

An Illustrated Look at the Terlingua Chili Cook-off

Drawing and eating at the Super Bowl of chili cook-offs.

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NOVEMBER 2017



ILLUSTRATIONS BY MATT DIFEE 

Terlingua, Texas. It's the Super Bowl of chili cook-offs. You can't compete unless you've gotten yourself qualified by winning smaller competitions, and you have to show picture ID on account of what happened in 2003. A fella by the name of Don Eastep, a Yankee no less, snuck into the proceedings posing as his brother, who'd qualified but couldn't attend.

As if that wasn't bad enough, take a listen to this. Picture a desert scene with pickup trucks and campers and about a hundred folks in straw hats and aprons cooking chili on camp stoves. Now, our friend here, he'd set up his cooking area, but he wasn't cooking. He was strolling around sipping a koozie-clad cold one and chitchatting. He'd eventually ask folks for a taste of their chili in a Styrofoam cup, and most of the cooks obliged. He

took those samples and dumped them into his own pot. He got enough to enter the

contest. And he won.

Yep. He won the whole

dang deal. (Editorial

Note: This event

happened at the Behind

the Store cookoff, not

the CASI event)



Now, that may seem

hilarious to you and

me, but it ain't one bit

funny to a chilihead.

That's what they call

themselves, the

fundamentalists of the

chili religion, the "chiligious," if you will. They love chili like a nun loves Jesus. And almost every weekend they're off to one of the five hundred sanctioned cook-offs in their big fancy motor homes with bumper stickers like this:



They buy chili-related shirts and chili-related dog sweaters. They write chili blogs, read



chili magazines, and have tackle boxes or sewing kits packed with exotic chili powders that you and I have never heard of.

And every fall for fifty years now, thousands of chiliheads have been making the pilgrimage to the dusty ghost town of Terlingua to fight for supremacy. Last year I decided to go check it out. The first thing I learned is that there are two cook-offs. Yep. Like any major religion, there have been doctrinal schisms. The first was in 1975, when one of the founders, race-car driver Carroll Shelby, and all his friends split off to do their own thing in California (chili con tofu?). The remaining chiliheads split into two camps in 1983, the smaller known as the Tolbert group and the larger known as the Chili Appreciation Society International, or "CASI," for short. These two factions have held concurrent cook-offs a stone's throw apart ever since. (Thankfully, not literally "a stone's throw.")

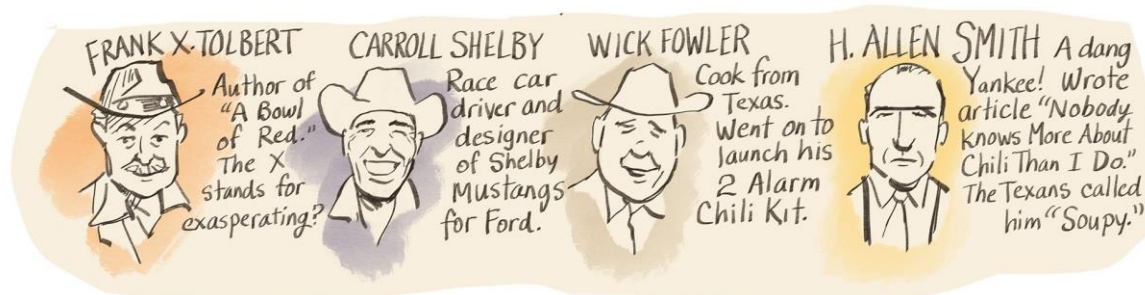
Rumor has it “Terlingua” comes from the Spanish *tres lenguas*, which referred to the three languages spoken by the Apache, Shawnee, and Comanche who gathered here peacefully to share the only source of water. It’s a place where three warring Indian tribes came together and where three chili tribes split apart.

What Is Chili?

It’s short for chili con carne. It’s not chili con carne y frijoles. Beans have no business in chili, just like a man’s toes don’t belong in flip-flops. Call me old-fashioned, but I believe a man needs to be ready to kick a rattlesnake out of the path of a crawling baby, and you’re not doing that in flip-flops. It’s off topic, but it needs to be said. Men of Texas, put your toes away.

1967:

It started as a publicity stunt to promote Tolbert’s book and Shelby’s West Texas real estate schemes. Hence Chili. Hence Terlingua. It pitted two cooks against each other: the good guy, Wick Fowler, versus the bad guy, Allen Smith. It was all a big goof and declared a draw when one of the judges scorched his taste buds. The next year masked bandits stole the ballot box and threw it down a mine shaft. That kind of thing. Each new year brought more cooks, more rules, more bickering.

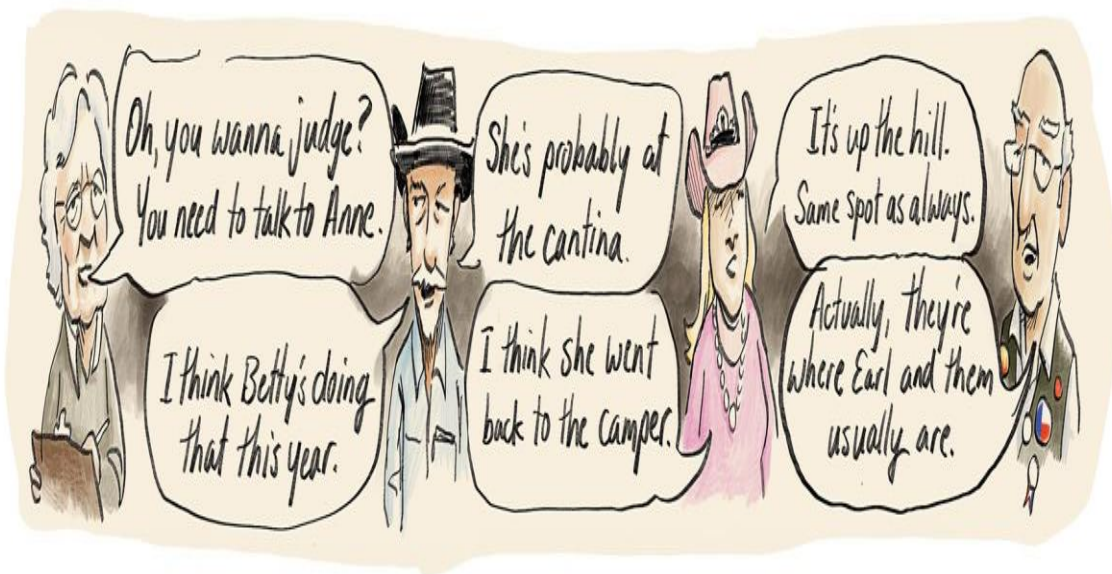


Is this rift serious? Yeah. Lawyers were involved. Is it silly? Yeah. We’re talking about something most people think of as hot dog topping. Is it a big deal? Not really. A few of the old-timers still seem to be smoldering about it, but for everyone else it’s just nothing, like a town with two Baptist churches. People just go to the one they go to. I think some other folks could take a lesson from this. Yeah, I’m talking about you, Sunnis and Shiites.



Thursday

One thing that will surprise you about a chili cook-off is how hard it is to get any chili. The only surefire way is if you volunteer to be a judge. So when I show up at Tolbert's, that's my mission.



But by the time I've figured out who to talk to, all the chili judging spots are taken. All the barbecue too. I can judge the black-eyed peas. I like black-eyed peas, but this feels like going to a fireworks stand and leaving with sparklers.

Luckily there's another cook-off just down the road. At CASI, they have a sign-up table for judges. Ah, organization. I sign up. That's the first difference I notice between the two cook-offs. CASI is bigger and more professional, better funded. They have large steel-framed structures to house their activities. Tolbert's events take place in a cluster of tin-roofed adobe buildings that were probably originally designed to shade goats. It's charmingly informal. Kathleen Ryan Tolbert, Frank's daughter, sums it up.



At CASI, they need the infrastructure, because they'll get three times the number of people. The incoming director, a third-generation chili cook, Kris Hudspeth, between the chirps and crackles of his walkie-talkie, tells me



It's true. They even have a temporary police station strategically placed in what's known to be the wild part of the CASI town. We might as well get into this now, I guess. See, each cook-off has a sort of camp-within-the-camp. At CASI, it's separated from the chili-cooking sector by a dry creek bed and it's called Krazy Flats. It's the night spot, the red-light district. Every night, sunburnt drunk people cruise around in dune buggies and ATVs. They hop on and off a neon-covered party bus as it makes laps blaring frat jams. And when Krazy Flatters really cut loose, they gather at a tent bar called Wally's Pole and Grill, where there's free booze and grub, more neon, and yes, it's true, a stripper pole. It's mid-morning when I first see it, so thankfully the pole is unoccupied. I'll check back later, you know, for research. Over at Tolbert's, the side camp is just over a ridge and it's known as Cowboy Camp. When I get there, it's deserted. Indian raid?



Nope, they've all gone to Mexico, which is just down the road. They do this every year to deliver gifts and sit down with amigos for lunch at a cute little Asian fusion place. I'm kidding. They eat tacos.

Friday

One of the first chili cooks I meet is 1984 Tolbert champ John Billy Murray. He's 83 but has the grin and nimble eyebrows of a man half that age. He gives me the lay of the land.



The basic rules are that all chili must be prepared on site using only meat, liquid, and spices. You can use any meat but beef always wins. Your liquids and spices can be pre-made or commercial products. No one expects you to grind dried chiles out here or brew your own beer. You also can't put anything in that would identify it as yours, like hunks of onion or something. That way you can't tell your judging buddies what to look for.

That evening something nice happens. The cowboys at Cowboy Camp host a big potluck dinner. The food is great, roasted goat and all the fixin's, and the vibe's even better. It's all to raise money for ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease, which took Wick Fowler's life back in 1972. The trail boss at Cowboy Camp seems to be Tom Nall. He's been around since nearly the beginning and was the first salesman for Wick's 2 Alarm Chili mix, and based on the warmth of his smile and handshake, I'd bet he had a lot to do with its success. He and the others who run things are decked out like authentic working cowboys. (Ones that work as two-step instructors.) And Tom has a big white cowboy mustache. I wonder how he keeps it from turning orange when he eats chili.



With pockets empty and my soul and belly full, it's time to head over to Krazy Flats for an eyeful.

Things are in full swing, if you know what I mean. Exhibitionists, both male and female, overfed and overaged, shaking what their mama and Whataburger gave 'em. Maybe I'm a prude or just too sober, but this all makes me cringe. And I think it attracts the wrong crowd. Folks who aren't here for the chili and who might not realize that crazy isn't spelled with a "K." To make matters worse, while strolling the darkened alleys of Krazy Flats, I think I caught an accidental glimpse through an open tent flap of some corpulent copulation. I can't be sure. It's possible it was just a prepping pitmaster oiling a pork butt.



Saturday

It's go time for the chili cooks. Turn in time, like any proper West Texas showdown, is at high noon. By nine in the morning, most of the cooks are hard at it. At Tolbert's, John Bill Murray is making meatballs.



Larry Walton, CASI champ 2011, who is actually cooking chili at both events, seems remarkably relaxed.



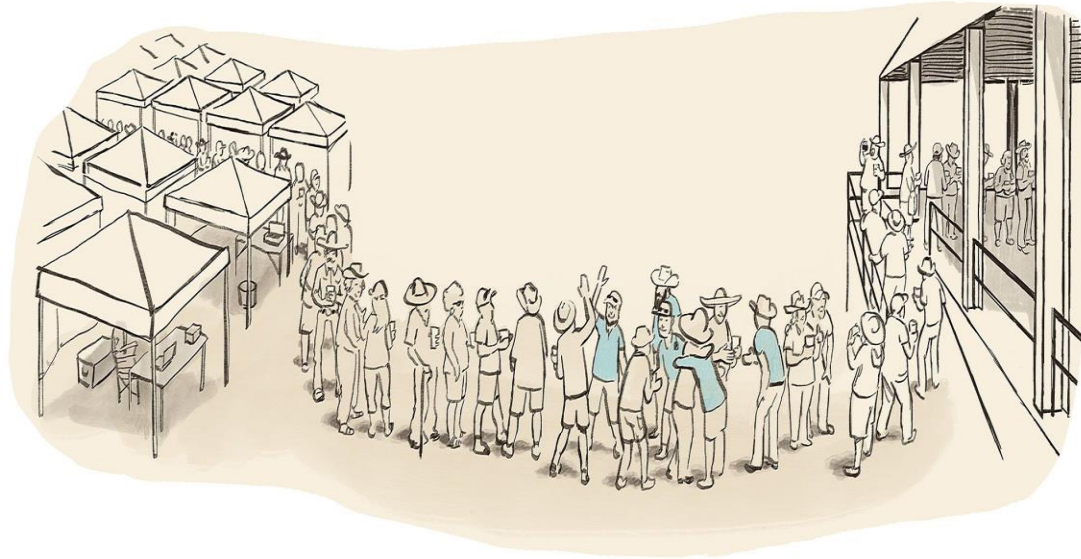
Over at CASI, the cooks are preparing for turn in.



Deanna Castillo and Herman Everett, a local married couple, are floating serrano peppers in their pots. They're fairly new to all this, but Tom Dozier has given them some tips.



The clock strikes noon at CASI, and 327 chili cooks form a long winding line clutching their urn-size Styrofoam cups like supplicants approaching a throne. The CASI board forms an honor guard to congratulate the cooks with high fives, handshakes, and hugs.



A couple of hours later, after four rounds of preliminary judging, they've whittled it down to just 24 final chilis. Then they called me. That's right. I was fortunate enough, no doubt due to my culinary reputation, to be a judge in the final round. I humbly take my place at the table.

How does the judging work?

Judges rate each cup from one to ten, based on how close it comes to what they imagine to be the perfect chili, taking into account these qualities.

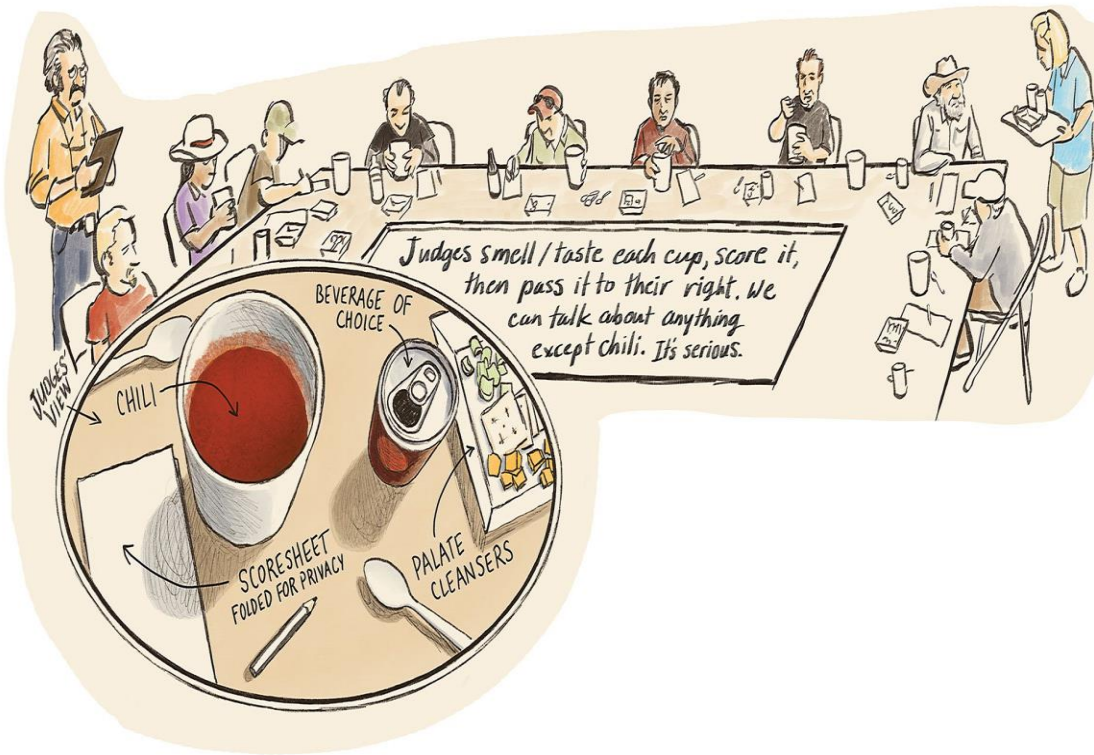
Aroma: It should smell like chili, not beef stew or, God forbid, cinnamon.

Color: They call it a bowl of red for a reason.

Consistency: Meat should be tender, but not mushy. Chili not too thick or thin, grainy or greasy.

Taste: Chili flavor; cumin; hot but not too hot, or too salty, or sweet; balance.

Aftertaste: Sometimes called "back heat." A complex flowering of flavors without any bitterness.



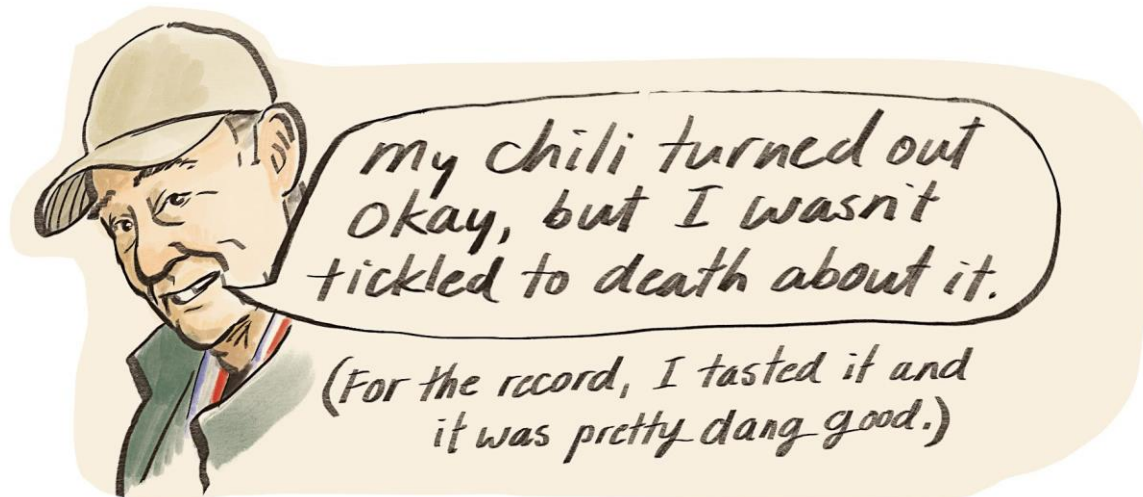
So, how was the chili?

Well, it wasn't that hot. It was great, don't get me wrong. This is the very best of the very best, so it was all delicious. It just wasn't very spicy. And I don't even like crazy-hot stuff. I just want it to have a little pep. Come on. This isn't Ohio, where the chili doubles as spaghetti sauce. This is Texas, and we have a reputation to uphold.

So, Who Won?

Drumroll . . . At CASI, first place went to Lisa Stone, who cooked alongside her mom and her daughter. Second went to T. J. Cannon, who should have burned it just a little more. And at Tolbert's, believe it or not, Deanna Castillo won the prize. Guess who came in second? Her husband, Herman! Larry Wilton came in seventh place.

John Billy Murray didn't place, but he wasn't surprised.



Can You Do It?

Maybe you're like me and you're thinking, "Hey, I wonder if a rookie like me could walk in and compete in the rarefied world of championship chili." The answer is yes. It happens all the time. Like two years ago. James Burns won CASI his first year as a chili cook. How?



I've gone ahead and done that for you:

Matt Diffie's

BASIC TEXAS CONTEST CHILI

MEAT: 2 lbs. of ground beef 80% lean 20% fat

LIQUID: One 14.5 oz can of beef broth, one 14.5 oz can of chicken broth, one 8 oz can of tomato sauce

1st SPICES: 2 Tbs chili powder, 1 Tbs onion powder, 1 Tbs garlic powder, 1/8 tsp salt

2nd SPICES: 2 Tbs chili powder, 1 Tbs cumin, 1/2 tsp cayenne

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- Brown the meat until gray. Drain the grease and set aside.
 - In the same pot, bring liquids to a boil. Add the meat back in, along with the first spices. Stir lightly and simmer for forty minutes, or as long as it takes to listen to Lyle Lovett's Road to Ensenada. Don't fuss over the pot. Distract yourself by practicing your lasso tricks.
 - Add second spices and cook another thirty minutes. (First nine tracks of Lyle's Pontiac while whittling a horny toad from a hunk of mesquite.)
 - Right before turning in, taste and adjust as needed with salt, sweet, and heat.

NOTE: This recipe works for vegetarians too. Just replace the meat with six ounces of lightly crumbled Styrofoam, the Lyle Lovett with some Moby and the rope tricks and whittling with contributing to NPR.

And here are some ...

(Ways to tweak it)

SPICES: Go crazy!
Try every chile. Then experiment with new sources for salt, sweet, and heat.

I know a gal who uses dried kelp for salt.



I've heard of folks using all kinds of things: bananas, honey, even grape jelly.



LIQUID: How about a little beer, bourbon, or apple juice?



A lot of people add prune juice.

Mexican tomato sauce is a little bit sweeter.



MEAT: Try different meats. Cubed beef instead of ground?

I mix about half a pound of ground turkey into mine.



So you might be wondering, whatever happened to ol' Don Eastep, the chili imposter we started things off with. Well, he was found out, of course, and stripped of his winnings. To his credit, he was as embarrassed about the whole deal as everyone else. Maybe that's why he went on to become a bona fide chilihead up in Illinois and even returned to Terlingua to cook for fun a few years later, armed with a tongue-in-cheek pardon drafted by Governor Rick Perry. And you know, I kind of think that Don's shenanigans were just the sort that Tolbert and Shelby and the rest of the founders would have appreciated, so when Don died a few years ago, driving home from a cook-off, I like to think he was warmly welcomed with a wink and a grin to that one big cook-off in the sky.

