

So YOU WANT TO COOK COMPETITION CHILI?

Cooking competition chili can be a rewarding experience. Seasoned competition chili cooks enjoy the camaraderie of their fellow cooks and especially enjoy the opportunity to exercise their "bragging rights" when they have won or placed in a chili cook-off contest.

WHAT IS COMPETITION CHILI?

Chili cook-off's are held in virtually every state and in many countries around the world. Usually held as fund-raising events for charity, they serve also as an outlet, a hobby, for countless competition chili cooks. Everyone loves Momm chili and everyone seems to have the recipe to end all recipes. So the reason for chili cook-off competition is to settle the score and, in the process, raise money for a good cause. Chili is cooked on site and from scratch. A panel of judges, using a blind selection process, determines the winners.

WHAT IS A SANCTIONED COOKOFF?

There are two sanctioning bodies that provide rules and a membership structure for chili cook-off's. The International Chili Society (ICS) operates out of California and the Chili Appreciation Society International (CASI) operates out of Texas. Another, more loosely formed organization is called the Original Terlingua International Frank X. Tolbert Wick Fowler Memorial Championship Chili Cook-off, Inc., (TOLBERT).

ICS hosts its Worlds Championship Chili Cook-off in a venue out West in early October each year. To qualify to cook in the Worlds Championship one must win first place in an ICS sanctioned state or regional chili cook-off, or two ICS sanctioned district cook-off's. The first place winner in the traditional red Worlds Championship wins a prize of \$25,000. Judges in ICS cook-off's are permitted to taste and re-taste the chili samples and select their 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place chilies. In addition to the traditional red chili competition, ICS also offers the chili verde (green chili) and salsa competitions. CASI uses a point accumulation system to

determine who is invited to cook in their International Chili Championship. Cooks accumulate points, in order to qualify for the International Championship, by winning or placing in CASI sanctioned cook-off's. They can also automatically qualify by winning certain places at state and regional championships. The CASI Terlingua International Chili Championship cook-off is held on the first Saturday of November in Terlingua, Texas, a remote area just west of the Big Bend National Park on the Rio Grande River. While there is no cash prize for winning this championship, the "bragging rights" have an incalculable value to seasoned chili cooks. Judges in CASI have only one opportunity to taste each chili. They are not permitted to re-taste any chili sample after they have passed the sample on to the next judge. Each chili is judged on its own merit and scored on a scale of 1 to 10. Judging criteria are color, consistency, aroma, taste, and aftertaste. CASI cook-off's frequently have a bean, chicken wings, green chili, or salsa competition as a side event for an additional entry fee. There is usually a payback to the winner of these side events. Also, there is usually a "cooks pot" in which you can participate that normally pays back 50% of the collected monies to 1st place, 30% to 2nd place and 20% to 3rd place. Participation in the "cooks pot" is voluntary and the fee is normally \$2. TOLBERT holds a championship cook-off on the same date as the CASI Terlingua International Chili Championship Cook-off in November, and in the same vicinity north of the Big Bend National Park in Texas. This championship cook-off is affectionately called the "behind the store" cook-off. To be eligible to cook in this championship, you must win any sanctioned cook-off or accumulate nine points in TX or six points in the other states. At any sanctioned cook-off 1st place is awarded 5 points, 2nd is 4 points, 3rd is 3 points and 4th-10th is 2 points.

WHAT ARE THE COMPETITION RULES?

It is important to contrast the Official Contestant Rules in each organization as opposed to "the real world" of competitive chili cooking. These rules may allow ingredients in your chili that more than likely would put you "outside the range" of judging acceptability if used, however, that is up to you. It is unfortunate when a new, excited chili cook attends his or her first chili cook-off, spends quite a bit of money for the entry fees, travel, ingredients and equipment, and finds the chili cooked is not "competitive". This turns many first time cooks away, and they never come back.

ICS Official Contestant Rules & Regulations

The following rules and regulations for cooks at the Worlds Championship, State, Regional and District Cookoffs are as follows:

1. Traditional Red Chili is defined by the International Chili Society as any kind of meat or combination of meats, cooked with red chili peppers, various spices and other ingredients, with the exception of BEANS and PASTA which are strictly forbidden.
2. Chili Verde is defined by the International Chili Society as any kind of meat or combination of meats, cooked with green chili peppers, various spices and other ingredients, with the exception of BEANS and PASTA which are strictly forbidden.
3. Salsa: there are no rules as to the ingredients or how to prepare your Salsa. It may be prepared at home and brought to the site that day, or it may be store bought and brought to the site, or it may be prepared at the Cook-off.
4. No ingredient may be pre-cooked in any way prior to the commencement of the official cook-off. The only exceptions are canned or bottled tomatoes, tomato sauce, peppers, pepper sauce, beverages, broth and grinding and/or mixing of spices. Meat may be treated, pre-cut or ground. MEAT MAY NOT BE PRE-COOKED. All other ingredients must be chopped or prepared during the preparation period.
5. You must be an ACTIVE ICS member to compete in any ICS competition including Traditional Red Chili, Chili Verde, and Salsa. You must be at least 18 years old.
6. The cooking period will be a minimum of 3 hours and a maximum of 4 hours. The exact starting and ending of the cooking period is to be announced by each local sponsoring organization. Cooking during entire cooking period is at the sole discretion of the contestant.
7. A representative of the sponsoring organization shall conduct a contestant's meeting, at which time final instructions are to be given and questions answered, no later than 1 hour prior to the official starting time of the cook-off.
8. Contestants are responsible for supplying all of their own cooking utensils, etc. The sponsors of the cook-off will provide an area for each contestant and in some instances stoves and/or electrical outlets.
9. Each contestant must cook a minimum of two quarts of competition chili prepared in one pot, which will be submitted for judging.
10. Contestants will be permitted to sell or participate in Peoples Choice Chili with the approval of the cook-off chairperson and in compliance with State and local agencies. It is at the discretion of each contestant if he or she wants to participate in Peoples Choice, unless the sponsoring organization requires Peoples Choice Chili in lieu of the entry fee (2 gal maximum) or in addition to the entry fee (1 gal maximum) may be required, but cooks should not be limited to a specific amount. Contestants may elect to pay a cash entry fee rather than provide Peoples Choice Chili. PEOPLES CHOICE CHILI MUST HAVE BEANS OR PASTA.
11. Each contestant will be assigned a contestants number by the Chief Scorekeeper and be given an official 32 oz. ICS judging cup. Each contestant should verify that the number on the bottom of their cup is the same as their assigned contestant number. Each contestant is responsible to deliver their cup, which must be filled to the bottom of the cups rim, to the judging area at the official time for judging.
12. Judges will be told they should vote for the chili they like best based on the following major considerations: good flavor, texture of the meat, consistency, blend of spices, aroma, and color.
13. The decisions of the Chief Judge shall be final.

For the complete rules for each organization, please visit these web sites;

ICS; http://www.chilicookoff.com/Event/Event_Rules.asp

CASI; <http://www.chili.org/documents/CASI%20Official%20Rule%20Book.pdf>

TOLBERT; http://www.abowlofred.com/Tolbert_Rules.shtml

THE REAL CHILI COOKING WORLD

As you can see from each organizations rules, it leaves the cook with a lot of leeway for putting some pretty exotic things in their chili. Having cooked competitively for over 20 years, I have learned that there is a rather narrow range of acceptability on the judging table. Representative chilies that would be considered mainstream are those of previous

champions from ICS and CASI. The recipes for these winning chilies can be found at the following websites:

ICS World Championship winners; http://www.chilicookoff.com/Winner/Winner_Champions.asp?Cat=1

CASI International Championship winners;

<http://www.chili.org/recipes.html>

These chilies, as you can see, have no exotic meats and exhibit a smooth, clean gravy with meat cubes, for the most part. The meat of choice depends on your area of the country, due to its availability. West coast cooks opt for tri-tip. This cut of meat is highly marbled and has a triangular appearance. Cooks in the other parts of the US have trouble finding tri-tip and so they normally use chuck tender (also called mock tender). This cut of meat is a few dollars less per pound than tri-tip. There are some parts of the country where hamburger meat or chili grind is used. CASI is trending more toward chili grind (coarsely ground beef), especially in the North Texas area. One of the best things a new cook can do is to volunteer to judge. CASI is always looking for judges at their events. Let the cook-off organizer know you are interested in judging. This will allow you to see what is considered "in range". Also, talk to the cooks. Most will give you pointers on dos and don'ts. Another interesting fact, from my experience, is that there are no real differences in the end chili product between chili organizations. So don't be afraid to try them all!

WHEN AND WHERE ARE THE COOKOFFS HELD?

The ICS Newsletter is published quarterly. It is a tabloid newspaper listing a host of ICS sanctioned chili cook-off's. A \$42 membership fee will get you on the mailing list for the ICS Newsletter and give you the privilege to cook in any ICS sanctioned chili cook-off for 12 months. Additionally, you will receive a subscription to "Chile Pepper" magazine, for 6 bi-monthly issues. Write to International Chili Society, P.O. Box 1027, San Juan Capistrano, CA 92693.

Information regarding the TOLBERT cook-off's can be had by writing P.O. Box 617, Corsicana, TX 75151.

Listings of chili cook-off's can be found on the Internet as well: ICS's web site is www.chilicookoff.com CASI's web site is www.chili.org.

TOLBERT's web site is www.abowlofred.com.

WHAT EQUIPMENT WILL YOU NEED TO GET STARTED?

Most chili cook-off's take place outdoors. Cooks must provide their own equipment for cooking. Seasoned competition chili cooks will come to the cook-off with canopies, tables, decorated booths and more. In addition to your meat and cooking ingredients, you will need to bring, as a minimum, the following extra gear:

- Table - Dipping or serving spoon
- Chili pot with lid*, 5-8 quart variety & a Knife
- (Glass lids not recommended for outdoor cooking) - Measuring spoons and cups
- Portable outdoor-style camp stove - Heat diffuser (inexpensive
- Can opener metal device to spread flames)
- Matches - Propane fuel cylinder
- Pot holders - Tablecloth, paper towels
- Ladle, large and small - Ice chest and ice
- Long-handled spoon - Cutting board
- 1 to 3 gallons water - Dishpan, dish soap, scrubbers, etc.

Since samples of your chili are usually given out to the public, most cook-off's fall under the jurisdiction of local health departments. You may need some additional equipment such as rubber gloves or hand-washing provisions in order to serve samples to the public. Check with the Cook-off Chairperson for local health department requirements for each cook-off.

HOW MUCH WILL IT COST TO COOK A WINNING POT OF COMPETITION CHILI?

Preparing a pot of competition chili will cost you about \$35. A breakdown of the approximate costs is:

- ~ 2-3 pounds of beef chuck, mock tender, round steak or tri-tip \$3-\$6/Pound
- ~ 8 oz. can of tomato sauce \$1.00
- ~ 14 ½ oz can of beef broth \$1.50
- ~ cooking oil \$1.50
- ~ an assortment of fresh spices \$12.00
- ~ propane gas for camp stove \$3.00
- ~ bag of ice for your cooler \$1.50
- ~ miscellaneous \$1.50

Some of these ingredients you will be able to carry over to additional cook-off's.

In addition to the cost of the ingredients, you will be asked to pay an entry or registration fee. A representative entry fee for CASI is about \$10-\$20 and ICS fees are approximately \$30 for red, \$20 for verde and \$10-\$15 for salsa.

WHAT PREPARATION CAN I DO AT HOME BEFORE THE COOKOFF?

Chili cooks often cut the chili meat at home a night or two before the cook-off. This saves time at the cook-off and provides the opportunity to take care of this time-consuming effort in the manageable confines of the family kitchen. Most chili cooks cube the meat into 3/8 inch cubes and freeze it in sealed plastic bags. Here's a tip to cut and cube meat; Trim the outside of the brisket or silvery skirt and freeze on a cookie sheet. Take out of freezer, partially thaw, and slice into 3/8 inch slices. Refreeze these on a cookie sheet, and then take out a group at a time and cube. Don't have time to do the whole batch? Put the extra slices in a freezer bag until ready. This way the meat won't wiggle around when you're cutting it, resulting in better standardized cubes. On the other hand, many cooks will cut their meat at the cook-off and that is perfectly all right. CASI is tending to go toward "chili grind only" (coarsely ground beef only) cook-off's, so ask the promoter before you go.

Some cooks measure their spices at home and bring them to the cook-off in separate containers. It is best to exactly pre-measure all spices and do it the same for each cook-off, so you can replicate the results. Many cooks grind their spices in an electric coffee grinder to a fine powder. This process makes for a smoother looking gravy and imparts better flavor to the finished product. If you experiment with something new, write it down so you know what you did! This practice helps keep one from being distracted by spectators or the effects of a windy or inclement day. This is your option.

WHAT HAPPENS AT A CHILI COOKOFF?

Typically a chili cook-off will start with the registration of the cooks and organizing where the cooks will set up their cooking gear. Thereafter, the Chief Judge or some other cook-off official will call for a "cooks meeting" during which the rules of the day will be explained and the cooks will be given an opportunity to ask questions.

The Chief Judge will announce when the preparation of ingredients may begin and the precise time cooks will be allowed to light their stoves to begin the cooking process. The lighting of the stoves typically provides a minimum of three (3) hours cooking time before turn-in of the chili samples to the judges. The Chief Judge will see to it that the official sampling cups will be presented to the individual cooks.

At the designated turn-in time, all cooks will take their chili samples to the judging tent or similar area. The Chief Judge will oversee the marking of the sample cups for the blind judging and the process of determining the winning bowl of chili will begin. It could take from one to two hours for the judging panel to complete the judging process. Announcement of the winners will be set at a time consistent with any other programmed activities.

Most importantly.....You will have fun...the time of your life kind of fun!

Common Mistakes By 1st Time Cooks

The following is list of "do's and don'ts" to keep in mind when you begin cooking in competition:

One:

First-time chili cooks will often garnish the chili before it is turned in to the judges. Sour cream, whole red or green peppers, mint, parsley, and, even, Maraschino cherries have been used to make the chili look "pretty" for the judges. Such garnishments mark the chili by defeating the blind judging process, and therefore may be disqualified by the Chief Judge. Don't garnish your chili.

Two:

The excitement of the chili cookoff is infectious and a novice cook may tend to rush the cooking preparation or fail to watch the cooking process closely. The result may be a scorched or burned pot of chili. Using an inexpensive heat diffuser will provide protection against the hot spot in the center of the burner. Diffusers can be found in kitchen stores and

some hardware stores. Cook the chili well but save the "blackened" effect for your Cajun dishes. Limit consumption of "adult beverages" until after turn-in to prevent "memory lapses" or ill-advised additions to your chili.

Three:

Winning chili is that perfect blend of spices which serves to light up the taste buds and to intoxicate the palate. As a first-time competition chili cook, you will be challenged by seasoned cooks who already have discovered that a blend of spices which allows a single spice to predominate the flavor of the chili will not obtain the favor of the judges. Be careful not to overdo one spice to the exclusion of all others (this includes HEAT). REMEMBER; YOU'RE COOKING FOR THE JUDGES, NOT FOR YOU.

Four:

The chili most likely to win will possess that spectacular and elusive marriage or blend of tender meat and a smooth, rich looking gravy. Of course, this blend must taste good. Don't allow poorly cut vegetables such as tomato, onion and garlic or seeds from tomatoes or peppers to float in the traditional red chili gravy. Even though this may be allowed by the rules, floating objects tend to detract from the appetizing appearance of the traditional red chili. The use of powders is one way of getting away from this problem. Also, rinsing your meat either before or after browning will extract a lot of the blood. This process will significantly enhance the smoothness of the gravy. Grinding of the spices and other ingredients goes a long way to achieve the look most pleasing to the judges. The exception to this "rule" would be the chile verde competition, where almost anything goes. Feel free to experiment in this competition!

Five:

Cooks with experience will select a cut of meat that is marbled, has a reputation for flavor, and is not so tender that it will cook down or cook away. Common cuts used by chili cooks are beef chuck tender and tri-tip. Seasoned cooks stay away from sirloin and other very tender cuts of meat. The use of exotic meats may also seem like a great idea, but experienced cooks find that it is better to stick with traditional meats for competition chili.

Six:

Don't get caught up in the excitement of the cookoff and start giving away samples of your competition chili to the spectators long before you take your sample for the judges. Your sample ought to come out of your full pot of chili.

Seven:

Don't panic at the last minute before preparing your sample for the judges. Stick with your recipe. Of course, a minimal amount of "tweaking" in the final 20-30 minutes of cooking can often help your chili, but avoid last minute major adjustments.

Eight:

Let the chili cook without excessive boiling and try not to stir the chili constantly. Both these processes, in excess, will break down the chili meat and create mush. It is recommended, however, that you bring your chili to a boil for the purpose of adding your spices.

