

chili

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The Hot Facts about Chili

No food fires up culinary controversy quite like chili — the spicy stew-like dish of beef and chile peppers. The essential ingredients are peppers and meat, but that's where the agreement ends. Beans or no beans? Ground meat or chunks? The variations are endless, but here are the basics:

Mexican — or Texan?

The debate starts with the origins of "chili con carne." ("Carne" is the Spanish word for meat.)

Many people assume chili is a Mexican dish. Ancient Mayan and Aztec cooks did create a chili-like sauce called mole — which combined chile peppers, vegetables, cinnamon and chocolate — but experts say the meaty mixture took root in the Lone Star State.

In late 19th century San Antonio, "Chili Queens" dished out the concoction in the town square, substituting expensive chocolate and cinnamon found in mole with readily available chile peppers and meat. By the 1930s, chili parlors had sprouted across the country.

Today, chili is one of the best-selling canned foods in America, and thousands swarm to chili cooking competitions — known as "cook-offs" — where chefs whip up distinctive takes on the iconic dish.

The Perfect Bowl of Chili

Texans know their chili — after all, it's their state food. Texas-style chili is composed of chile peppers or powder, and meat. Lone Star State purists insist that a "bowl of red" never, ever contains beans.

Variations Abound

But put a bunch of chili fanatics in the same room, and chances are a debate over the nature of "real" chili will erupt.

Cincinnatians devour a thin, beanless, Greek-style chili that's more sauce than soup. Chili parlors all over the city serve up "3-ways" — spaghetti covered in chili and a mound of shredded cheddar cheese, with oyster crackers on the side. "Chiliheads" can add kidney beans or onions to make it a "4- or 5-way."

In New Orleans, chili is eaten over white rice. Green chile peppers mark the dish in New Mexico, while in Springfield, Ill., the dish is spelled "chilli."

Then there are chili dogs, chili fries, chili burgers, chili burritos — and even chili ladled over scrambled eggs. Some people like it spicy enough to start a four-alarm fire, while others sweeten their stew with packets of sugar.

Though variations abound, many chili recipes contain the following ingredients:

Chile Peppers

You can't make chili without chile peppers or chile powder. ("Chile" refers to the pepper pod, like a jalapeno or ancho, that creates heat and flavor; "chili" is the dish.) Some cooks suggest four peppers per pound of meat. For beginners, two to three pods are recommended. A heaping tablespoon of chile powder equals one average-size pepper.

Meat

Whether its ground or chunked in half-inch cubes, beef, pork, turkey or venison — or even rattlesnake or raccoon — chili (unless it's vegetarian) always contains meat.

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Beans

Nothing fuels debates over "real chili" like the issue of beans. For many non-Texans, a chili without beans is nothing more than a meat sauce. Pinto beans are traditional, but some favor kidney or black beans.

Other Ingredients

Almost anything goes when it comes to giving a pot of chili a distinctive twist. Some popular additions include:

- Tomatoes
- Green peppers
- Garlic
- Onions
- Mushrooms
- Corn
- Cumin
- Chocolate
- Tequila

How to Cook It

Brown the meat first before simmering the mixture, usually for several hours. The dish is finished when a no liquid runs out of a spoonful of chili.

How to Serve It

It's traditional to embellish the dish with garnishes, ranging from diced avocado to sour cream to grated tortilla chips. Steamed rice, corn bread or tortillas are often served on the side.

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