

REAL BY-GOD TEXAS CHILI



The 21st Century Edition:

“NOBODY KNOWS MORE ABOUT CHILI THAN I DO”



by Diana Finlay Hendricks

With a nod to Joe Cooper, Wick Fowler, Frank X. Tolbert, Carroll Shelby, H. Allen Smith, George Haddaway, a whole bunch of chili queens who graced the plazas of San Antonio, and all who put a Bowl of Red on the culinary map, I will stand up to anyone who wants to argue this statement. Bring it on.

THE FIRST WEEKEND OF NOVEMBER in 1983, we had just finished judging the World Championship Chili Cook-Off, and I was sitting at a picnic table at Villa De La Mina in Terlingua, Texas, listening to Carroll Shelby tell me how chili cook-offs came to be.

I had been around chili cook-offs since the first Chilympiad in 1970. My mother had been on a cooking competition chili for more than a decade (the “Jump Up And Kiss Me” chili team), and she coordinated the first international chili cook-off for several years in Guadalajara, Mexico. I had been named the second or third runner-up in the Miss Chilympiad Contest in 1976, at the esteemed and ever so sexist Men’s Texas State Championship Chili Cook-off, and I had cooked enough competition chili in children’s divisions, college divisions, and finally adult divisions to bring home a pile of trophies and make a name for myself in the competitive chili world. In 1983, I was married to the “Poet Laureate of Terlingua,” who had written the

national chili anthem “If You Know Beans About Chili, You Know That Chili Has No Beans.”

But until that November afternoon more than a quarter-century ago, I only thought I knew the history of chili. Shelby had some pretty racy stuff here. I was a young journalist, but I saw a story in Shelby’s memories. Shelby saw a hungry, kid writer who would probably work cheap. He wanted to start a magazine. And he wanted someone to run it, and to write the “whole story,” as he said, “Not just Tolbert’s story.”

He and *Dallas Morning News* columnist/Texas culturist Frank X. Tolbert were in the midst of one of those heated fights that old friends wage when they don’t remember the same story the same way. Shelby was living in California and had been around the track a time or two. Tolbert was writing his popular weekly Texas culture column for the *Morning News*, and buying ink by the barrel. Shelby had just gone national with his Carroll Shelby’s Chili Mix. And, according



to Shelby, Frank X. Tolbert was rewriting history and retelling how chili cook-offs began. Bottom line, Tolbert was not giving Shelby the credit he thought was due.

It was the early '80s, and chili was hot. The Texas legislature had named chili the State Dish of Texas. Chili cook-offs were springing up around the nation, in parking lots and arenas, at rodeos and fairgrounds, and thousands of people were flocking to Terlingua to fight over who made the best bowl of red.

Shelby had a stubborn streak, money to burn, and a war to win. Dangerous mix. He offered me the chance to edit a national chili magazine, and said he would fund it. He told me I could write anything I wanted about chili as long as it was the truth. I said okay, and we shook hands. I hadn't yet learned that "the truth" came in so many versions. Like the old story about the blind men and the elephant, everyone I talked to told a different story from their personal view of the beast.

It was a wild two months gearing up for that premiere issue, during which time I was privileged to interview legendary names in the chili world—the people who started chili cook-offs as we knew them. Oh, the stories they could tell. Straight from the horses' mouths, I learned that the first chili cook-off at Terlingua came about because

about twenty-five newsmen and public relations guys got together regularly in the Press Room in Dallas, to solve the problems of the world, drink a lot of whiskey, and eat Wick Fowler's chili.

It came to pass that a Yankee travel writer named H. Allen Smith wrote a story for *Holiday* magazine titled, "Nobody Knows More About Chili Than I Do." And the chili chef of this rambunctious group of friends, Wick Fowler, said, "Them's fighting words, Yankee." Backed by some of greatest media talent in Texas and beyond, Fowler threw down the gauntlet. And Smith accepted the challenge. And so the chili war began.



About that time, on a lark, Carroll Shelby and Dallas attorney David Witts had purchased a 200,000-acre ranch in Terlingua, in the far reaches of West Texas, with what Shelby called "whiskey plans" to turn it into a tourist mecca. The catch: No one had ever heard of Terlingua, Texas. It was a long way from anywhere. But some of the public relations folks convinced Shelby and Witts that this chili war would be the perfect opportunity to put their ranch on the map. So Fowler challenged Smith to a chili contest—to be waged in the badlands of Terlingua. Several hundred media and PR folks found their way to the old mercury mining ghost town in the middle of Brewster



County, Texas. The press corps included a young Gary Cartwright, who was covering the 1967 cook-off for *Sports Illustrated*.

It was a huge publicity success by all reports. And by the way, neither Smith nor Fowler was declared the clear winner in the first competition. Cartwright reported in *SI* that the contest was declared a draw. One of the three judges, attorney David Witts, tasted Smith's chili and immediately declared his tastebuds damaged beyond repair, and was rendered unable to finish judging the competition. Did I mention that Smith's recipe called for vegetables? As Cartwright reported in *Sports Illustrated*, Smith's chili included, "God help him, canned pinto beans. 'Nuff said."



Our first edition of *Chili Monthly* came out in January of 1984. The cover story was "The Gospel According To ..." and featured interviews with Tolbert, Shelby, Cartwright, Hallie Stillwell, George Haddaway, and more. Everyone described their elephant from a slightly different angle but all agreed that in the beginning, it was all about fun. Tolbert died of natural causes shortly after that first issue hit the streets. Shelby, always a competitor, took that as a win for his side in the chili-history war, and gave me free rein to keep going as long as the money held up.

Through the next eighteen months, I met the nephew of a leg-

endary 6666 and XIT chuck wagon cook, who gave me his personal copy of Richard Bolt's *Forty Years Behind the Lid*, a homemade cookbook filled with authentic range recipes. In subsequent issues, we wrote about chili wars that had been waged for decades by chili queens in San Antonio market plazas, and chuck wagon cooks on the cattle trails, in small town cafes and bus stops—and even jails that earned reputations among outlaws for having good chili. I got to interview the granddaughter of a real San Antonio chili queen about the competition between women vendors who sold chili con carne and tamales, as well as a variety of services on the plazas in San Antonio. And I even got to interview Gene Autry about his mentor, Will Rogers, another great chili aficionado.



When Lisa Gouveia asked me to write about chili for this premiere issue of *Real South*, I dug out those old issues of *Chili Monthly*, and boxes of files, scraps, and notes, and found myself wandering backroads, lost in forgotten memories. Stumbling down rabbit trails and tangents, it occurred to me that I am probably the only person who ever chronicled the stories of these chili gurus in their own words. I have been quoted as a chili historian and subject matter expert on the topic of Texas chili. Heady praise, I'll tell you what.

That said, I am going to have to wind this longwinded story down.



And save some of these chili stories for another time. But before I close the subject, I am going to put my money—or at least my best chili recipe—where my mouth is.

I probably mentioned that I did win a fair share of chili cook-offs back in the day, and qualified for the World Championship Chili Cook-off at Terlingua four times. But the chili I am the most proud of is not the high octane, telegraphed chili of competitions. This is good old “eating” chili. It is the chili that will have your guests scraping the bottom of the pot at parties. It is Texas chili in its purest form, a recipe that reflects the good taste of Joe Cooper, the author of the first published book about chili; the chili queens of Alamo Plaza; chuck wagon cooks like Richard Bolt; and early Wick Fowler bowls of red. It's year round goodness, and is simply the best I can do. This chili is not for professional competition use only. And, yes, you can try this at home.

With no disrespect to H. Allen Smith and Wick Fowler; but with just enough bravura, sass, and confidence to make any Texas chili queen proud, I am going to stand on my record and say, “Nobody Knows More About Chili Than I Do.”

-DIANA FINLAY HENDRICKS
SEPTEMBER, 2012



GOURMET GUIDE TO 2-ALARM CHILI:

Sear 2 pounds of lean, coarse-ground meat (round, chuck, venison, bull round, or mixture) to grayish color. Add the can of tomato sauce, and water to cover a quarter-inch or thereabouts.

Let the mixture bubble (simmer), then add all but one of the ingredients in the packets. Stir each thoroughly into the chili. (Hold back the masa flour packet. The large packet of masa flour is for thickening later in the cooking process.)

Stir thoroughly about every 10 minutes. When the chili has cooked for about an hour and a half, skim off the grease. Then mix the masa flour with warm water into a thick, but flowable, mixture and stir into the chili to “tighten” it.

Another 15 minutes of cooking, then taste the meat for tenderness.

Serve when ready, or allow chili to remain in pot overnight. Freeze what you don't eat, in unwaxed cartons.

This 2-alarm chili has been widely publicized as an amateur production. Serve it with pinto beans on the side, or mixed with the chili in the serving bowl. Grated cheese, rice, hot cornbread, tortillas, crackers, chopped or sliced onions, jalapeno peppers—all are good side courses.

If 2-alarm is too hot for the more timid appetites, cut the pepper quantity in half for 1-alarm. For 3-alarm or 4-alarm chili, add to the pepper quantity, plus a “level” teaspoon of tabasco.

(Warning: The red peppers are hot, but you could eat around them.)



Diana Hendricks' Homestyle TEXAS CHILI

This is would not be classified as a competition chili recipe, as the chili heads know it today. This recipe is very similar to Joe Cooper's original recipe from the 1930s, and not unlike the recipes of the chili queens who competed in their own right in the markets of San Antonio from the late 1800s until the city health department closed them down in 1937. It's rich, beefy, and aromatic, pungent with the flavors of good chili powder, garlic, and onion.

But it is simple, and created from years of research and recipe testing, from knowing the difference in what makes a good spoonful of chili for a judges' table, and what makes hungry friends and family dig into a bowlful and come back for seconds. This is a peasant- purist recipe, the best kind.

And it just might be the best pot of chili you have ever made.

Here goes:

Plan on about 90 minutes to two hours cooking time and about 20 minutes prep time. You will need a heavy stew pot or Dutch oven with a lid; a strong, large spoon, (stainless is preferred but wood will work—just not one of those flimsy plastic spoons); a large cutting board and a sharp knife; a grater for garlic and cheese (can be one of those stand up box graters or new fangled plane grater).

Here's your annotated shopping list:

★ THE MEAT

Buy a large package of thick-cut top sirloin (about three pounds and about one inch thick). Or ask the butcher to cut some sirloin about an inch or an inch-and-a-half thick and give you about three pounds. Do not use ground beef or ground chili meat for this recipe. (If you are feeding a larger crowd and don't want to spend a lot of time cubing your meat, you can add one pound of COARSE ground chuck for every three pounds of cubed beef.) But really, you are working on the best chili you have ever made, so take the time to cube it yourself.

THE CHILI POWDER

One bottle of good quality chili powder (*Note: unlike some chili snobs, I will not offer a definitive chili powder. I used to swear by Gebhardt's (the original chili powder, created in New Braunfels, Texas) or Adams (an old Austin company best known for vanilla extract), but they are getting harder to find, so I will tell you that McCormick's Gourmet line makes a high quality chili powder and if you are lucky, you will find their gourmet chipotle chili powder also. The combination of those two is my general go-to spice combo these days. Easy to find in most large grocery stores. Spice Islands makes a consistently good chili powder with a broad distribution as well, but if I cannot find Adams or Gebhardt's, I will reach for McCormick's.*



THE OTHER SPICES

While you are at the store, pick up a jar of ground cumin (aka comino); one bottle of garlic powder (not garlic salt); a box of sea salt, and coarse ground black pepper. Grab a bottle of paprika if the color is bright and you like a redder color in your chili. But that is optional. Don't be swayed by recipes that call for mole or mustard or other deviations from purity. Remember that good chili is basic and simple—and it is the food of the gods if you cook it right.



THE PRODUCE

Swing through the produce section and snag a bag of small Key limes or Mexican limes the size of pingpong balls, that are soft enough to the squeeze so that you can tell that they have a lot of juice in them; a couple of baseball-sized sweet yellow onions; a bunch of cilantro; and a handful of shiny serrano chiles.



MISCELLANEOUS REQUIREMENTS

If you are lucky enough to have access to that bouillon concentrate paste (Better Than Bouillon is my favorite), get a jar of it. Otherwise, grab a couple of boxes (at least a quart) of beef broth (though I have used the chicken broth before and it works fine). I prefer to buy the low-salt broth, because I have more control of the salt in the chili that way.

Pick up a pound of longhorn/mild cheddar cheese to grate for the final product. (Don't buy that pre-grated, tasteless plastic cheese that comes in the bag.)

Grab some good beer (I am already buying limes, so it makes sense to grab longneck Mexican beer) or a good grocery store red wine, if you prefer. Beverage choice is seasonal with me. Cold beer for warm weather chili, and a nice Malbec for fall or winter chili.

Come home from the store and put away the groceries.



THE PROCESS.

Turn on the music. Get out your big cutting board and a sharp knife and your heaviest chili pot. I have cooked chili in cast iron, heavy aluminum, porcelain, stainless steel, and cast iron coated in enamel. I prefer enamel-coated cast iron, hands down. Be sure your pot has a good lid that fits.

Trim the fat and cut the chili meat into squares that are roughly the size of your thumbnail unless you have those crazy three-inch long acrylic nails. I am thinking about a half-inch or a little smaller here.

Okay, now you have cut the chili meat into dice and thrown it all into the heavy pot. Put a lid on the pot and start cooking the meat on a med-low heat for about 10 minutes. The meat will start making its own juice. The old timers call this pot-likker, the juice from the beef. Stir occasionally—it will start to lose the red color and turn pinkish-grey). Coarsely chop one of the sweet yellow onions, and peel and finely chop or grate two cloves of garlic. (Another note: this is not two bulbs of garlic. This is two of the little cloves that are part of the bulb.) After that first ten minutes, dump half the chopped onion and the two chopped garlic cloves into the pot and gently stir. Turn the heat down to low. Cover with the heavy lid and continue to cook for ten more minutes. Note, this onion and garlic were added purely for aromatic flavor at this point. When you are in the early stages of cooking the chili, your audience will expect it to smell good. Hence the handful of onion and garlic.

You have been cooking for 20 minutes now. So add two big heaping tablespoons of chili powder. Also, add one tablespoon of salt and one tablespoon of GROUND cumin. You can add about one scant tablespoon of garlic POWDER now too. Mix it all in and look at the color.

If you are a big chipotle person, you can add one flat tablespoon of chipotle chili powder or you can chop up one or two canned chipot-



les in adobo sauce and add to the chili right now—it is trendy but not at all necessary ... just a variation if it's there. If you only have regular chili powder, you might want to add another tablespoon if the color does not look rich enough.

Now that you have added the seasonings, simmer on low for about five more minutes. Add about a quart of beef broth—enough to have about one inch of liquid above the meat—and put the lid on and cook on medium-low. You have been cooking for about 25 minutes now. So put the lid on and let it cook for about 30 minutes. Check and stir occasionally. Add more beef broth or water as necessary to keep about an inch above the meat.

You can add some water, but NOT tomato sauce—this is Texas chili queen chili and those chili queens were cooking for cowboys, not spaghetti aficionados. Some people like to add beer, but I think it makes chili bitter, and you certainly don't need it to help tenderize this sirloin. So save the beer for the cook.

After about an hour of total cooking time, it is going to start looking like really good chili. Taste. Add some more salt and chili powder if you want. You might want to add more cumin if you like that taste. Don't add more garlic, as it can turn bitter. This ought to have a really beefy, spicy flavor and start looking like chili. Cook until the meat is tender—sirloin will get tender pretty fast—count on about 90 minutes total cooking time. When it is the texture and consistency that you want, you can add a tablespoon of paprika if you have some, and a scant handful ($\frac{1}{3}$ cup) of chopped fresh cilantro to the pot and cook for about 6 to 10 more minutes—uncovered.

Turn off the heat, stir, and let it rest, covered, for about 10 minutes. If the juice seems a little thin, and you want thicker chili, mix up $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of water with a heaping tablespoon of masa or cornstarch (or flour will do if that's all you have) and make a "slurry," a thin liquid mixture with no lumps. Then pour that into the chili and bring back to a boil, then simmer till it thickens. Masa or cornstarch is best to keep the chili shiny. Flour tends to dull the color a little. *Note:* Wick Fowler and Carroll Shelby always put a little packet of masa in their



commercial mixes, and chili queens used masa for years. Today, chili cook-off rules disqualify chili with "fillers or thickeners." But I am going old-school here, and recommending a little masa slurry just to bring it all together.

Put the chili in individual bowls and (here's a modern twist, but trust me) squeeze a half lime over each serving, serve with a sprig of cilantro, a sprinkling of chopped onion, and a whole small serrano pepper floating on top for decoration. Have a bowl of grated cheese for those who would like to add it. You can serve with a bowl of lime wedges on the table if you want. No, those limes are not authentic to the chili queens, and completely optional for purists, but the squeeze of lime juice is a great flavor enhancer. You won't taste the citrus, but it makes the taste of the chili really pop.

One more thing: The truly Texas Frito® Pie serving alternative: serve a large spoonful of chili over a handful of Fritos (no substitution—FRITOS® corn chips only) with grated cheese and onion.



There you have it. Remember The Alamo. Viva Terlingua. Long Live Chili Queens. ▼

DIANA'S CHILI COOKING SOUNDTRACK

*It takes about two hours to make a good pot of chili.
If you are like me, you will want a good soundtrack to play in the kitchen.
You can use mine—cue up Spotify: '12 Hendricks Chili or
go to iTunes and make your own chili playlist.*



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| The Ash Family – “Bread and Wine” | Ray Wylie Hubbard – “Pots and Pans” |
| Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys – “San Antonio Rose” | Robert Earl Keen – “The Road Goes On Forever” |
| Brennen Leigh – “Two Step Program” | Rosie Flores – “This Little Girl’s Gone Rockin’” |
| Carrie Rodriguez and Chip Taylor – “The Real Thing” | Ryan Bingham – “Yesterday’s Blues” |
| Delbert McClinton – “I Had A Real Good Time” | Shelley King – “Summer Wine” |
| Doug Sahm – “Is Anybody Goin To San Antone” | Slaid Cleaves – “Horseshoe Lounge” |
| Ernest Tubb – “Waltz Across Texas” | Sons of Fathers – “The Country” |
| Gary P. Nunn – “The Chili Song” | Tex Smith – “Come On!” |
| Guy Clark – “Dublin Blues” | Texas Tornados – “Hey Baby, Qué Pasó” |
| HalleyAnna – “Tonight!” | The Derailers – “Cold Beer, Hot Women and Cool Country Music” |
| Hayes Carll – “Drunken Poet’s Dream” | The McKay Brothers – “Texas Heart, Mexican Soul” |
| Hill Country Gentlemen – “Travelin’ On” | Tish Hinojosa – “Corazon Viajero (Wandering Heart)” |
| James McMurtry – “Hurricane Party” | Todd Snider – “Beer Run” |
| Jerry Jeff Walker – “Sangria Wine” | Tommy Alverson – “Texas Women” |
| Larry Joe Taylor – “Corona Con Lima” | Townes Van Zandt – “To Live’s To Fly” |
| Lydia Mendoza – “Mal Hombre” | Walt Wilkins – “Diamonds in the Sun” |
| Lyle Lovett – “Texas River Song” | West Side Horns – “You Don’t Have To Go” |
| Marcia Ball – “That’s How It Goes” | Willie Nelson – “Bloody Mary Morning” |
| Pake Rossi – “For All That It’s Worth” | |
| Ray Price – “Heartache By The Number” | |



*What’d we leave out? What doesn’t belong?
Comment—agree—complain—argue!
Write me at diana@realsouthmagazine.com.*

