

The Great Del Ray Chile Cook-Off

Laura Fries

It's often recommended that one should avoid discussions of religion and politics. Chili, it seems, is also one of those lightning rod topics.

Everybody's got a great family recipe and everyone has distinct opinions on what constitutes authentic chili. Texans, for instance, believe beans or tomatoes are heresy. If you're from Cincinnati, your chili goes over spaghetti. Some folks swear by white beans and chicken while others prefer a slow-smoked beef.

What started as a casual debate about chili a few years ago eventually turned into the unofficial but highly competitive Del Ray Chili Cook-Off. This annual event, which just celebrated its fourth year this October, is as much about good-natured taunting and showmanship as it is about chili. Mostly, it's a great way to get friends and neighbors together.



1st Place Winner - Jack

For me, it's a quintessential Del Ray event. And like Del Ray itself, it often includes a diverse medley of tastes and styles, including many Native American influences and recipes from as far away as New Zealand and Ethiopia. The event is one of those magical nights that, because of the perfect confluence of people and place, really couldn't be reproduced in any other neighborhood. That great Del Ray camaraderie was a big part of why my husband Jack Schutzius and I, and neighbors Amy & Dante Desiderio started the cook-off. That, and because Jack was sure his chili would beat the pants off Dante's recipe.

After that first heated discussion, I looked into local contests and was taken aback by all of the rules and regulations. I couldn't imagine pulling together an eye-catching vendor display and meeting all of those health department regulations. The thought of some huge Waterfront festival seemed overwhelming, especially with two young kids in tow. The dead-end alley that parallels our house, however, suddenly seemed like the perfect venue for a casual neighborhood competition.

The first year, no one was sure what to expect. We put out the word that for \$10, you could enter your favorite chili recipe—winner takes the pot. The only requirements were that you had to give your chili a creative name and be willing to dish it out with flair. Without enough chairs for the party, we corralled a few hay bails for seating and set up what can only be described as a very homey chili contest. Despite several last minute entries and some electrical snafus, we eventually declared the first winner: chili novices Mike Anderson and Michele Mitchell, who claimed the secret was thickening the chili with corn.



The Great Del Ray Chili Cook-Off in full swing

Talk to the right person and you might hear some grouching about that first year and some rather questionable vote tabulations. But the winners were pleased (rumor has it the home-made certificate is framed and hanging in a law office downtown); Dante acknowledged that too much spice ultimately doomed his Uncle Crickety's Colon Cleanser, while Jack learned that not everyone is open to the idea of chili over spaghetti. Still, we all vowed to come back stronger the next year.

Before next October rolled around, our daughter Emma decided Jack and I should have a second wedding. She had always been rather miffed that she missed our first ceremony and had orchestrated an elaborate plan where Jack and I would remarry so she and her younger brother Brian would be our flower girl and ring bearer. Dante caught wind of this, enlisted the help of neighbor Aaron Engley, and the two became ordained over the Internet. With the second cook-off looming, we decided to indulge Emma's whim and perform a second wedding ceremony before dishing out the chili. Amidst hay bale pews and a haystack alter, Jack and I renewed our vows--legally-no less--in front of family, friends and recycling bins in the alley. Dante, dressed as Elvis and Aaron clad as a preacher, presided over a surprisingly touching ceremony despite frequent pauses to sip beer each time our names were mentioned in unison. Emma's wish was finally granted and to top it off, Jack's authentic Cincinnati chili--dubbed Lovey Dovey Chili in honor of the nuptials, took first place.

Finding a date for the third cook-off was increasingly difficult since there were now more kids' schedules to accommodate and work travel to interfere. Dante offered to perform another wedding ceremony, and although nobody rose to the challenge, it was still a celebratory event. Our friend and neighbor Byrd Tripp was home safe from duty in Iraq and was able to participate in the cook-off once again. Aaron and his wife Kerri had moved up the street, but returned for the evening and we christened new neighbors with a crash course in Del Ray politics. We also enlisted the talents of a bunch of street musicians willing to play for whatever we could collect in a hat and all of the experimental chili you could eat. Another newcomer, Arch Wells won, with a spicy recipe made from Elk.

Talk to the right person and you might hear some grouching about that third year winner and whether or not it was really elk meat.

This year, we still had many changes and challenges to face. Our original date was rained out despite a record hot fall. Some friends were lured away from Del Ray with the promise of bigger homes, only to return often bemoaning that their neighborhoods weren't nearly as fun. Joan Schilcher, the matriarch of our block, had recently lost her beloved canine companion Patch, who has been a part of our neighborhood landscape since we first moved here in 1993. The Tripp family was reassigned to Norfolk, but we did inherit two new families, Rob Motyka and Gail Kasun and the Abegaz family from Ethiopia.

The band returned, only this time with amplification and we even had a guest celebrity of sorts. Sheriff nominee Dana Lawhorne stopped by and agreed to act as our master of ceremonies. With 10 entries, most of them returning competitors, this year's batch of chili seemed to have an exotic flair.

One contestant claimed to use kangaroo meat. Rob and Gail placed a very impressive second with their tasty Fiesta Verde chili, a clever blend of tomatillos, lime, cilantro and white beans. The winning pot of \$100, however, finally went to Dante. His Five Indictment Chili, also known as Scooter's Last Meal, was a lip-smacking blend of fire roasted bacon and Chorizo sausage.

Talk to the right person and you might hear some grouching that Dante stacked the deck by bringing in outside voters.

Next year it's anyone's race. And it isn't too soon to be thinking up new and exciting recipes for the next cook-off. Just don't expect any of the winners to publish their recipes in The Sun. The first rule of a chili cook-off is: Trust no one.

Laura Fries is a freelance writer who lives in Del Ray and is often seen walking with her son Brian, taking advantage of Del Ray's amenities, including its wheelchair-friendly sidewalks.

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