

## **CHOOSING THE RIGHT EQUIPMENT**

*By Alan Dujenski*

“You need the right tool for the job.” How many times have you heard that or better yet how many of you have tried to do a job and you didn’t have just the right tool. It made the task not only harder but not as much fun.

The same goes for cooking chili (or cooking anything as a matter of fact). Everybody is different, just like their chili recipes. There is no “one” correct pot, stove, etc. Some are a little better, or maybe I should say, more consistently produce better results. You need to make an intelligent choice so you are not surprised later on.

### **SELECTING THE STOVE**

The best way to cook chili is on your home range. Being able to have a well regulated heat source that can be adjusted high enough to get the chili cooking initially and then low enough so you don’t scorch the pot is very important. Unfortunately this is not feasible to have that stove at a cookoff. Additionally, the rules require the chili to be cooked on a portable stove.

Unless you have an elaborate cooking kitchen on a trailer (ED Note: CASI rules prohibit cooking in tents or travel trailers.) you will be using a camping style portable stove. There are only two real choices available to you: (1) PROPANE fuel or (2) WHITE GAS fuel. The propane type is easy and safest to use and is good for cooking under most conditions, even in cold weather. The WHITE GAS is used by some because the fuel is a little cheaper and many use the stove for camping where they may have lanterns that run off the same fuel. It produces good heat but unless the stove is WELL MAINTAINED, I have seen them flare into a 3 foot tall inferno. For those of you who want the safety of a Propane stove, if you purchase propane in refillable bottles (as opposed to the small disposable ones) the price will be comparable to the white gas. Also you will be kinder to the environment by not throwing the small bottles away.

There are stoves that use kerosene and unleaded gasoline. These however do not produce a good steady flame because of the “dirty nature” of the fuel. Besides being a bit temperamental to use, they produce strong vapors and sometimes smoke which is not only unhealthy to you but can contaminate your chili (giving it a fuel taste).

Alcohol stoves are out. They just don’t produce a hot enough flame for cooking chili and do not perform well in cold weather. These are better suited as food warmers - not for cooking.

### **CONTENDING WITH THE ENVIRONMENT**

Strong winds, rain, and cold weather all have a dramatic affect on your cooking time. Since most chili recipes are time sensitive being able to cook your meat tender and get your sauce to thicken within the usual three hour cooking time allowed is extremely important.

Wind screens provided as part of most cook stoves general are inadequate, especially as the elements go to extremes. Many folks use three-sided screens. Although somewhat effective, a better way to go is with a four-sided arrangement. This controls the air around the stove better. Because I was concerned with not having cover at Terlingua, and I have heard about those Texas wind and dust storms, I designed a trunk that converts into a cooking station, the front folds down and the top props up. Depending upon the conditions, I can make the cooking area as tight or as open as I need.

Several folks have told me how they have improvised with cardboard boxes and aluminum foil. If it works that's fine. My own personal preference is that if you look professional, you will feel professional, and that you will cook like a professional. With this case and the flexibility of it as a cook station, I feel well prepared for the elements and can concentrate on one thing: COOK'N CHILI! Nuff on this.

### **CHOOSING THE RIGHT POT**

You have a lot of choices available to you, all of which produce good results. Some folks like Fords, other Chevies, or like me I swear by old Volkswagens. They all get you where you are going but a little differently. It is very important that you know your pot and how it cooks to get the best results.

**ALUMINUM:** You never want to use aluminum with strong acidic foods like chili. Aluminum oxides are pulled into the food which not only leaves a "taste" but some medical reports indicate that aluminum and Alzheimer's Disease are connected.

**GLASS:** Good cooking pots but the draw backs are they don't hold heat well and develop "hot-spots" where the flame impinges on the bottom of the pot which can burn the chili if you are not careful. YOU need to stir often and even think about using a diffuser plate. This is a corrugated, multi-layered plate that you set on top of the burner and you set your pot on it. As the name implies, it diffuses the flame so hot spots don't occur. But you do lose a lot of heat with the diffuser. If you are in a cold and windy environment, it could make it difficult to get your chili cooked.

**STAINLESS STEEL:** Good all around pot for cooking. The material does not hold flavors (generally) from previous things cooked in it and has good thermal properties. However, you want a thick bottomed pot or you will experience similar problems as with the glass and burning of the chili.

**CAST IRON:** It too has good and bad points. The material holds heat extremely well and because of its thickness also minimizes the chance of burning. Problem is cast iron is porous and iron can be leached out by strong acid foods like tomato and chilies. If you properly "season" a pot, the problem is reduced but not totally eliminated. Also, the seasoning is a "fat" and it can impart some slight tastes of its own. Ideally, an enameled covered cast iron pot gives you the best of everything, almost. From the cooking perspective it is ideal. But cast iron is heavy. Also, if you accidentally drop the pot, because of its brittle nature, it can break.

**DOUBLE BOILERS:** They are excellent in regards to reducing the chances of ever burning your chili, however, the heat getting to your chili is limited to about the boiling point of water (212 degrees F.)

**WHAT SIZE POT?** Generally a 2 1/2 to 3 1/2 quart size is ideal. One thing to remember is that the larger the surface area of the chili, the quicker it will thicken because there is a larger area for evaporation of moisture. To me this is important because I like to cook my chili as quickly as possible so the spices stay fresh and bitterness has less chance of occurring. I use Glenna's (my wife) pot when I can, which is a 4 1/2 quart Le Cruset.

### **COOKING AT HIGHER ELEVATIONS**

When you cook at higher elevations, the atmospheric pressure is less. As you know, because of the lower air pressure, water will boil at a lower temperature. You get good and bad with this. First, because the water boils off easier, the sauce will thicken sooner. However, boiling at a lower temperature means the meat will take longer to get tender. Those of you using meats such as chuck tender or shoulder clod, this can be a real problem. One solution is to artificially increase the atmosphere with the use of a pressure cooker. This technique has been used successfully by some cooks, but you really need to practice so you don't overcook the meat. My alternative is cooking with the lid on my Le Cruset. The heavy cast iron cover creates a mini pressure cooker and compensates quite well for altitudes up to at least 6,000 feet (I haven't cooked at higher altitudes to test it).

A good pot will cost about \$70 - \$150. If you keep your eyes open for sales, visit garage sales or go to second-hand stores. There are some good buys out there!