



Competitors will put their hearts into South Carolina's first sanctioned chili cook-off

By [Lillia Callum-Penso](#) • Staff writer • February 3, 2010

The secrets to really good chili? Quality ingredients, a good balance of heat and flavor, texture and just a little bit of love.

There is no in-between for those with a heart for chili. It's all or nothing, says Chris Galloway, a chili lover and recent chili cook-off convert. And perhaps there is no better place to experience that love than a chili cook-off. There are hundreds of them each year, from California to Massachusetts, and all have one thing in common: "It's an inexact science," says Galloway.

For the first time this year, South Carolina is getting in on the action with its first-ever State Chili Cook-off, the Upstate Chili Cook-Off, scheduled in Belton in April. The competition will be the first ever sanctioned by the International Chili Society (yes, there's a chili society) in South Carolina. That means those who attend should come ready to eat and those who compete should come ready to get serious.

In accordance with the chili governing body that oversees more than 200 cook-offs around the country, the local event will donate proceeds to local non-profits – the Belton Interfaith Ministry Association, Belton Center for the Arts and the Belton Area Museum Association. In its 43 years, the ICS has raised almost \$90 million for charities, says CEO Carol Hancock.

The Upstate cook-off will include a judged ICS professional division for chili pros, as well as a Peoples' Choice Division open to anyone. And to give the event a local spin, it also will include a fireman's division, for local fire departments to prove their muster and raise money at the same time.

Jim Bright remembers sitting around a church basement, tossing around fundraising ideas, but somehow chili stuck.

"Chili is a comfort food," says Bright, a financial planner and one of the local chili cook-off organizers. "And everyone can do chili."

It was the perfect fit for Belton's small-town atmosphere, but the cook-off has grown. ICS approval has given it the "street cred" to attract chili competitors from as far away as Illinois and Connecticut.

The chili cook-off circuit is a world unto itself, says Bob Hall, the 2009 World Chili Cook-off champion. You start innocently, but before you know, it "just snowballs," he said. "A chili cook-

off is nothing but fun because people go to relax, enjoy themselves,” says the 27-year veteran of the cook-off circuit. “There are never any grudges or people fighting or arguing. I love NASCAR, but they’re not really having as much fun.”

The folks who enter cook-offs are not professional chefs, says Vickie Marnick, administrator for the ICS; they’re merely people who love chili. In fact, she says, not one world chili champion has had any professional experience. The skills are developed over time, and the drive to succeed comes not from the promise of trophies and huge cash prizes (the average is \$1,500), but more from bragging rights.

“Chili’s been around a long time,” Marnick says of the hearty food’s enduring appeal. “It’s been on the wagon train when the settlers were here. It’s just something that’s always been there, and competition just adds to it, I guess. That ‘I can do it better than you can...’ ‘Well, prove it.’”

That being said, the ICS has very strict rules regulating competition chili. All cooking and prep must be done on site in a three or four-hour time frame. Cooks can use only tri-tip meat, and no beans are allowed. Beans mask the flavor of the chili, Marnick says, so you can’t get a true taste. With the absence of beans, cooks must distinguish their pots by other means - deft spicing, exact timing and balancing heat. In the world of chili, you never know for sure how your pot will turn out.

“Everybody thinks they have a secret, but there’s no magic, there’s no magic spice, there’s no secret,” Hall says. “Us chili cooks that have been around awhile, we probably look at it as about 40 percent cooking and 60 percent luck.”

The ICS collects every world champion recipe for its Web site, which now includes Hall’s “Chef Boy-R-Bob World Championship Chili Verde” as well. He doesn’t worry about copycats, because “you can cook my recipe but you can’t cook my chili.”

Galloway will make his debut at the competition level at the Georgia State Chili Cook-off in March, and he has his recipe all worked out – meat, crushed tomatoes, onions, jalapeños and spices, but no chili powder. The no beans thing took getting used to, he says, but now “it has completely changed how I look at chili.”

Alas, it has not changed the way his wife (an avid chili with beans person) looks at it.

“She’s like, ‘Well, you’re not making chili for us,’” he says. “But look at it this way, how many different people live in South Carolina? That’s how many different chili recipes there are. Everybody has their own. It’s their personality coming out.”



Chris Galloway prepares chili in the kitchen at Belton Presbyterian Church in Belton, South Carolina on Friday. Galloway was making competition chili without beans and a peoples choice chili with beans. He was preparing for the South Carolina State Chili Cookoff.

YOU CAN ENTER: There are still spots for competition cooks, people's choice cooks and firefighter's division cooks. Those who enter the People's Choice category should be prepared to make 2 gallons of chili that can be prepared off-site. ICS competitors

Cost: \$85 for official competitors (includes \$50 ICS membership fee); \$40 for open division; free for firefighter division in exchange for bringing a fire truck.

For more information, call 864-979-2658, or go to www.upstatechilicookoff.com

- What: Upstate Chili Cook-Off
- When: April 17
- Where: Downtown Belton
- Cost: \$5 for a wristband and a chance to taste 1-ounce samples of all People's Choice and Firefighter Division entries and to vote on the best chili.
- Ingredients: 2½ pounds of pork tenderloin, cut into 3/8 or ½ inch cubes
- 2 tablespoons bacon fat
- 1 cup diced onion
- 4 cloves of garlic, pressed
- 4 jalapeno peppers, seeded and chopped
- 2 green chilies, seeded and chopped,
- 4 Serrano peppers, thinly sliced
- 1 pound of green chilies (canned or frozen), divided in half
- 1 14-ounce can of chicken broth
- 1 14-ounce can green enchilada sauce
- 1 7-ounce can green salsa verde
- 1 tablespoon cumin
- 1 tablespoon powdered green jalapeno
- 2 teaspoons powdered green chili
- 2 teaspoons cornstarch for thickening
- Salt to taste

- Tabasco green pepper sauce (as needed for heat)
- Method: In a 6-quart pot, brown the pork in the bacon fat. Add the remaining ingredients (using only half of the frozen or canned green chilies) to the pot and simmer for two hours. You may need to add some water during the cooking time to keep mixture covered.
- With 30 to 40 minutes of cooking time left, add the remaining green chilies and, 10 minutes before the end of cooking, adjust the thickness, salt and heat. Remember, the salt level drops each time you add the green chilies, so be sure to add salt as needed.

(Photos by Owen Riley Jr.)