

It's Your Texan Duty to Eat Chili in Terlingua This Month

[Food & Drink](#)

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There was a time when Terlingua, Texas (population 58 on a good day) offered at least three perfectly valid reasons to take a turn off of 170. First, to see an exorcised ghost town, the result of the boom & bust of early 20th century cinnabar (the source of mercury) mining. Second, for the time-honored tradition of the country's oldest championship chili cook-offs (more on that in a bit). And finally, Clay Henry, the charismatic goat whose beer-guzzling antics (he preferred Lone Star longnecks) delighted visitors to Terlingua for years in the late 1900s. Alas, Mr. Henry is no more -- gone to that glorious corral in the sky. But that still leaves two perfectly good reasons to make time for Terlingua.

Even without Clay Henry, Terlingua's dueling chili cook-offs make the seven-hour drive from San Antonio worth your weekend. You can enjoy the yearly contest known as the Original Terlingua International Championship Chili Cookoff, but just to spice up the pot a bit, you can also check out the parallel event held yearly at the same time that is sponsored by the Chili Appreciation Society International -- CASI for short. The two groups, which were once united by the power of the

pepper, split in 1983 and went their separate ways, which, as it turns out, aren't very far apart.

In the 1960s, journalists H. Allen Smith and Frank X. Tolbert (author of *A Bowl of Red*) both claimed to be the true chili king of Texas. But there could be only one! So what better way to settle a blood feud of this magnitude in the Lone Star State than with a chili contest? The first tussle took place in Terlingua, moderated by historian and chili aficionado Wick Fowler and automobile legend Carroll Shelby (of Shelby Mustang fame). It's pure coincidence, of course, that Shelby happened to have property outside of Terlingua. But it's pure politics that the first encounter ended in a draw. (To further complicate matters, Shelby's contingent later established a third organization, the International Chili Society, that holds its championship in California.)

Things were quiet for a while in Terlingua, like any good ghost town, but another philosophical dispute had been simmering under the surface, which eventually led to the big breakup in the early '80s. A judge was required to more or less amicably divide the assets. According to Joe Nick Patoski, writing in *Texas Monthly* in 1992, this was "the most ridiculous, overblown, and irreconcilable political squabble this side of the [Texas] Legislature... If you believe the CASI version of history, the split was a cooks' rebellion against the old guard, specifically Tolbert. If you believe the Tolbert faction, the breakup of the chili world was caused by showoffs, Johnny-come-latelies, and minor league coots with absolutely no sense of chili history, much less respect for pioneers such as Tolbert, Smith, and Fowler... In truth, though... it comes down to egos."

In the divorce, OTICCC won Terlingua, basically getting the house; CASI was hit with the proverbial restraining order and forced to decamp to its

acreage outside of town. But they still share a birthday in 1967, which would make this the 50th anniversary for both of them. To properly capture the tone of a Terlingua cook-off, look back to that watershed year of 1983 when the event hosted a satirical "Over, Under or Through" fence-climbing contest. You don't hear "build a wall" rhetoric any more these days, but back then, proposals of beefing up Mexican border security were as outlandish as ever. A 17ft cyclone fence with barbed wire at the top was erected next to the cook-off site and contestants were challenged to break through it for a case of Lone Star. The winner breached the wall in only 30 seconds, proving once again that "free beer" might be two of the most powerful words known to Americans.

There's another milestone moment, however, that needs to be noted during this golden anniversary of excellence in the chili arts. In 1970 a group called the Chiligettes, who had been crusading for the rights of women to compete, just up and did it. According to reports, Janice Constantine of Midland, Texas "set up her cooking area with her own silver service and candelabra accompanied by a male violinist in a tuxedo." (Accompanied by a lot of grumbling and grouching on the part of the men and city elders, we can also imagine.) Constantine didn't win, but she was effectively crowned Terlingua's first chili queen in the process, and long may she reign (swapping a spoon for a scepter of course).

The men should have realized that there was historic precedent. San Antonio, the nearest metropolitan center to Terlingua, can be called the original home of chili con carne without fear of serious contradiction. It was in its lamp-lit plazas that the original Chili Queens plied their wares from cast-iron wash cauldrons (the Queens were less-exotic laundresses by day) from the mid-1800s and beyond. It was from the Alamo City that

chili spread outward, with a big boost from the popular San Antonio Chili Stand at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago.

As chili spread throughout the Southwest, the purity of the San Antonio original -- basically cubed (not ground) beef, onions, garlic, a paste made from a variety of toasted dry chiles, cumin, and oregano, preferably Mexican -- was soon diluted. Beans (even white ones!) were added, turkey was substituted for beef, spaghetti somehow put in an appearance. Heresy! And as a result, San Antonio ultimately ceded its primacy to locations as unlikely as Hollywood, with its bastardized bean & tomato version from now-shuttered Chasen's.

It will require serious dedication to the cause if San Antonio is to win back any kind of crown, as events such as the OTICCC and CASI contests only exist due to a carefully cultivated system of preliminary cook-offs in cities from Seattle to Savannah. Points must be accumulated in order to qualify. In Texas, there are cook-offs all around us, but San Antonio suffers from a shocking dearth of good chili on local menus and a notable lack of enthusiasm in the competition department. This alone calls for a trip to Terlingua November 3rd-5th for a little inspiration. That doesn't mean the good citizens of other Texas cities need not apply, of course; this is a hajj-like pilgrimage for any true son or daughter of the Lone Star State, if only to bear witness to the likes of David Lazarus of Killeen, who has won the OTICCC championship the last three years in a row.

Despite the fact that cook-off rules (and the chili, too, for that matter) are generally the same, the two events have evolved in vastly different directions. OTICCC pitches itself as more of a family event. It should be noted that in the showmanship competition, "nudity and lewdness is banned," along with the dispensation of alcoholic beverages to spectators

(damn). Despite the fact that a World's Championship Margarita Mix-Off has been added, in which anything goes but garnishes, these folks are serious. Though the rules do somehow allow commercial chili powder, “complete commercial chili mixes are not permitted” -- which means no Wick Fowler’s 2-Alarm Chili Kits, btw. As with that original San Antonio recipe, “no beans, pasta, rice or other similar items are allowed.”



But there is now a chili verde competition as well -- with those New Mexicans and their Hatches trying to horn in on the Texas original -- and a barbecue cook-off that includes salsa, chicken, black-eyed peas, and “any kind” of beans, in addition to pork ribs and beef brisket. “We’ve been doing barbecue since at least 1983,” says Kathleen Tolbert Ryan, whose father was aforementioned chili legend Frank X. Tolbert. “It makes for more fun, and people just plain love to cook.” For the first time this year, there’s also a Texas authors’ tent.

Tolbert Ryan says that the number of participants varies from year to year, but “there were over 100 chili cooks alone last year,” some of which fly into (relatively) nearby Marfa from as far away as Florida. “We’ve upped our Porta-John count [for the 50th],” she does admit, adding that

tent and RV space is about all that's now left in terms of accommodations, as local hotels and motels, many of them full of repeat offenders, have been booked since June.

With more room to spread out under starry skies above, the CASI confab attracts a larger, and looser, crowd. Complete with its own police and fire department and pop-up hospital facility, it has been referred to as "spring break in the desert" and, if only aspirationally, as a kind of Texas Burning Man -- without the burnt hombre. Burning Man's sharing ethos is alive and well, however, a fact that's made reference to in more than one biker blog (yes, bikers tend to congregate at this one, and yes, they have blogs too). And if the Terlingua contingent tends toward T-shirts sporting cook-off logos, the CASI crowd turns to costumes as cartoony as chili pods and as racy as modern-day dance hall queens. These folks know how to party. And to that end, both groups feature headliner Texas bands such as the Texas Tornados and Gary P. Nunn -- all in the price of admission, which, at both events, is \$40 for the duration.

It seems only right that, with attendance routinely topping 10,000, there's no room left in local inns. As Tolbert Ryan points out, chili is, after all, the state dish of Texas. If pressed, she might have allowed how, between the two competitions, visitors can experience in one place the best chili the world has to offer--not to mention some pretty damn good 'cue, a passel of searing salsa, and rip-roarin' ribs and chicken for days, all while doing a little boot scootin' and star gazing.

And a little nostalgic, if only slightly macabre, reminiscing. Clay Henry, the bibulous billy goat who was once also the honorary "Mayor" of Terlingua, is now preserved in finest Texas taxidermy fashion at the

Terlingua Trading Company. Yes, he's shown chugging a longneck. So we take it back: There are still at least three reasons to visit Terlingua.

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