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chili con carne

Even by Texas standards, they don't come bigger than Lyndon Baines Johnson, the 36th president and man of voracious appetites.

Johnson loved his politics, his Cutty Sark, bawdy talk and crude jokes, cigarettes by the dozens and, like so many of our former leaders, the ladies. But the way to a Texan's heart, we all know, is through its belly — and LBJ adored Texas chili.

"Chili concocted outside of Texas is usually a weak, apologetic imitation of the real thing," bellowed Johnson. "One of the first things I do when I get home to Texas is to have a bowl of red. There is simply nothing better."

We agree, but the pleasures of the dish are not lost on the rest of us with more modest-sized egos who live in more modest-sized states.

Texas chili comforted cowboys on cattle drives and was a prison staple in Texas in the late 1800s. It's also said the quality of chili at a parlor in McKinney, Texas, kept Jesse and Frank James from busting up the town and filching loot from the town's bank.

Whatever the story, the dish remains popular and easy to make. Now, folks back East and down in Dixie may not like what follows, but real chili is made *without* beans. Yes, true Texas chili has no beans. Now, I ain't a Texan, but Kansans love the stuff, too. What follows here is a family recipe from my pa-

THOUGH ITS ORIGINS ARE
SHROUDED IN MYSTERY,
CHILI REMAINS A POTENT
FORCE IN AMERICAN LIFE

BY MARK LUCE



ternal grandfather, Gene, who passed away this December. Grandpa, who taught flyboys how to be flyboys as an Air Corps flight instructor during World War II, was a mean cook and had been making this wonderful chili for more than 50 years. As with all chili recipes, Grandpa's is a concoction flexible and imprecise to enough to give respectful room for individual tastes, eccentricities and personal culinary style.

Grandpa's chili

Brown 3 pounds to 4 pounds of ground beef (or venison) with two large, finely chopped onions. Drain the meat and then douse the mixture with chili powder and/or red pepper and/or

chili seasoning and/or whatever spices you choose. In an enormous crockpot or giant soup pot, pour 4 cans to 6 cans of 15 ounces to 18 ounces of tomato sauce (maybe a couple of cans of tomato paste for thickness). Add the meat and start stirring. You may want to add some water to get the consistency to your taste.

Then add any of the following: chopped green peppers; more onions; minced garlic cloves; diced celery; mild or hot or please-shoot-me-this-is-so-damn-hot chili peppers; small chunks of tomato; sliced mushrooms; and, if you insist on it, a bunch of yucky beans. Cook on low heat for 3 hours to 4 hours, stirring every once in a while. Occasionally, you should add more spices — chili powder, celery salt, salt, pepper, Tabasco, Louisiana hot sauce, oregano, sugar or whatever else tickles your fancy.

Once you think you have it right, remove from heat and put it in the fridge overnight. Reheat the stuff — on low heat, of course — and serve topped with shredded sharp cheddar and crackers. Chow down. Freeze some to eat later.

LBJ would have come back for thirds for this delicacy. Enjoy, and, thanks, Grandpa, for teaching me this — and so much more.

Mark Luce is a free-lance writer based in Kansas City, Mo., who loves his chili more than even LBJ.

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