

# Desert Heat: How Terlingua Became a Mecca for Chili Lovers

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Every November, in a town next to Nowhere, thousands of people converge for not one, but two Championship Chili Cook-offs. Otherwise known as “a bowl of red,” the saying goes that chili is only real if it’s prepared by a Texan. Fifty years ago, two gentlemen, one a Texan and one from New York, decided to take this statement to the dusty streets of Terlingua, Texas, and settle it once and for all.

H. Allen Smith was a columnist for *Holiday*, a midcentury magazine that, in its prime, brought glamorous locales to the readers across post-war America when the days of glorious travel were in their infancy. The magazine spared no expense and boasted such writers as Jack Kerouac, Ian Fleming, Truman Capote, Joan Didion and Arthur C. Clarke, as well as Faulkner, Steinbeck and Hemingway, not to mention stunning photography and art.

In 1967, Smith wrote an essay in *Holiday* entitled “Nobody Knows More About Chili Than I Do.” Frank X. Tolbert, a columnist for *The Dallas Morning News* and author of *A Bowl of Red* and his columnist buddy, Wick Fowler, read the article. Possibly in a smoky bar over a longneck or a Manhattan. (The two gentlemen and a group of their friends – who were the original founders of the Chili Appreciation Society – considered Fowler’s chili to be one of the best around.) A portion of the verbose catalyst by Smith read:

*“Let it be understood that I am well disposed toward Texans and enjoy visiting their state; I’m tolerant of all their idiotic posturing, of every one of their failings, save only this arrant acclaim of superiority in the composing of chili. Mr. Tolbert of Dallas . . . declares that acceptable chili should contain no tomatoes, no onions, and no beans. This is a thing that passeth all understanding going full speed. It offends my sensibility and violates my mind. Mr. Tolbert criticizes Lyndon Johnson’s chili recipe because it leaves out beef suet and includes tomatoes and onions. Yet the President’s chili contains no beans. To create chili without beans, either added to the pot or served on the side, is to flout one of the basic laws of nature. I’ve been told that when I was a baby and it came time to wean me, I was fed Eagle Brand Milk with navy beans frapped into it.”*

In Wild West form, Tolbert challenged Smith to a chili duel against Fowler later that month. (Note: Smith was second choice as a duelist – their first choice became ill – but he was a natural one due to his inciting words.) They chose Terlingua, Texas as the location because their friend Carroll Shelby (of Shelby Mustang fame) and a Dallas attorney, Dave Witts, had property there which they were trying to sell. They made a side bet to see if they could draw a crowd in the double-digit town. It may have also been mentioned that if the event were to be a screw-up and a mess, no one would notice – all of Terlingua was a mess anyway, so they thought.

There were no actual winners of the cook-off the first two years. The first year was declared a draw between Smith and Fowler. The second year, legend has it that a masked bandit with a rifle grabbed the ballot box and threw it down a mineshaft.

The cook-off gained popularity due to the many articles written about it in high-profile magazines as well as its infamy in regards to the amount of alcohol consumed and the antics of showmanship present.

The seventies marked a turning point for the cook-off. Although the first few years were “Men Only,” in 1974 a woman became the World’s Champion for the first time. That was the last year that the cook-off, under the International Chili Society banner, was held in Terlingua. (Tolbert, Shelby and C.V. Wood organized the ICS in 1970.) In 1974, Frank X. Tolbert resigned from the ICS board. Carroll Shelby took the ICS designation to California, leaving the Terlingua event under the Chili Appreciation Society International, or CASI, umbrella. In 1977, chili became the official dish of Texas as per the Texas Legislature (although it’s unclear if that’s with beans or without).

Charles Maxwell, a local Alpine resident, was farming in Redford in the beginning years of the cook-off and attended a couple times when it was held at the Terlingua Ghost Town. “It wasn’t my total cup of tea,” he said. Later, however, the cook-off moved to the property of Glen Pepper, at an old mining project he bought and named “Villa de la Mina.” There were a few structures in place at the Villa when Pepper purchased the property and Maxwell started caretaking the Villa. He expanded the space for RVs and built on to the music stage and concession area, clearing and leveling out old goat pens. Pepper brought in rocks and dirt to terrace the arroyo so there would be a level area for RVs to park.

In Terlingua, on the first weekend in November, there’s an equal chance of the weather being hot or cold, wet or dry. One year five inches of rain fell in a short time, as sometimes happens in the volatile desert. The voluminous rain caused the RVs to sink into the freshly cleared slop . . . “Down, down, down into the goat shit. We laughed and laughed,” Maxwell remembers.



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The cook-off continued to grow because chili eating and beer drinking go together like peas and carrots. Beer trucks came and parked to serve the thousands of people who heartily drank beer for days. "The paving on the dance floor was hundreds of smashed beer cans," Maxwell recalled.

Different classes of people drink differently, and according to Maxwell, "The best drinkers are the motorcyclists. They're used to drinking and have been in trouble enough to know how to stay out of it. Then you have the chili cooks who sometimes get pissy and obnoxious. They're 'king of the hill' at the cook-offs, and sometimes this notoriety heats up their heads. The worst drinkers are the college students; inexperienced and irresponsible, they're the ones who need the most coddling."

At the front gate where the money is taken, three or four people always worked as money takers to accommodate the lines of motorcycles, cars, and RVs waiting to get into the cook-off. One year back in the day, Maxwell said, a drunken college guy decided to play cowboy and proceeded to practice his tie-down roping on one of the money takers. As Joe College started dragging the money taker with his rope, the son of the money taker jumped to the rescue. The son threw Joe College onto the hood of the next car in line where two older ladies waited to pay. As he pounded the face of Joe College, the son smiled at the ladies inside the car and said in that friendly Texas way, "That will be ten dollars apiece, please."

The eighties marked another change, when CASI split off from the original Tolbert-Fowler group, taking the rights to the CASI name with the help of a water-pistol toting judge. Kathleen Tolbert, the daughter of founder Frank Tolbert, has served as director of the Official Terlingua International Championship Chili Cook-off, the OTICCC, for the last 12 years. (This cook-off is also known as the "Behind the Store" cook-off.) Now in her sixties, Kathleen used to be known as the baby of the event, although she didn't start attending until she was 18 years old.

Tolbert doesn't like to revisit the viciousness of the split from CASI, but for almost three decades there have been two cook-offs on the same weekend. "This makes it harder to do because CASI is bigger," Tolbert said, "but we do have help from the ALS Association (Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis), which is our designated charity."

Both cook-offs raise money for their designated charities as well as for Terlingua schools. "I just like to think now that my dad helped start the first cook-off ever. It all goes to help the community of Terlingua," Tolbert said. Hallie Stillwell – one of the original judges and a local legend – was always the Chili Queen. Tolbert's brother made Stillwell's crown every year. She was like a grandmother to all the youngsters. Stillwell would get up on stage and wish everyone good luck until she was well into her nineties.

Sometimes things get a little too crazy (even for people who like crazy), especially in Krazy Flats on the CASI side. The Chili weekend's rowdy reputation causes many local Terlingua residents to cut out of town beforehand. Wet T-shirt contests, reports of things burning that shouldn't be on fire, and other spring break-like events don't appeal to everyone; many long-time residents of the tri-county area have never even been to a cook-off.

"CASI has a wild aspect," Tolbert said. "We don't have that. It's more of a family thing." They only hire one off-duty sheriff, Tolbert said, where the CASI one needs multiple sheriffs and a jail.

Sometimes the biggest dangers to the participants are themselves. One year, someone ran up to Maxwell and his gang yelling, "Someone's fallen in the mine shaft!" Although the shafts were fenced off to keep goats from falling in, an unfortunate, crooked soul wandered over the fence. Everyone sprinted to the pit prepared for the worst. A voice drifted up from the darkness . . . "Help – I've fallen and I can't reach my beer." He'd landed on old mattresses that were discarded in the hole during the pre-cookoff cleanup.

If you don't eat chili and you eschew questionable moral hijinks inspired by profuse quantities of alcohol, there are other options. Brisket, chicken, salsa, beans, and margarita contests are held on Friday. There are also more adventures to be found, at least at the Behind the Store cook-off. This year will be the third year of an art festival, and the second year for an author tent within the Tolbert-Fowler portion of the cook-off on Saturday, the day the chili champion is crowned.

Mary Diesel is a Terlingua artist who helps let the world know about the festival where sixteen to eighteen artists will show this year. They call for local artists first, then branch out to long-time participants of the cook-off. "It's fun," Diesel said. "We'll have four or five different media: ceramics, glassworks, some stippling art, and local photography as well as some stunning landscape artists. It's funky Terlingua art thematic to the Big Bend." The authors include names like Beth Garcia, Carlton Leatherwood, Tom Alex and Richard Willis, as well as Tiffany Harelik premiering her new chili cookbook.

After a half-century, Texans are still posturing, and people are still arguing over beans or no beans. Perhaps the aim is to expand the cookoff into a more "cultural" event with the addition of art and artists. However, American pop culture is comprised of myriad entities, many of which turn 50 this year: Batman, Star Trek, and The Monkees, to name a few. This year the Chili Cook-Offs take their place in the birthday line-up of West Texas pop culture, shenanigans and all, bound together by the Fates and a passion for chili.

"We're all excited to reach the 50-year mark, and I'm just happy to be here," Tolbert said. "Years ago we thought, 'can we even make it?'"

*Author's note: There are many more stories from the cook-offs, hundreds if not thousands. Some were told to me, many funny, a few scary. Glen Pepper has a wealth of positive stories about friendships formed and an ambulance acquired; perhaps someday they will be told in another place. Some of the "facts" may be a little sketchy, but Pepper said he always loved what Blair Pittman, photographer and local author, said, "Never let the facts get in the way of a good story."*