

A Bowl of Arizona Unkar

An homage to L.T. Felty : “Expert Chili Adviser to the Governor of Texas”

The boatmen who have met me over the last six summers and had me on their trips as an assistant are well-aware that I like to be in the kitchen.

It's not only something I only like to do but something I feel I must do daily.

These boatmen know they'll either find me in the bow of their boat trying make photographs of them in the biggest rapids of the day or prepping dinner or breakfast. For me it's a good way to end a day and start a new day. Covid-19 has put everyone's river plans on temporary hold but I still turn to cooking to start and end my days, and today it's chili.

Like most Americans, I was introduced to chili at a young age through the culinary exploits of Chef Hormel and Van Camp. They were on the cutting edge of American *haute cuisine* and their recipes with their signature ingredient—pinto beans—were not only delicious but were easy to execute. Open can, heat and serve. Though I can't attest to it, it seems reasonable to assume that these chefs were on a trip or two. Chop some onion, grate some cheese, and if you stowed the empty cans in a hatch before your guests arrive for dinner you'd be considered a Michelin Chef.

As an aspiring young photographer, I worked as an assistant, location scout, and producer for a noted *National Geographic* and advertising photographer named Michael O'Brien. It was through one of the many assignments with Michael that I learned about chili, and specifically Texas chili or Texas Red as it is commonly known.

In 1991, Apple was about to launch their first laptop computer, the Powerbook. Michael had gotten the coveted assignment to shoot their advertising campaign which was titled “What's On My Powerbook.” Soon he and I were traveling to the Lone Star State to revisit the town of Waxahachie, where he had photographed a story for *LIFE Magazine* a few years earlier.

It was there that I would meet L.T. Felty, who was to be our tour guide and introduce us to the local town heroes that would become the subjects of Michael's photographs.

As L.T. drove us around that first day he brought up the topic of chili. It turned out that he had helped to organize the fabled Texas Chili Society's Annual Chili Cook-Off and had won the event more than once and now was one of its judges. His chili notoriety was so revered that one of Texas's governors named him “Expert Chili Adviser to the Governor of Texas” and he had the business card to prove it.

Lunch hour was approaching and L.T. took us to a restaurant that was on the town's historic square. As I read over the menu, I noticed that they had chili and it was in fact L.T. Felty's chili. No need to wonder what I ordered that day.

My bowl was placed before me and as I spooned through it I immediately noticed that things in this bowl of chili were not as they should be, per Chef Hormel and Van Camp.

First, it was a deep rich red. Second, the meat was small cuts of beef (½ inch cubes), not the ground beef that Chef Hormel and Van Camp had instructed us to use. Most importantly, there were no beans! It was a Champion's bowl for sure with regards to flavor, but the lack of beans was throwing basic knowledge of chili into a culinary tailspin.

As I worked through my bowl of deliciousness, I gathered myself to asked the question that would change my world view and understanding of chili forever. The conversation went something like this...

D.Z.: “L.T. this is delicious. I've never tasted anything quite like it.”

L.T.: “Thanks Dave.”

D.Z.: “I'm curious though, there are no beans. Doesn't chili have to have beans?”

L.T. gave me a wry smile and replied.

L.T.: “Dave, there are no beans in true chili or specifically Texas Red chili.”

I had never eaten a bowl of chili that didn't have beans in it so I had to press further.

D.Z.: “So L.T. when you're judging the granddaddy of them all, the Texas Chili Society's Annual Chili Cook-Off, and a contestant brings you a bowl of chili with beans in it what happens?”

Once again his wry smile crept forward and with all his Texas charm he answered.

L.T.: “They don't win, Dave!!!”

David Zickl



Arizona Unkar Recipe

Feeds 12 - 16

Prep Time : 1.5 to 2 hours Cook Time : 6 hours (low and slow)

I put the heat quotient for this at about 6.5 to 7 on a 10 scale. It's mild +. It's spicy enough but won't burn your taste buds. Although you can and probably will you don't need to drink a six pack to put the fire out for you to enjoy this bowl of chili.

INGREDIENTS

- large stock pot (the biggest one you have. 8 quarts or larger)
- blender or stick mixer
- 4 strips of bacons (to render the fat from the bacon for sautéing)
- 4 eggs (to eat with your bacon after you've got the chili finished and slow cooking)
- 4 LBS Cubed Beef Chuck (it might be labeled stew beef in the meat dept)
- 3 TBS salt
- 1 TBS white pepper (can use black)
- 2 TBS chili powder
- 1 TBS cayenne
- 1 TBS cumin
- 1 TBS sage
- 1 TBS oregano
- 1 TBS coriander
- 4 large red onions (diced small) (saved half of one for garnish)
- 2 jalapenos (seeded and diced small)
- 1 garlic bulb (minced)
- 1/2 cup of tequila or red wine (to de-glaze pot after searing beef)
- 12 cans diced tomatoes (16 oz.)
- 6 can diced green chilies (7 oz.)
- 4 cans tomato paste (6 oz.)
- 4 limes(juiced)



PROCEDURE

- Cut beef in 1/2 inch pieces. It comes cut into 1 to 1 1/2 inch pieces. Basically, you need to quarter them.
- diced onions (small)
- dice jalapenos (small)
- mince garlic
- mix all spices together into a bowl
- on medium heat cook bacon in the large stock pot. Take bacon out and save for breakfast.
- on medium to low heat sear meat in the bacon fat
- add spice mixture to meat while searing. You just need to brown the exterior. The rest of the cooking will happen throughout the day as the chili simmers low and slow.
- pour meat and its juice into a bowl and hold on the side.
- on medium to low heat sauté' onions, garlic and jalapenos for about 5 minutes
- deglaze with tequila or red wine. With a wood spoon scrap any bits off the bottom of the pot.
- add the chopped tomatoes, green chilies and tomato paste and simmer for 30 minutes.
- using a stick mixer or blender, puree the onions, jalapeno, chopped tomato, green chilies, and tomato paste.
- add the meat back into the pot with puree and stir.
- cover pot and let simmer 4-6 hours on the absolute lowest setting you can set on your stove.

GARNISHES

- 1/2 red onion (diced small)
- 1 avocado (diced or sliced)
- 1/2 cup cilantro leaves (pull whole leaves from stems)
- 1 cup Cotijo cheese(graded)

- add lime juice and stir
- serve with garnishes

Now cook your eggs and eat your breakfast. Then 4 to 6 hours later...