

COMPETITION CHILI: DOWN TO BASICS

By Alan Dujenski

Ideally, you want the meat to be tender (to the point of almost falling apart), the spices should be at their peak (not bitter), and the sauce should be velvet-like. How do you get there? This whole process, as I have viewed it, is a big cycle. First you start with a basic recipe, select some spices, and pick a cut of meat. Cook your recipe using that particular type of cut of meat several times and see where you are. If the meat is not tender enough you either have to change the cooking time or change the cut of beef. Then you have to decide if you want to cook the meat by itself or cook it with the sauce. Problem with the latter method is if the meat doesn't get tender soon enough, you may end up over-cooking the sauce driving off the flavor and making it bitter. Let's look at some specifics:

CHOOSING MEAT: I was schooled that you use only chuck "mock tender". I have since found that that is not necessarily true. You want a cut of meat that will get tender, hold its shape, have little gristle, and taste good. You can use even the real tender "London Broil" if you don't over-cook it. I have found that a good all-around chili meat is the rump roast, bottom round, or top round. They are all basically the same piece of meat. It is low in gristle, holds its shape and has a good taste. Some folks like shoulder clod, but depending upon the cow, it could take a while to cook to get tender because it has very little fat in it. You want a cut of beef that has fine marbling of fat throughout. It helps it get tender and adds flavor.

PREPARING THE MEAT: This is probably old news to most of you but it is worth repeating for the new folks. To get nice cubes (3/8") you need to freeze the meat. When ready to cut the meat you partially thaw the meat, using the defrost cycle, in the microwave (I like mine still on the firm side). Using a sharp boning knife, slice the meat into the 3/8" slices, turn on its side and cube away. I generally cut away a thin slice of the top and bottom edges of the slice first because freezer burn will make that meat go mushy when cooking. I put it in plastic bags and put it back into the freezer. For my recipe, I use 1 1/2 pounds of meat. I split the meat into two quart size "baggies" for convenience. The refreezing helps to tenderize the meat (according to the experts). It is best to cut the meat no more than one to two nights before the cookoff to keep other flavors being absorbed and freezer burn developing.

CHOOSING THE RECIPE: I have tried them all and found out, in my opinion, the simpler the recipe the better the chili. The standard most people use is the YAHOO CHILI recipe used by Barbara Britton (1989 Terlingua Champion). My problem with that recipe was the fact it was easy to turn bitter on me. I tried every trick in the book and met with only marginal success. I have since gone to a two dump method and find it works much better. I will include the recipe at the end of this article that won the Washington State Championship last year. The recipe you choose also depends upon the cut of meat you use. I cook my meat to almost tender then add the spices.

CHOOSING THE SPICES: This may be blaspheme but I have found that the spices are not as important as how you blend them. You want your chili to be a red-brown (favoring the red side). So the mixture should produce this desirable hue. A mistake I found I made was that certain chili powders are stronger than others and that if a recipe calls for a total of 6 tablespoons of chili powder, for a particular brand, 4 may be enough. This is where the experimenting comes in. For your cooking time and recipe, altering a spice by 10% could make a big difference. There are a lot of good spice companies out there and you need to find the one you feel comfortable with. I have used Pendery's for years but have settled with MARKET SPICE out of Redmond, WA. I started my winning with their spices and am superstitious about changing. (Mild Bills.com is another good one for spices.)

PREPARING THE SPICES: I ALWAYS measure the spices using level spoons. This way you can be assured that you are getting the same mix each time. After measuring them out, I will double grind already. Here is the reason(s). When they were first ground, they released a lot of flavor or oils. Most of them have since dried out. Regrinding them releases new oils. I grind them the morning of the cookoff and put them in "baggies" and immediately put them on ice to keep the oils from evaporating. This double-grinding is done with a coffeegrinder. One dedicated to spices, not for your coffee.

1995 WASHINGTON STATE CHAMPION WINNING RECIPE

1 1/2 pounds of chuck steak or roast, cubed (3/8")
4 Tbsp New Mexican chili powder
1 Tbsp Texas Chili powder
1 Tbsp Paprika
1 Tbsp garlic powder
1 Tbsp onion powder
1 Tbsp cumin
1/2 Tsp cayenne pepper
1/2 Tsp white pepper
1/2 Tsp salt
1/2 Tsp brown sugar
1/2 Tsp MSG (or Sazon Goya)
2 - 15oz cans chicken broth
1 - 8 oz can tomato sauce
1 cube beef bouillon
1 cup distilled water

Brown the meat in about 1 Tbsp cooking oil. Cook in it's own juices until the juices have almost boiled away. Add a can of chicken broth. Simmer about another 30-40 minutes or until tender. Rinse the meat to get rid of grit and set aside. Mix the chili powder, cumin, paprika, onion, garlic, peppers, and salt. Divide equally in half. Now add the chicken broth, beef bouillon, tomato sauce, and water. Bring to a gentle boil and add half of the spice mix and the meat. Simmer for 30 minutes and then add the second half of the spice mix and cook for another 30 minutes. The sauce should start to thicken by this time. Add 1 Tsp brown sugar and 1/2 Tsp MSG. Turn off heat, cover, and let set for 15-20 minutes to allow the spices to marry with the meat. Reheat and serve.

I can't guarantee that you will win but you should do well with this. Remember my friend Don Alciati? Took a class with me and won first place at the last cookoff beating me out by three points. You be the judge!