

The Surprising History of Chili



Is It Mexican?

Chili has history in the United States but origins can be traced back all the way to the Incas, Aztecs and Mayans. Contrary to popular belief, chili is not a Mexican dish. In fact, Mexican's make chili for American tourists because they know we like it. It was the Spaniards who brought chili with them to the American Continent. In the United States, chili can be traced back to the original cattle drivers crossing the country through the South Western states.

It was the cook in the chuck wagon who planned a night's meal. Conveniently a stew consisting of meat, herbs and chile peppers was easy for them to make since ingredients were readily available. The cowboy original chili recipes say that cowboys would plant herbs, chilies, and onions along their trails in patches of mesquite. The mesquite would keep foraging cattle from eating the required chili ingredients while allowing necessary ingredients to thrive. As the cowboys moved along the trails, the cooks or "cookie" would harvest the spices, onions, and chilies and combine them with beef to create chili. Although cowboy chili is a great recipe and one that does not include beans, chili concoctions have been around for centuries. The name "chili con carne" is taken from Spanish, and means "peppers with meat." It was the Incas, Aztecs or Mayan Indians who used beans while also using peppers, meat and herbs to create meals.

The chili peppers used in authentic chili recipes give the dish its flair and its name. Ancient cuisines of China, India, Indonesia, Italy, the Caribbean, France, and the Arab states also show the use of chile peppers in their dishes.

In 1598, Don Juan de Ornate brought with him into the lands that are now Mexico, the green chile pepper. Chile peppers were used in Spain during the time of Cervantes who lived from 1547-1616. Introduction of chili to the United States can be credited to Canary Islanders. Canary Islanders who arrived in San Antonio, TX as early as 1723 used the local herbs and peppers to make their own version of meat dishes that they were familiar with on their home islands. This dish became so popular with Texans that the first fast food on wheels may have been chili.

In the 1800's, women pushed small carts to sell foods like chili in the military plazas of San Antonio, Texas. These culinary women shop keepers were called "Queens". Early reports of activities in San Antonio claim that these cart pushers may have been pushing their culinary recipes for centuries. It may have been for as long as 200 years. Most of these cart operators were Mexican. It is from these original temptresses that the idea that chili was a Mexican dish was sprung. Part way into the 20th century, the chili carts all but disappeared. Chili parlours caused the disappearance.

As early as 1904, chili parlors popped up all over Texas replacing the need for "Queens" and their carts. The parlours were small operations run by families. Eventually, between the 1920s and 1930s the idea of the chili parlor was popular and moved to the Mid West. These chili parlour chains were popular diners. You can still find one of these infamous chili parlors on Pine Street in Saint Louis. In September 1937, the San Antonio Health Department implemented new laws and that required the chili cart owners to adhere to the same standards as indoor restaurants. These regulations required the "Queens" to have lavatory facilities. This was an impossible feat and the cart pushers instantly became a thing of the past.

When San Antonio redeveloped their marketplace in 1970 a Memorial Day re-enactment of the Chili Queen's cart is staged in a production called "The Return of the Chili Queens Festival". The history behind this culinary delight prompted a bill to be put forth by legislature in 1977. This bill made chili the official state dish of Texas. Following the original recipe of the trail blazing cowboys, Texas chili recipes leave out beans as an ingredient.

Ingredients vary greatly by region and each region claims to have the best tasting chili. Since chili recipes are regarded so highly, cook-offs have become a popular and fun event. Very few people say that they do not like chili. Everyone has their favorite version. It is eaten by the bowlful, spooned on to hot dogs, served over pasta, used as a nacho topping and mixed with cheese to create a delicious dip.

"Whenever I meet someone who does not consider chili a favorite dish, then I've usually found someone who has never tasted good chili."- Jan Butel, author of "Chili Madness," published by Workman Publishing, 1980



The Popularity of Chili Cook-offs

It stands to reason that the eclectic history of chili would prompt the popularity of chili cook-offs in the United States. Cook-offs can be full blown competitions or simple ones. Simple competitions are often just cook-offs between friends. The creativity and originality of chili chefs are much more on display at fiercely competitive chili cook-offs. Unusual ingredients like chocolate stem from this creativity. Often cook-offs are held at fairs or are sponsored by local communities. Many cook-offs donate proceeds to local charities as they are a great way to earn raise money. Breweries and Micro Breweries will sponsor these events, too! For what goes better with chili or in chili than beer?

A popular venue for starting a cook-off is the International Chili Society (ICS). They have sanctioned over 200 cook offs and those numbers are steadily rising. You can contact the ICS can to help you organize a chili cookoff in your area. Contact the ICS at www.chilicookoff.com for more information.

Chili Cookbooks

Trail Blazin' Chili Recipe

Howdy, Partner! Do you have the guts to try an original cowboy chili recipe. We used what we had while we was on the trail. Ol' "Cookie" managed to whip up some good grub. Here is how "Cookie" makes his pot of chili. Come on now, give it a try.

-Cut up as much meat as you think you will need to use, beef is good, in pieces about the size of a whole peanut. Remember you is feeding hungry cowboys so don't skimp on the meat.

-Put that beef in a heated cast iron pot along with some suet use enough so as the meat don't stick to the sides.

-Cook that meat with about the same portion of wild onions, garlic, oregano, and chili peppers as you have got meat. Cut up the onions and peppers as the same size of the beef.

-Put in some salt. Black pepper's good, too!

-Stir it from time to time and cook it until the meat is as tender as you think it's going to get.

-Serve yourself a bowl first cuz there won't be none left once you let the cowboys get at it.

Comments

DJ on July 05, 2015:

New Mexico has and makes the best chili product in the world, it is the recipes use that make it a difference. People from all over the when they come to New Mexico, chili is one of the first things they are excited about to try for lunch or diner

Kris on May 14, 2015:

What a suprising for me! I do a lot of researches because I'm doing an assignment which is talking about culinary product and my topic is chilli pepper. Even of that I haven't found this amazing history on internet. Thanks for sharing!

margie carlet on January 18, 2013:

nice history.

Corey (author) from Northfield, MA on December 05, 2011:

Thanks for the great comments. Russell-D, It never occurred to me to look for International chili recipes, now I will be on the hunt. Thanks.

Russell-D from Southern Ca. on December 03, 2011:

Fun, Atlanta has some major chili shops, as does KC and we have a few New Orleans style and deep south purveyors in Los Angeles. I think we're sissying it up, though, damping down the amount of onions and chili used. And we don't cook it overnight in a cauldron size pot hanging over a fire

anymore, thanks to Weight Watchers. But, on a cold winter day, what's a better tummy warmer and taste satisfier than a deep dish bowl of hot Chili, with flaked cheese, beans or no. Voted up. I also loved the Chili in Argentina. David Russell

ernie on December 03, 2011:

What an excellent article about chili , I must go make some right now !

cashmere from India on December 03, 2011:

What an informative hub on Chilli! I have heard about it and seen it being consumed in American cowboy movies, but am yet to taste it!