

The History of Chili Cook-Offs (Part 1)

Part One: In the Beginning

All Eyes on the Prize

For a half-century or so, chili-cooking competitions -- known as cook-offs -- have been a part of the American and world scene. The premise is simple: people get together and compete to see who can make the best pot of chili -- that day.

The first cooking contest to get wide attention and publicity was the Pillsbury Bake-Off. It was started in 1949 and was known as the "Grand National Recipe and Baking Contest". It was held at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City, and had a top prize of \$50,000. The only required ingredient for the contest was Pillsbury's Best Flour, and it was soon being called the Pillsbury Bake-Off.

Our chili cook-offs came along shortly after the first Pillsbury Bake-Off. There are some unconfirmed stories about competition among the Chili Queen vendors in San Antonio around 1900, but there is no solid evidence.

Making History at the State Fair

The first modern-day chili cook-off was held in October of 1952 at the State Fair of Texas in Dallas. (Until just recently it was pretty much given as gospel that the first chili cook-off was held at Terlingua, Texas in 1967. However, Bob "Ranger Bob" Ritchey dug up the facts of the 1952 competition in the newspaper archives at the library.)

The 1952 cook-off was the brainchild of Joe E. Cooper as a way to advertise his new book With or Without Beans. The contest was a success with 55 contestants trying for the first prize. Mrs. F.G. Ventura of Dallas was crowned the winner. Cooper died a couple of months later and never saw his book become a best seller. With or Without Beans is now considered **the** authority on chili history and lore. It is the book all the chili authors refer to.

The recipe for the first winning bowl of chili is amazingly simple. It is nearly identical to the recipe found on the Gebhardt's Eagle Brand Chili Powder label of the day (see photo).

The second place winner at the 1952 affair was Mr. Julian Capers, Jr. Mr. Capers' recipe was a bit more complicated, but still simple by today's competition chili standards. Here are the recipes:

Competition chili judges don't want to see any chunks of onion or garlic in the chili, so the chefs either finely dice or pure these so they will disappear in the cooking process. Some favor onion or garlic powder.

Flecks of black pepper are frowned on, so white pepper is substituted for the "up front" bite. ("Up front" bite is the tingle from the pepper that you taste immediately; "back bite" is the tingle that comes later, usually from cayenne).

Tomato sauce is favored, as it contains no offensive seeds or skin.

Canned beef or chicken stock is used for thinning the mixture to the desired consistency. If water is used, it will probably be bottled water to avoid the chlorine.

What a Dump!

Dozens of cooking techniques have been developed by cook-off contestants over the years. One of the most favored is the "dump" method. The spices are divided into several portions or "dumps". The dumps are added to the pot at varying time intervals. Some flavorings such as garlic lose their potency when overcooked, so you add that near the end of the cooking process. During a competition, you will hear a lot of kitchen timers reminding the chefs to add the next dump.

Only the traditionalists still make chili from ancho pulp. This requires removing seeds and stems from the dried pods, soaking them in hot water and then removing the pulp with a food mill. Just too much work for the average cook.



Corrected chili recipe from
old Gebhardt's cookbook

The chili powder we buy to make our bowl of red is actually a *chili blend* or spice mix. It contains among other things, cumin, oregano and garlic. A pure chili powder without the added seasonings is *chile molido*.

The cumin starts life as comino seeds -- tiny seeds that are very aromatic and pungent. Cumin is simply ground comino seeds. Comino can be used in the chili, although most folks prefer the cumin. If you want to try the comino, toast the seeds in a heavy skillet before you add them to the pot. If you have a way to grind the seeds, toast them first and then grind them. It really improves the flavor. Cumin is the spice that gives chili its heavily distinctive aroma.

Red pepper or cayenne is what puts the bite in your chili. Cayenne has what is called a **back bite**. That is, it takes a few seconds before it grabs your taste buds. Most folk can't abide too much red pepper. Go easy on it to start.

Millions of words have been written on the subject of how to construct a proper pot of chili. If you are really interested in learning a lot more, go find a copy of [The Great Chili Book: 101 Variations on "The Perfect Bowl of Red" by Bill Bridges](#).

Here's a starting recipe for chili novices.

Mrs. F.G. Ventura's First Place Chili

- Two pounds ground beef

- One teaspoon shortening
- Two teaspoons ground cumin seed
- One small bottle chili powder *
- Four tablespoons chopped garlic
- One tablespoon salt
- Three cups water
- Two tablespoons flour
- One-quarter teaspoon black pepper

The small Gebhardt's chili powder bottle held one ounce, which would be about 4 to 4-1/4 tablespoons.

Drop ground beef and garlic in hot grease: cook slowly 15 minutes, add chili powder, flour and cumin seed, stir and add water, salt and pepper, cook for 35 minutes.

Mr. Julian Capers' Second Place Chili

- Two pounds lean beef (chuck, plate, or round)
- One-half cup suet

Two tablespoons Gebhart's chili powder

- One teaspoon oregano
- One large onion, chopped
- Four large Mexican dried chili peppers
- Three large pods (cloves) garlic
- One tablespoon salt
- Two tablespoons ground comino (cumin)

Cut meat into half-inch cubes with a knife, trimming out all fat, rind and gristle. DO NOT GRIND THE MEAT.

Drop ground beef and garlic in hot grease: cook slowly 15 minutes, add chili powder, flour and cumin seed, stir and add water, salt and pepper, cook for 35 minutes.

Cut the suet into similar cubes. Put the suet into a heavy iron pot or kettle, and heat until you have 1 or 2 tablespoons of fat in the kettle. Remove the suet (solids) and discard it. Put the beef into the kettle, turn up the fire and cook until meat is browned, stirring frequently. Add the chili powder, one tablespoon of comino, the oregano and enough water to cover the meat well. Simmer very slowly over an asbestos pad for two hours, adding a little water if necessary. Keep covered and stir well every half hour.

MEANWHILE, prepare the chili pepper as follows: Open the pods, remove all seeds, fibers and stems; place in a saucepan, cover with water and cook over medium fire about 15 minutes. Remove from pan, saving the cooking water. Carefully strip off the thin, tough membrane that covers the peppers. This is easily done if you strip it off while the peppers are still warm from the cooking.

Then take the pulp and either put it through a sieve or put into a food blender with the cooking water and turn on the blender for about one minute. If sieved, mix the sieved pulp with the cooking water.

AT THE END of the first 3-hour cooking period, uncover and add the pepper pulp and cooking water, one large onion chopped fine; return to fire, cover and cook very slowly over the asbestos pad for another hour. Next, chop the garlic and grind it with a pestle into the tablespoonful of salt, until you have a paste. Add this garlic paste and the other tablespoonful of comino to the chili. Continue cooking for another 15 minutes or more. If the juice is thin, add one or two tablespoons of flour shaken up with a little cold water in a tightly covered jar or bottle, to thicken.

Serve very hot with or without beans. Never cook the beans with the chili. This quantity will serve six or more.

Note that neither recipe uses any tomatoes. Mr. Capers does use onion, but the only other fresh ingredient is the garlic.

Mrs. Ventura's cooking time of 35 minutes seems a bit short. Mr. Capers' cooking time of approximately four hours may be about right. (The cooking times given in the recipe don't quite add up). Both recipes use flour to thicken the mix.

Next month, part two: [Chili Competition Erupts in Terlingua.](#)