

HISTORY OF TOP OF TEXAS POD

Top-of-Texas (i.e., TOT) Pod CASI is based in the Dallas-Ft. Worth area in north Texas. Although not the oldest Pod in CASI, today it is one of the largest – with its current membership approaching 200. It is also the home Pod for many former T.I.C.C., Texas Open, Southwest Open, Texas Men's State and Texas Ladies' State champions – all 5 of which are large, prestigious events.

TOT meetings routinely draw 40-50 attendees at their monthly meetings, which are held at the Irving Elk's Lodge, the 2nd Wednesday of each month. The Pod cookoff, held at the same site in May 2004, was their 25th Anniversary cookoff. This cookoff featured (besides CASI Chili) a chili cook's reunion, a chili kid's reunion, a salsa competition and a chili memorabilia raffle.

The union between TOT and the Irving Elk's Lodge has been a long and strong one. Historically, TOT has generated many thousands of dollars for Elk's charities and many of the chili cooks are also Elk's members. In turn, the Irving Elk's lodge has also provided many thousands of dollars for CASI in support of the Terlingua International Chili Championship (i.e., T.I.C.C.) each year.

TOT is fortunate to have many of the original, founding members who are still active in the Pod and CASI. Mike Sweet was the 1st Great Pepper and recalls the Pod's origins:

“In September of 1978, I set out with pen and paper in hand to start a new Chili Pod in the state of Texas. At the time, there were three (3) other Pods in Texas: Houston Pod CASI (the original Pod), San Antonio Pod (i.e., SAP) CASI in San Antonio and Cowtown CASI in Fort Worth.

Chili politics were intense at the time. There were quite a few cooks unsatisfied with rules and lack of rules, and starting a new Pod was not easy. Most of the people solicited wanted to remain anonymous until there were enough cooks signed up to give the Pod a chance to succeed. Don Malone was the only cook who would come out in the open and help sign up members with me.

As soon as we had about 25 members interested, we started meeting every week planning the new Pod. Members present at the first meetings were: Mike Sweet and Marcia Sweet, Don Malone, Hugh and Ginnie Bivona, Dusty Kitterman, Bill and Mary Brown, Jim and Betty Redd, John and Alice Thompson, Steve Montague, Billy Cothrum and others, whose names time has stolen from me. My apologies to those I have failed to mention.

Early in 1979, I was chosen as the first Great Pepper. My term was to run until By-Laws were established and yearly terms for election of officers were adopted. Jim Redd was chosen as the first Pepper Popper.

TOT was founded on the ideal that cooks should join together to promote chili and chili cookoffs, improve the quality of chili, and raise money for deserving charities in the process. It was also very important that the Pod have By-Laws to protect the founding ideals for the future members. Chief among these By-Laws was the concept that all members of the Pod be full members with full voting rights, no matter where they lived.

TOT had a very positive impact in the early years of chili cooking. The first cookoff the Pod held was in Ennis, Texas at the Sokol Hall and it attracted 114 cooks. At the time, this was a record for a first-time Pod cookoff.

TOT was also the first Pod to hold “inner-Pod” cookoffs (non-sanctioned, fun events for Pod members only) for the purpose of training cooks on a) how to run a judging area and b) improve their chili by open critique by their peers. TOT also sent representatives out to the community to promote chili and help sponsor chili cookoffs.”

In 1987, when Mikie McGarity was Great Pepper of TOT and Mayo Blair was Great Pepper of the Houston Pod, they implemented a “North-South” challenge to see which Pod could get the most members to the other Pod’s cookoff. Mikie and Mayo came up with a traveling trophy that was originally a Dr. Feelgood creation. TOT won that first year, when their Pod cookoff garnered 276 cooks. The challenge continues to this day with bragging rights going back and forth. The challenge has not only been a lot of fun but has created life-long friends and helped each Pod achieve more money for their charities.

In 2004, Nick McGarity, Great Pepper of TOT, and Greg Martin, Great Pepper of State of Texas (i.e., SOT Pod) in Austin, started a 2nd challenge dubbed the “North-Central” challenge. They hope this will endure as long as the TOT-Houston challenge with the same lasting effects.

Out of the 11 current Directors of CASI, 8 are TOT Members. Several of them have also been former Great Peppers.