

## History of the Mason Dixon Pod

Bruce Pinnell became enthused about CASI after attending TICC in 1984. He came home to Maryland from that experience, gathered his friends, and began to put the Mason Dixon Pod together. With the help of his wife, Susan, Wayne Dunn, Chris and Cathy Grimes, Debbie Watkins, and sponsorship from the Hard Times Café, they staged the first ever Maryland Chili Championship in 1985 in Gaithersburg, Maryland.

This group built their pod membership, elected Bruce as Great Pepper, and applied for CASI affiliation. They were officially seated at the 1986 Great Peppers' Meeting in San Antonio. Susan Pinnell Marshall started the pod newsletter, the *Mason Dixon Lines*.

The longest running pod event, the annual Polar Bear Cookoff, began in 1988. The Polar Bear Cookoff is a New Year's party and chili cookoff. Bruce and Susan invited cooks and friends to their house in Fallston for a day of chili fun and celebration. Dennis Kincaid won the inaugural Polar Bear and this event has not slowed from that day on. In 1997, the cookoff moved to Alan and Susan Dean's house in Bel Air. The annual party continued as the perfect way for chili friends, from near and far, to spend the New Year's holiday.

With the exception of 2000, the Polar Bear cookoff has always been held on New Year's Day. However, on January 31, 1999, twenty brave cooks from across the country braved Y2K fears and set up stoves and pots at Swan Harbor Farm in Havre de Grace for a special New Year's Eve Polar Bear. Chili was turned in for judging at 10 PM and winners were announced at 12:01 AM, at the conclusion of Auld Lang Syne. Jim Weller was crowned the first Chili Winner of the Millennium. This momentous occasion propelled Jim to the ICS championship and fourth place at TICC later that year.

In 1987, the Maryland State Championship moved to Oregon Ridge Park in Baltimore and reached its peak in 1991, when Shelby Lynne was the featured entertainment.

In 1989, Bruce Pinnell was elected to the CASI Board of Directors and Susan Pinnell Marshall became Great Pepper. Susan was elected CASI Great Pepper of the Year in 1992.

Charlie Walstrom was an early member who was vital in the growth of the pod. Charlie served as the unofficial Pied Piper of the Mason Dixon Pod. Charlie could always be seen recruiting and helping new cooks with his cooking expertise. Charlie always appeared with extra equipment whenever someone discovered they forgot something.

The Mason Dixon Pod was one of the sponsoring pods for the 1991 Great Peppers' Meeting in Washington, DC.

Charlie Walstrom was elected Great Pepper in 1994. Alan Dean was elected Great Pepper in 1997. Gradually, Maryland began to see an increase in CASI cookoffs and

became a 12-point state. Maryland grew from a state with three cookoffs to fourteen cookoffs in 1999.

The Mason Dixon Pod became the leader of an effort to spread CASI cookoffs throughout the Mid Atlantic and Northeast. New cookoffs were created in Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, New York, and Vermont. New CASI pods were organized in Pennsylvania and New York. Alan was elected CASI Great Pepper of the Year in 2000.

In 1998, Mason Dixon Pod cookoffs expanded to Maryland's eastern shore. The Ocean City Parrothead Club held the first Hots For Tots Chili Cookoff to benefit Toys For Tots on the first Sunday in December. This has grown into a huge, annual event that hosts restaurant and CASI divisions and raises thousands of dollars for charity.

Brian Smith began one of the more popular pod cookoffs at the Maryland State Fair in 2000. A large number of people get exposed to CASI at this event.

Alan Dean was elected as CASI Executive Director in 2002. Susan Dean was elected Great Pepper of the Pod. The Mason Dixon Pod continues to attract new cookoffs and has many new members and cooks.