

WINNING AT CHILI COOKOFFS

By Alan Dujenski

One of the most frustrating feelings in chili cooking is to come out weekend after weekend competing in the chili cookoffs and not place. There are many of those “chiliheads” that say that people come out for the camaraderie and it shouldn’t make a difference if you win or not. I commend those that can take that cavalier attitude but I am not one of those. I guess the best approach would be a blend of both worlds. Come out for the camaraderie and to regularly place.

After two years of cooking my heart out and occasionally breaking into the top ten, I was getting frustrated. After several years of making all the mistakes at least once, I can say “I’ve been there, done that, etc.” What I would like to do in a series of articles is to share with you some of the knowledge I have gained from my mistakes. If you subscribe to the theory that you can best succeed by learning from the mistakes of others, you will qualify for a masters degree at the end of this year.

I can’t guarantee that you will be the Terlingua Champion, but I know you can place regularly. My friend, Don who cooked chili with me twice got a 6th and a 3rd for his two showings. You be the judge!

SO YOU WANT TO BE A CHILI COOK!

Some folks come by cooking naturally. Take Ruth Peach, for example. You could blindfold her and she could cook a top quality pot of chili each and every time (and she does). My wife, Glenna is the same. Now me, that is another story. I don’t have the most discriminating taste buds and without a good recipe I am lost. Pride often got in my way and I felt I could stray from the tried and true by “experimenting.” It was like the many times I thought I knew a short cut, only to end up lost.

GET A WINNING COMPETITION RECIPE AND STICK WITH IT FOR SEVERAL COOKOFFS!

Aunt Ruby’s home chili recipe that warmed your tummy on many a cold winter afternoon won’t cut it in competition. My first cookoff in CASI was in Blaine several years ago. I had probably the best pot I ever made. It is tough to beat the flavor of shredded brisket and the colorful look of chunks of red and green peppers floating in a sea of “red.” But it is not competition style. I have seen many first time cooks make this same mistake. By the way, I got third (only because there were just three of us cooking that day).

NEVER “EXPERIMENT” ON THE DAY OF A COOKOFF!

One cookoff I tried a different brand of bouillon cubes. It was so salty I was ashamed to turn it in. On another occasion I tried some London Broil. Not knowing that that cooking time was significantly less, I had a pot of shredded beef at turnin time. If I decide to try something new or different I try it at home several times first.

HOW CAN YOU TELL WHAT IS A GOOD RECIPE?

I have watched cooks over the years and the most consistent winners are those that have a simple recipe and use the least amount of cooking time. Remember the fewer the steps, the less you can mess up. Also, the shorter the cooking time, the less chance for bitterness to develop in your chili. I prefer to brown and cook the meat until almost tender and then add the spices, etc. Typically, meat takes about an hour and a second hour for the spices to form a rich and thick sauce. Here is the 1995 winning Terlingua recipe:

SIERRA CHILI by *Colleen Wallace*

2 1/2 lbs chuck mock tender-cubed or chili ground. Brown in 1/2 tsp Crisco with seasoned salt.

Add one can Swanson's beef broth; one can 8oz tomato sauce and water to cover meat plus one inch (add water as needed for consistency). Low boil for 1/2 hour.

Add: 1 tbs chili powder; 1 tbs granulated onion powder; 1 tsp granulated garlic powder; 1/2 tsp cayenne pepper, ground; 1/4 tsp jalapeno pepper powder; 1 tsp beef bouillon granules; 2 tsp chicken bouillon granules; and 1/2 tsp salt. Slow bubble about one hour or until meat is tender.

Add: 4 tsp cumin; 1 tsp granulated garlic powder; 1/4 tsp black pepper; 1 package of Sazon Goya; 6 tbs chili powder; 1/4 tsp brown sugar. (Suggested chili powders: Gebhardt's, Adams, Pendreys.) Slow bubble about 45 minutes.

My recipe will be published in another article. Remember that no cook will reveal "all" his or her secrets, but it will be close. Mine is EXACTLY what won the 1995 Washington State Championship.

CHOOSING THE SPICES!

Ten people can cook the same recipe, but the chilies will not all taste the same. A lot of this is attributed to the spices. If you don't have discriminating taste buds, find out what the winners use. PENDERY'S (telephone: Toll free 1-800-533-1870 for a catalog) is an excellent source. They offer a good variety at a good discount. Me? I stumbled upon the MARKET SPICE COMPANY by accident. I didn't have time to order by mail (the procrastinator I am) and went to the Public Market in Seattle. Since using their spices I have placed in most of the competitions. What I am saying is to find a source you feel good with and stay with it for a while. Basically you will need only the following: GROUND CHILI PEPPER, GROUND CHILI BLEND, CUMIN, GARLIC, and ONION. The difference between the ground chili pepper and the blend is that the blend contains garlic, onion, etc., as the name implies. Folks don't use blends exclusively because the consistency of the blend can vary from order to order. Also the blends tend to be darker than you want for competition. Typically you will see recipes with a 4 to 1 ration of chili powder to blend.

PRACTICING YOUR RECIPE!

I mentioned that you need to practice your recipe if you want to make sure you have no surprises at turn in time. To keep the cost down I will make only the sauce. You need to remember that cooking on the camp stove is different than cooking on the stove at home. Once you think you have the recipe down, try it on the camp stove. There can be a significant difference in cooking time.

IN UPCOMING ARTICLES!

In the following series of articles I will be talking about the following subjects:

Choosing your cooking equipment.

Preparing for the cookoff.

Choosing the right meat.

Good practices the day of the cookoff.

What is “hot” in spices.

How to size up the judges.

REFERENCE BOOKS:

There are two excellent books that every cook should have (and most of the good ones have read). I swear by them for the basics and will not even try to compete with the knowledge they impart.

TOP OF TEXAS COOKBOOK

Top of Texas Pod
4510 Princeton
Garland, TX 75042

HOW TO MAKE CHAMPIONSHIP CHILI AND WIN!

Hi-Co Western Products
1806 East Main St
Mesa, AZ 85203

WINNING ISN'T EVERYTHING BUT IT SURE MAKES COOKOFFS A LOT MORE FUN!

Remember that placing is about 50% preparation and 50% luck. Placing consistently in the top 3 is about 80% preparation and 20% luck.