

The Lone Star State's Best Chili is in Terlingua - Tribeza

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Red Alert

The Lone Star State's best chili is in Terlingua

by Laurel Miller



It's the first weekend of November, and the high-desert landscape behind the Terlingua Store off of FM 170 looks like an outdoor recreational vehicle expo collided with a campground. ATV's are zipping across the hilly terrain and many of the encampments sport smokers, portable kitchens or open fires.



A deep love for chili and wide open spaces drives scores of fans to Terlingua annually.

I crawl out of my tent, lured by the seductive aroma of cooking meat and spices. I'm a first-time attendee of the International Frank X. Tolbert-Wick Fowler Memorial Championship Chili Cook-Off. It's Saturday, and the semi-finals judging is about to take place. By early evening, a new winner will be declared (Becky Daniels of Midlothian, Texas, bested 88 other entries to claim the title) and the weekend will conclude with dancing and live music by headliner (and Austinite) Gary P. Nunn.

The four-day event draws thousands of attendees from all over the world, who often combine the sojourn with a visit to Big Bend (see sidebar) or Marfa. Most are self-described chili heads who make the pilgrimage to Terlingua to witness what is inarguably the Holy Grail of cook-offs.



The first “Behind the Store” cook-off was held in 1967, the brainchild of *Dallas Morning News* columnist and “A Bowl of Red” author Frank X. Tolbert, his colleague Wick Fowler, and a handful of other seminal chili heads. The event was conceived as a way to put to rest a long-standing rivalry between Tolbert and New York journalist H. Allen Smith.

Both men fancied themselves experts on the subject of chili; Allen even penned an article, “Nobody Knows More About Chili Than I Do,” an admittedly bold proclamation for a native Midwesterner. Tolbert recruited Fowler as his cook (if the name sound familiar, it’s because he later founded Wick Fowler’s 2-Alarm Chili kits) and Terlingua was chosen as the locale for the showdown, having been determined “neutral territory.”



Apart from the competition, the cook-off also serves as an opportunity to gather with friends, drink local brews and enjoy the best live music Texas has to offer.

Three judges declared the contest a tie and the world's greatest chili cook-off was born. In the mid-70s, Tolbert opened Tolbert's Restaurant & Chili Parlor in Dallas; it was later relocated to Grapevine and is now run by his daughter, Kathleen Tolbert Ryan (she became cook-off director and president in the early 90s, after her father passed away), and her husband Paul Ryan. Tolbert and his colleagues also went on to establish the Chili Appreciation Society International (CASI).

As the cook-off grew, disagreement over how it was regulated and marketed eventually led to a lawsuit and in 1983, a judge intervened. The Tolbert cook-off carried on as it always had, emphasizing the history and culinary culture of

Texas and its signature dish – you won't find any beans or other suspect ingredients among the entries. Meanwhile, CASI began holding its own cook-off down the road, on the same dates.



If you're looking for a lost weekend in the desert (one with, say, wet t-shirt contests, rumored stripper poles and hot tubs and not-necessarily-authentic chili), Tolbert may not be for you.

Please don't misunderstand: There's still plenty of beer, bourbon and late nights around the campfire at Tolbert: the weekend is as much about revisiting old friendships and establishing new ones as it is about the food. I frequently heard it described as a "family reunion" – one in which additional members are welcomed with open arms and a freshly cracked Tejas Clara lager. "My dad was a Texas historian with a great love for his state," says Tolbert-Ryan. "He believed everyone should see Big Bend and know the origins of the state dish."



Since its inception, the chili cook-off has expanded to include a variety of events like the “Cowboy Camp” charity dinner.

You’ll be hard-pressed to find better chili in Texas -if not the nation -than at Tolbert and free samples abound, especially on Saturday. Every time I thought I’d tasted the zenith of chili perfection, I’d get handed another cup and discover new depths of flavor. The judging criteria includes “aroma, consistency, brick-red color, taste and after-taste.”

There’s an art to making chili, despite its short-list of ingredients. “Bite-size or coarsely ground beef or other mature meats...cooked slowly and for a long time with the pulp of chili peppers, crushed powder from the curly leaves or oregano, ground cumin seeds and chopped garlic cloves,” according to Tolbert’s 1966 book, considered the conclusive word on the subject. It requires an exacting palate and steady hand. Over-salted, over-seasoned or overly sweet chili is almost as big a crime as chili with a pasty or chewy texture; the meat should be slightly toothsome but not over-or undercooked.



The first place winners from this year's cook-off championship.

Over the years, the cook-off has expanded its culinary competitions to include chili Verde, BBQ, black-eyed peas, salsa and a Margarita mix-off. There's live music every night, a public "Cowboy Camp" charity dinner that elevates the concept of campfire cooking to glorious new heights, and all proceeds from the weekend go to the ALS Association of Texas (Fowler succumbed to the disease in 1972) as well as local charities including the Terlingua School. Tolbert-Ryan refers to it as a "cook-off with a cause," but her father's legacy is about more than just chili and charities. It's a celebration of Texas in its entirety: its fierce independence and pride, cultural hybridism, legendary hospitality and love of wide open spaces.

All of which can be found in a single bowl of red.

Visit abowlofred.com (<http://abowlofred.com/>) for dates and detailed information about the 2019 event.

([https://www.eventbrite.com/e/the-whiskyx-austin-with-the-x-ambassadors-live-tickets-59199515344?](https://www.eventbrite.com/e/the-whiskyx-austin-with-the-x-ambassadors-live-tickets-59199515344?utm_source=Tribeza%20Vertical%20Ad%20People%207%2F28-8%2F24&utm_medium=banners)

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The Long and Winding Road



It's a long drive from Austin to Terlingua –over seven hours –but once you pass through Alpine (home to Sul Ross State University) and descend 83 miles south on Highway 118, things get interesting. The sky opens up, the Chisos Mountains rise from the northern Chihuahuan Desert and the landscape transforms into the aptly-named imagery of Big Bend Country.



Terlingua was once a bustling 19th century mercury mining center; by 1947, all of the mines were closed and it became a ghost town. Now best-known as the gateway to Big Bend National Park, located 41 miles to the north (the east entrance of Big Bend Ranch State Park is in nearby Lajitas), Terlingua boasts under 80 full-time residents but sees enough tourism for most businesses to stay open year-round. (In winter, the weather is blessedly cool and clear and you'll have the place pretty much to yourself). There are a handful of galleries, the legendary Starlight Theater -a restaurant and bar famed for its wide porch, which provides prime people -watching -and accommodations that run the gamut from primitive camping to cushy casitas.

The 19th century Terlingua Cemetery is a National Landmark, and if you're in town during Day of the Dead (the 2019 cook-off falls during the holiday), you'll find that hundreds of people paint their faces, dress in costume and wander

amongst the candle-lit graves, honoring their ancestors or participating in the ritual. There's singing, food and drink and a festive, communal vibe that somehow feels right, at this confluence of two cultures that are so intrinsically a part of West Texas.

If you go:

If you don't own an RV and the thought of four days without a shower is unthinkable, Buzzard's Roost (<https://www.buzzardsroostrentals.com/>), is a charming one-year-old glamping property just up the road from the Tolbert Store. There are three cozy, fully-furnished tipis and a bathhouse with both indoor and outdoor showers.



Fully-furnished tipis bring some added comfort to the surrounding rugged landscape.

La Posada Milagro (<http://www.laposadamilagro.net/home.html>) has stylish, desert-rustic rooms and casitas. Adjoining coffee house Espresso...y Poco Mas is a community hub serving up tasty breakfasts and beverages.

(<http://www.tribeza.com/magazine-currentissue/>)

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