition red.

Competition guidelines are rigid: The chili presented for judging must be made with some kind of meat (beef, pork, chicken, sausage -- it could even be a firm fish), sauce and spices. No beans. ("There are 2,000 kinds of beans," explains a spokesman for the International Chili Society, one of the two not-for-profit organizations that organize American chili cookoffs. "If we allowed beans it would become a bean competition.") ROOTS WITHIN REACH Chili has deep roots in American frontier lore. Travelers in Texas in the 1850s made a meal of dried beef, fat, pepper, salt and chilies that they had pounded together. Texas Rangers and soldiers carried dehydrated chili "bricks" in their saddlebags. The dish may have been devised by poor residents of San Antonio; it may have originated in Texas prisons.

But chili was pretty much chili, with each cook boasting his own as best, until 1967. That's when the first chili cookoff took place in the ghost town Terlingua, Texas. When Texas writer Wick Fowler faced off against Eastern humorist H. Allen Smith -- their chilies tied -- neither combatant could have imagined their chili pod-based pugilism would spawn an organized hobby.

Two rival groups that grew out of that first faceoff, the Chili Appreciation Society International and the International Chili Society, sanctioned almost 700 cookoffs last year. ICS executive director Jim West estimates the two organizations combined have raised \$100 million for charity over the last 30 years. The ICS holds the World's Championship Chili Cookoff in Reno, Nev., each October, and

CASI crowns its champ every November back in Terlingua, at the Terlingua International Chili Championship.

As chili cookoffs evolved, so did chili. "In the old days there was a lot of creativity in it. You'd look for something unusual," says West of the ICS. "When people lose, they see what has won and adapt." Today's cookoff chili generally consists of cubed beef with a chili gravy. Eating chili is spiced less than the competition stuff, and is much more likely to be made from ground beef. The cubed meat makes sense in a competition: Cooking ground meat for three or more hours could turn it to mush.

"Lots of folks cook their favorite recipe {in a competition} and walk away disgruntled. You have to understand what the judges are looking for," says Dan Bauer, an Alexandria-based chili cook who placed second at Terlingua in 1995 and '96 out of a field of 275 cooks.

ICS and CASI have different judging philosophies, but most judges evaluate chili essentially on color, aroma, consistency, taste and aftertaste. Chili should not be excessively greasy, and it should have a pleasing color, from red to brown. It should smell good. It shouldn't be too thick or too thin. (Bauer inserts a plastic spoon in the chili at an angle. The chili is the correct thickness if the spoon slowly falls over.)

It shouldn't be lumpy, so leave out the chopped vegetables. Nor should it be grainy from spices that aren't finely ground. Chili should taste good -- no argument there -- and it should have a pleasant aftertaste, and maybe some afterburn. Shoot for a round heat all over the mouth and throat. Excessive heat doesn't score points. COOKING UP A WINNER

To make your chili a winner, most chili-heads agree, you must be able to achieve predictable results. Map out your procedure and obtain ingredients whose characteristics are known and consistent. That means powdered garlic instead of fresh, and tomato sauce instead of tomatoes. "It's down to the point where you don't use anything real," says Roger Koltz, a chili cook living in Charlottesville. A fresh onion may be sweet or hot, but commercial powder is pretty much the same every time.

Note changes in your recipe or cooking conditions and their consequences, so you can adjust in the future. Parker, who placed eighth at Terlingua in 1994, has been known to adjust his recipe for altitude.

Your chili will reflect the quality and preparation of its ingredients.

Select a piece of meat with just a little marbling and not much gristle. Bauer prefers chuck, while some cooks opt for mock tender (also called tri-tip), which isn't easy to find. Don't use sirloin, veterans say -- it'll mush up on you. Take the meat home and chop it into 3/8-to- 1/2-inch cubes the night before the cookoff. This is best accomplished by partially freezing the meat. The cubes should be fairly uniform in size; if a piece isn't cube-shaped, put it aside. Budget plenty of time for chopping; Bauer estimates an hour per pound. Rinse the meat before it goes in the pot; excess blood coagulates and makes little lumps.

(At home, if you opt for ground beef, make it a coarse chili grind. This can sometimes be found in grocery stores; if not, ask your butcher to grind a piece of beef with a 1/2- to 3/4-inch blade, or do it yourself.)

You'll need a bit of fat to cook the meat. Bauer likes bacon grease. Other cooks use olive oil, sesame seed oil or Crisco.

Chili cooks don't use grocery-store chili powders, which contain ingredients like oregano, cumin, salt and garlic in addition to chili pepper. They add these ingredients separately. You can create a round, complex heat by using several varieties of chili peppers.

Don't just use water for cooking liquid. Chili cooks like to use chicken and beef broth.

Avoid graininess and lumps. Use tomato sauce instead of tomatoes, so you don't have seeds in your chili. You can put whole chili peppers in, but put them in a muslin bag or take them out of the pot before they break open. Grind your spices a second time in a coffee mill, preferably one that hasn't been used to grind coffee.

Your chili will encounter some well-salted competition. This isn't the place for low-sodium chili. Adjust the color with paprika. Spiciness should be distributed all over the mouth. This is achieved by using a range of chilies and peppers that might include black pepper, white pepper, jalapeno powder and hot sauce -- both red and green.

You may want some sweetness to balance the slight bitterness of chili powder, not to mention its heat. Tomato sauce often provides all the sweetness you need. Chili cooks also use apple juice, honey and brown sugar. According to Bauer, some cooks use vodka -- in the chili, not themselves.

"I usually add two pinches of brown sugar -- less than an eighth of a teaspoon -- near the end of cooking," says Bauer. "It doesn't sweeten it up. It just mellows it out and makes it seamless from one end to the other." Parker adds brown sugar if his chili is tasting a bit salty. Add any sweeteners 1/4 teaspoon at a time to a batch based on 3 pounds of meat.

If you need to thicken your chili before sending it to the judges, use a neutral agent, perhaps flour or cornstarch. Arrowroot works, but will thin back out if the chili is boiled. Bauer keeps potato flakes on hand, but rarely needs them. Masa harina, some say, gives chili a taste the judges don't like. When you enter your first cookoff, remember some simple advice. "Cook the recipe and leave it alone," says Bauer.

"Don't panic," echoes Jim Parker of the Hard Times Cafe chain of chili parlors. "Right at the end of cooking, that's when people start to panic. Stick to the recipe, no matter what. Don't tweak." **WHAT NOT TO ADD**

Chili cooks have been known to add just about anything to their creations, including woodruff, salsa, chocolate, olives and orange liqueur, but there are some things that don't belong. "Beer goes in the cook, not the chili. It has an aroma like dirty socks," says Bauer. And it's wise to keep the beer out of the cook as well until the chili is sent to the judges. Alcohol has been known to influence cooking decisions.

Beans don't belong in the chili. They'll break down and turn to mush. It's okay to stretch the chili with beans after the cooking is done, but don't dare put a legume in the sample you send to the judges. **TWO DUMPS OR THREE**

Most chili cooks add spices in two or three "dumps," and some cook the gravy separate from the meat until late in the game.

Three dumps looks to be the norm, although some cooks, like Parker, go with two dumps. The first spice dump goes in the meat, the second goes in the gravy (if cooked separately) and the third goes in the assembled chili shortly before the chili is sent to the judges.

The first dump should penetrate the meat. This is where you get your afterburn. Cumin becomes bitter with extended cooking, so some recipes hold it for later. The second dump will break down and dissolve in the gravy; that's good. Bauer recommends bringing the gravy to a boil, then cutting off the heat. Steeping the spices like this breaks them down and prevents overcooking. The third dump is

the "kicker" or "booster." Cumin, garlic and finely ground red chilies are candidates for this one.

Once the chili is boiling, it should be left alone except for occasional stirring. Too much stirring will break down the meat. Bauer recommends what he calls a "nine-bubble boil," by which he means there are about nine bubbles on the surface at any time. "You don't want a heavy, rolling boil," he says.

The final step is preparing the sample cup for the judges. You should have seasoned this rigid foam container by rubbing the interior with fresh garlic and dusting it with cumin to absorb the cup's flavors. "If I can put it in the sun, I will," says Bauer. Before filling the cup with chili, rinse it with broth or chili gravy to wash out the chunks of garlic. Fill the cup with about 60 percent meat and top it up with gravy. "The judges want heavy meat and smooth gravy," says Koltz. Leave an inch or so of head space.

If it seems that some prize-winning chili cooks are overly generous in sharing their recipes, keep in mind that while they specify an amount of chili powder, they don't tell which varieties of chilies they're talking about.

"There are 4,600 different chili powders. I'm using four in mine," says a cagey Dan Bauer. The reality is that a person couldn't duplicate someone else's chili in any case. As Bauer says, "You can cook my recipe, but you can't cook my chili." Jim Dorsch, who likes to eat chili, will host "Potent Potables," a Smithsonian beverage-tasting course, on Tuesdays in February. Call 202-357-3030 for information. COWBOY CHILI (6 to 8 servings)

Dan Bauer says this competition recipe also makes a good eating chili if you add a couple of cans of pinto beans, including the liquid, and serve it over pasta. "I also like to sprinkle a little grated cheddar cheese and chopped onion on top of the whole mess," he notes.

Bauer combines four different kinds of ground red chili peppers. It's your job to figure out which ones.

FOR SPICE BLEND NO. 1:

1 1/2 tablespoons onion powder

1 teaspoon MSG (optional)

1/4 teaspoon jalapeno powder

1 1/2 teaspoons garlic powder

2 tablespoons ground chili powder

1 teaspoon Creole seasoning

FOR SPICE BLEND NO. 2:

1/2 teaspoon MSG (optional)

6 tablespoons chili powder (no salt)

1/2 teaspoon Mexican oregano

1/2 teaspoon marjoram

1 tablespoon paprika

1 tablespoon cumin

1/2 teaspoon black pepper

1/2 teaspoon white pepper

1/2 teaspoon cayenne pepper

1/2 teaspoon Season-All

1 bay leaf

FOR SPICE BLEND NO. 3:

1 tablespoon ground red chili pepper

1/2 teaspoon cayenne pepper

1 tablespoon cumin

1/2 teaspoon garlic powder

FOR THE CHILI:

3 pounds beef chuck or sirloin tri-tip, cut in 3/8-to-1/2-inch cubes

3 teaspoons bacon fat

14.5-ounce can chicken broth

1 teaspoon red hot sauce

1 teaspoon green hot sauce

8-ounce can spicy tomato sauce

Spring water as needed

8-ounce can mild tomato sauce

14.5-ounce can beef broth

1 tablespoon beef bouillon crystals

1 tablespoon chicken bouillon crystals

1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce

Salt to taste

2 pinches brown sugar

Assemble the three spice mixtures in separate small bowls and set aside. For the chili: In a medium skillet, brown the meat in three batches, using 1 teaspoon of bacon fat for each. As each batch cooks, sprinkle with 1/3 of spice blend No. 1. Add the meat to a large chili pot, along with the chicken broth, hot sauces and spicy tomato sauce. Bring to a boil, cover and cook over medium heat, adding spring water as needed, for 1 hour, or until the meat is almost tender.

While the meat is cooking, combine in a saucepan all of spice blend No. 2 with the mild tomato sauce, 1/2 can beef broth, the beef and chicken bouillon crystals, Worcestershire sauce and enough of the remaining beef broth to make a medium-thick sauce. Bring to a boil, stirring constantly. Reduce heat and simmer for 5 minutes. Cover and remove from the heat.

After the meat has cooked, add the contents of saucepan to the chili pot. Bring to a boil, turn off the heat and let the pot rest, covered, for an hour or so.

Then bring the pot back to a boil and add all of spice blend No. 3. Adjust the consistency of the chili with spring water, taste for salt and add brown sugar as needed. Cook for 30 minutes longer, stir well and serve.

Per serving (based on 8): 571 calories, 40 gm protein, 22 gm carbohydrates, 37 gm fat, 133 mg cholesterol, 13 gm saturated fat, 844 mg sodium DOCTOR CHILI

(6 to 8 servings)

This recipe brought Jim Parker a first place, a fourth and two fifths in 1997. If it's too thin, add potato flakes, 1 tablespoon at a time, until desired consistency is reached.

3 pounds cubed beef

2 tablespoons solid vegetable shortening (Parker uses Crisco)

14.5-ounce can beef broth (do not use unsalted)

1 whole green canned chili pepper

8-ounce can tomato sauce

1 tablespoon ground hot red chili pepper

1 tablespoon granulated onion powder

2 teaspoons granulated garlic powder

1/2 teaspoon cayenne pepper

1/4 teaspoon jalapeno powder

1 teaspoon chicken bouillon crystals

5 tablespoons ground mild red chili pepper

4 teaspoons ground cumin

1/4 teaspoon black pepper

Brown the beef in the vegetable shortening. Drain off the excess fat. Put the beef in a large chili pot and add enough hot water to cover. Bring to a boil, cover, reduce heat to a simmer and cook until the meat begins to tenderize, about 1 hour

Put the beef broth and the whole green chili pepper in a saucepan and heat. When it's hot, add to the beef along with the tomato sauce. Cover and bring the mixture to a slow simmer. After 30 minutes, add the ground hot red chili pepper, onion powder, half of the garlic powder, the cayenne, jalapeno powder and chicken bouillon. Cover and maintain a slow simmer for another hour.

Then add the ground mild red chili pepper, cumin, remaining garlic powder and black pepper and simmer, uncovered, for an additional hour. Before serving, taste and adjust seasonings as needed.

Per serving (based on 8): 482 calories, 37 gm protein, 6 gm carbohydrates, 34 gm fat, 127 mg cholesterol, 13 gm saturated fat, 505 mg sodium PECOS RIVER

BOWL OF RED (6 to 8 servings)

From "Chili Madness" by Jane Butel (Workman, \$6.95).

2 tablespoons lard, butter or bacon drippings

1 large onion, coarsely chopped

3 pounds lean beef, coarse chili grind

3 medium cloves garlic, finely chopped

4 tablespoons ground hot red chili powder

4 tablespoons ground mild red chili powder

2 teaspoons ground cumin

1 1/2 teaspoons salt

Melt the fat in a large heavy pot over medium heat. Add the onion and cook until translucent.

In a bowl combine the meat with the garlic, ground chili powders and cumin. Add this meat-and-spice mixture to the pot. Break up any lumps with a fork and cook, stirring occasionally, until the meat is evenly browned.

Stir in 3 cups water and the salt. Bring to a boil, then lower the heat and simmer, uncovered, for 2 1/2 to 3 hours, stirring occasionally, until the meat is very tender and the flavors are well blended. Add more water if necessary. Taste and adjust the seasonings.

Per serving (based on 8): 254 calories, 32 gm protein, 8 gm carbohydrates, 10 gm fat, 85 mg cholesterol, 3 gm saturated fat, 548 mg sodium GOLD MINER'S CHILI (6 to 8 servings)

The 1997 ICS World's Champion Chili, made by Stephen Falkowski, Hopewell Junction, N.Y.

- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil (Falkowski uses Wesson)
- 3 pounds beef, cut into 1/4-inch cubes
- 1 1/2 cups white onions, finely minced
- 8 garlic cloves, finely minced
- 3/4 teaspoon garlic powder
- 2 14.5-ounce cans chicken broth, fat removed
- 4 ounces tomato sauce (Falkowski uses Hunt's)
- 3 tablespoons ground cumin
- 10 1/2 tablespoons Gebhardt Chili Powder (available through Pendery's catalogue, see box below left)

OR SUBSTITUTE:

- 5 tablespoons California chili powder (mild)
- 4 1/2 tablespoons New Mexico chili powder (medium)
- 1 tablespoon New Mexico chili powder (hot)
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon meat tenderizer
- 1/2 teaspoon light brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon hot pepper sauce (Falkowski uses Tabasco)

Brown the meat in the oil and drain well. Set aside.

In a large pot, simmer the onion, minced garlic and garlic powder in 2 cups of the chicken broth for 10 minutes. Add the tomato sauce and the cumin, whichever chili powders you are using and the salt. Mix well.

Sprinkle the browned meat with the tenderizer. Add the meat to the pot. Add the remaining broth and simmer for 2 1/2 hours. Mix in the brown sugar and the hot pepper sauce just before serving.

Per serving (based on 8): 557 calories, 40 gm protein, 20 gm carbohydrates, 36 gm fat, 132 mg cholesterol, 12 gm saturated fat, 843 mg sodium ORIGINAL TEXAS-STYLE CHILI (6 to 8 servings)

Adapted from "A Bowl of Red" by Frank X. Tolbert (Texas A&M University Press, \$9.95).

6 to 12 dried ancho chilies, or 6 to 12 tablespoons ground red chili pepper

3 pounds lean beef, coarsely ground

Cooking oil as needed

1/8 pound beef kidney suet (optional)

1 teaspoon oregano powder

1 tablespoon cumin seeds, crushed

1 teaspoon salt

1 tablespoon cayenne pepper

1 tablespoon hot pepper sauce (Tolbert uses Tabasco)

2 or more cloves garlic, chopped

2 tablespoons masa harina (optional)

If you're using whole dried peppers, wash them and remove the stems and seeds. (Don't touch your eyes during this operation, and wash your hands thoroughly afterward.) Boil the pods in water to cover for about 30 minutes or until the skins can be removed. Then grind, chop or run through a colander the remaining skinless, seedless, stemless pods. Reserve the peppery water to use for liquid in the chili.

Sear the beef in oil until it is gray in color. To a large pot, add the beef, rendered suet, if using, and ground or chopped chili pepper pods (or ground red chili pepper, if using). Add water and/or the peppery cooking liquid to a depth that covers the beef by about 2 inches. Bring to a boil, reduce the heat and simmer for 30 minutes.

Remove from the heat and add the oregano, cumin, salt, cayenne pepper, hot pepper sauce and garlic. Bring to a boil, lower the heat and simmer for 45

minutes, keeping the lid on as much as possible. Stir only if necessary. Add more water or the peppery cooking liquid only if the mixture would burn otherwise. Remove from the heat and skim any accumulated fat. If desired, thicken with 2 tablespoons masa harina, first mixing it with water. Return to the heat and simmer for another 30 minutes, or until the meat is done. Taste and adjust seasonings if needed.

Per serving (based on 8): 450 calories, 63 gm protein, 8 gm carbohydrates, 18 gm fat, 152 mg cholesterol, 4 gm saturated fat, 470 mg sodium
Where Chili Lovers Can Get Together

We're at the height of chili-competition season nationwide, but two Washington-area events are yet to be.

First is the Mountain Magic Chili Cookoff, to be held April 18 in Charleston, W.Va. Staged in Charleston's nine-acre Magic Island park, the competition is an event sanctioned by the International Chili Society and open to all comers (ICS entrants pay \$25 to compete, nonmembers pay \$55, which includes a one-year ICS membership). The entry fees benefit the town's parks and recreation association. The cookoff will be followed by a ramps dinner, featuring fried ramps, fried potatoes, pinto beans and corn bread. For further information, call Cyndee Prowse at 304-348-8046.

Then, on May 30, comes the 19th Annual D.C. Chili Championship, which will fill up Pennsylvania Avenue between 9th and 13th streets NW from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. In addition to the ICS-sanctioned cookoff (\$10 for ICS members, \$40 for nonmembers), there will be a Bring-Your-Own-Chili Contest (\$10 to enter) and a free Rookie Cook competition. The Bring-Your-Own versions do not have to hew to ICS guidelines and can be vegetarian and/or be made with beans. General admission to the event, which includes live music all day and benefits the National Kidney Foundation of the National Capital Area, is \$10.

The Virginia State CASI Championship cookoff will be held in Clarendon in June (date to be announced). Local Chili Appreciation Society International representatives will have information available soon.

To maximize your chili-cookoff possibilities, contact both chili groups.

The International Chili Society can be reached at 714-631-1780 or at Web site: www.chilicookoff.com.

Local Chili Appreciation Society International "Pods" are Capital (Janie Bauer, 703-360-9296), Old Dominion (Richard King, 703-631-9198), CASINOVA (Dick DeiTos, 703-273-5075) and Mason-Dixon (Alan Dean, 410-879-6410). The Web site for CASI is www.chili.org.

For chili news, you can subscribe to Goat Gap Gazette (\$18 for 12 issues; write to P.O. Box 271299, Houston, Texas 77277- 1299). CASI's \$15 annual membership includes a subscription to Terlingua Trails (call 888-227-4468). The ICS \$30 membership includes a subscription to the quarterly ICS Newspaper.

To learn more about chili history, lore and cooking, read "A Bowl of Red" by Frank X. Tolbert (Texas A&M University Press, \$9.95) or "Chili Madness" by Jane Butel (Workman, \$6.95). John Thorne includes an essay on chili in "Serious Pig" (North Point Press, \$30).