

Confessions of a Bigtime Chili Judge Deep in the Heart of

AMERICANA / H. Allen Smith

The first International Chili Cook-off was held in the autumn of 1967 in the ghost town of Terlingua, close to the Mexican border in the Big Bend country of Texas. Participants in that first tournament were myself, representing New York, and Wick Fowler, an out-sized newspaperman who was the best Texas had to offer. The contest ended in a Mexican standoff, and fun was had by all.

The cook-off was a large overall success and has been held each November since then, with dozens of chili cooks participating and getting stoned. The affair always attracts large and eccentric crowds.

My own life has been affected. In my time I have written nearly 40 books, but in Texas I am not known as an author. If my name is mentioned people are likely to say, "Oh yes, the chili man." It's the old story—just one



Chili

little old pot of chili and...

Cook-offs involving other comestibles have started up in other parts of the country and quite often now I'm invited to serve as a judge. Both Wick Fowler and I were asked to come to Atlanta to judge a sausage-making tournament. Last year I was summoned to the late John N. Garner's town, Uvalde, Tex., for the first annual Barbecue Championships. There were 10 contestants with steel ovens over shoveled pits strung out along the grassy banks of a crick that runs through the middle of the town. Each of the entrants barbecued steaks or larger slabs of beef, and a Señora Consuelo Garcia from Sabinas, Mexico, cooked steer heads in a pit. With the other judges I had to taste each offering. I tried to pull back from Señora Garcia's repellent entrée, but they shamed me into trying a morsel. I

gagged ever so slightly.

The highlight of the event was a lecture I delivered to these people, as well as to the citizens of Uvalde, concerning the error of their ways. I complained again about the unreasonable toughness of Texas beef, and then I began quoting material sent me by a Virginia friend, Jerry Simpson, who always called himself the world's foremost authority on barbecue. Some of Jerry Simpson's points, with which I totally agreed, were:

"Nowhere in the whole state of Texas can one find barbecue fit to feed a starving jackal. I have traversed the state from the Louisiana border to El Paso and never ever have I found a place that even knows the meaning of the word barbecue.

"Perhaps Texans are more to be pitied than censured, since they imagine that beef can be barbecued, whereas the whole civilized world knows that pork is the staple of barbecue cooking. I have done extensive research at the University of Virginia. I find that the first thing Virginians barbecued (1607) was sturgeon hauled out of the James River, and that even pumpkin was barbecued in those times. My people know barbecue.

"A pit fire with hickory coals should be going at 9 p.m. to be ready for eating at 3 p.m. the following af-

ternoon. This means that the experienced cooks will be dead drunk by daylight and that sober but ignorant younger men will have to take over. That's part of the glory. My paternal grandfather once fell into a barbecue pit and lay there an hour thinking he had died and gone to hell; the heat finally sobered him up and he somehow managed to escape with only superficial blisters. He claimed afterward that corn whiskey had saved his life by rendering him immune to scorching."

The people of Uvalde and the 10 cooks didn't care much for my lecture. Pork is almost never barbecued in Texas because Texas is religiously dedicated to beef. I know people in West Texas who actually hate to speak the word *pig*. In any case, I have not been invited back to the banks of that Uvalde crick.

Several months later I was summoned to Phoenix where C. V. Wood Jr., one of the Terlingua champions, was showing off his chili expertise at a Press Club luncheon. I drag in this affair because I want to mention Oren Fifer, a columnist for the Phoenix *Gazette*. Following the chili, Mr. Fifer wrote: "I broke into a sweat, and walked back to the office giving off fumes like a diesel rig."

This year I went to Brownsville, down at the southernmost tip of Texas



on the Rio Grande, to be a judge in the first annual Tamale Cook-off, held in conjunction with the Charro Days fiesta, a celebration of gluttonous delights from Mexico. Driving from my home in West Texas to Brownsville, a long jump, I paused in Laredo where I talked to a local newspaperman and told him the nature of my journey. He said that a popular confection in Laredo, peddled on the downtown streets, is the goat-gut taco. He suggested that if I'd linger in Laredo and forget Brownsville, he would try to get together the first annual Laredo Goat-gut Taco Tournament for me to judge. It was tempting, except for the palpable fact that I would have to eat some goat-gut tacos. I went on to Brownsville. For one thing I wanted to renew an acquaintance with a writer named Sam Huddleston, who was involved in the organization of the Charro Days festival. I wanted to discuss with Mr. Huddleston some of the things that have happened in the world of chili since that first history-making cook-off at Terlingua in 1967.

As a loyal Texan with a light-thump typewriter, Mr. Huddleston assailed me vigorously at the time I was seeking the championship. He is a man who learned to write at the ghostly knee of O. Henry and he is right ept with the language. When I laid claim to being the best chili cook in the coun-

try, he wrote that I ought to go somewhere and have my head candled. After studying my chili recipe, he said, "A man could get more flavor from a set of stewed piano keys." He suggested that I knew less about a good bowl of chili than a pregnant sow knows about Neiman-Marcus. And he charged that I was "one of them Yankees that have been spoiling up our womenfolks with washing machines and electric smoothin' irons." Mr. Huddleston went so far as to say that the only passable dish I can prepare is root beer muffins.

We held the tamale contest before a large and boisterous throng. There were a dozen entrants, all women, and the winner was Maria Sandoval, a lady who is connected with a Brownsville restaurant.

Afterward Sam Huddleston and I retired to his residence on a quiet street and sat down to talk chili. Mr. Huddleston's wife Dorothy is a Jewish girl out of the Bronx, and she enjoys a high skill with the Roumanian-Jewish cuisine. The conflict between Sam's Tex-Mex cookery and Dorothy's kosher pursuits made for what Sam calls "a bumpy push."

"After we got settled in here," said Sam, "Dorothy went to work potting up a brisket. While it was simmering she decided to take a bath and I got to snooping around the stove, and I

looked at the brisket and decided what that hunk of meat needed was a proper Mexican upbringing. Quietlike, I tossed a fistful of jalapeño chiles into the pot. A bit later, when my legal lover took a sampling of that brisket, she started flinging and flexing like a wild thing. She made noises like when you pour hot butter into a panther's ear. Some time later she made cheese blintzes with sour cream and I surreptitiously gave them the same picante treatment. This time, after she was able to utter words, she bowed her head and asked for Divine Guidance in keeping our marriage together."

Eventually Dorothy developed what the Mexicans call a tough mouth and today the Huddlestons sort of alternate between Bronx culinary treats and Mexican viands that would melt phonograph records. Long-play.

There in Sam's cool patio we talked about various chili doin's, Sam having been closely involved with the Terlingua bash from the beginning.

"You didn't make it last November," he said, "but I can tell you that it poured rain in that desiccated landscape for hours, so that they couldn't go ahead with the cooking. Finally the officials called a low-level conference in the men's outhouse and it was proposed that the carnival be called off or at least postponed. So up spoke one of the more erudite and percipient gents



and he says, 'Call it off? Hell, no! We still got lots of beer left. So let us keep a-going.' They kept a-going."

Sam now mentioned a chili cook-off held just recently in Houston. The entries in this one included Crawfish Chili, Jackrabbit Chili, and something called Cedar Rat Chili. Sam had some clippings concerning this contest and he now mentioned a gal named Jo Ann Horton who cooked what she called Mouth of Hell Chili, which had a snort of tequila tossed in at the last. The winner was a party named McMurry who called his version MPS Formula 73-FYVM Super Chili.

"I suspect," said Sam, "that this McMurry character was spewed from the bowels of the NASA establishment out south of Houston. There was also, in the contest, a batch of Tuna Fish Chili and a pot of Oink Brothers Pig-tail Chili. I tell you, the farther we travel along life's highway, the more intellectual the scenery becomes. Intelligence just plain flaps in the Texas breeze."

This report on Houston reminded me of other cook-offs around the state. People send me letters and clippings about them because they have me slotted as unofficial chili historian for Texas. There have been reports of contests involving Buccaneer Chili in Galveston and a Black-eyed Pea Jamboree in Athens where somebody en-

tered Black-eyed Pea Hush Puppies with a sweet mustard sauce; Hasenpfeffer Chili out of New Braunfels; Armadillo Chili from the pot of Hondo Crouch at Luckenbach; and chili variously constructed out of venison, cabrito, beef jerky, wild boar, coyote short ribs, 'gator tail and hump of buffalo. I have heard, also, of Javelina Knuckles en brochette and Catfish Stroganoff being featured at festivals.

With regard to that Armadillo Chili, I have long been planning to attend the Armadillo Festival held each year at Victoria, where armadillo racing is the top attraction. I can get along without the races, but I want to meet the queen of the Victoria festival. A new one is chosen each year and she is known as Miss Vacant Lot.

One of the more important regional cook-offs is held each year at San Marcos, a town between San Antonio and Austin, and the winner gets to cook at Terlingua. Both Sam Huddleston and I had seen reports on this fiesta written by a San Antonio columnist named Sam Kindrick. This Kindrick claims that he got a recipe for roadrunner chili from a character named Hairy Ed Smith, who spends his leisure hours "sitting in the doorway of his tarpaper shack on the Llano River, picking his teeth with a bone borrowed from the skeleton of a raccoon." Kendrick has described Hairy Ed Smith as "a man

renowned for his great speed, fearsome strength and wily ways." His chili is cooked in mescal, a cactus juice potion that will wither a normal man's tonsils, and it is seasoned with cedar berries, hackberries, garlic pods and green persimmons.

Sam Huddleston now remembered some more of the Hairy Ed Smith story. "The finished product," he said, "will grow hair on an anvil. Once Hairy Ed consumed a bowl of his roadrunner chili, picked up a pair of pliers, and pulled four of his own teeth without wincing."

I am compelled to state that I do not regard Hairy Ed as a glistening jewel in the diadem of the Smith family.

Sam and I got to talking about the origin of chili, a topic always popular wherever chili people gather and really not worth discussing because it is all settled. Chili originated in San Antonio, period.

I remembered the anecdote about Judge P. C. Sanders, a colorful string-tied San Antonio jurist who tried to have a bowl of chili for lunch every day of his life. It was a hobby of his to prowl the city in quest of the perfect bowl of red. San Antonio reporters often approached him and asked if the chili in, say, Campo's Chili Parlor, was any good. Judge Sanders would snort and glare and reply emphatically, "Hell, man, never was any bad!" ©

