

Chiliheads in Reno

Cooks stir, judges taste, and Willie Nelson sings during the World's Championship Chili Cook-Off.

By Brian Kluepfel

Judging a chili cook-off is a bit like playing Goldilocks: "This chili is too spicy. This one is too chewy. This one is too watery. This one's just right!" And while judges are committed to brutal honesty on their score sheets, they otherwise must maintain deadpan—and sometimes painful—silence during judging.

"Don't talk to the other judges, don't make faces, and pretend you're the only one out there," instructs chief judge Fred Wieland, who will be among the elite panel deciding the World's Championship Chili Cook-Off October 3-5 in downtown Reno.

About 125 teams are expected to fill four blocks of Virginia Street with the zesty smell of meat and spices. Admission is free, and visitors can purchase quarts of chili

Last year's chili-eating contest winner ate 166 ounces of chili in 10 minutes.

from competitors. The weekend also includes concerts by Willie Nelson, who performs October 3-4 at the nearby City Center Pavilion.

The International Chili Society has hosted the cook-off for the past 26 years. This diehard cadre of self-professed "chiliheads" log many miles in competing and trying to create the perfect bowl. Teams come from as far away as Australia for the finals in Reno.

"I've spent a quarter of a million dollars and gone a quarter of a million miles

doing this," says Skip Cooley, a resident of Carson City and the 1992 champion. "I'm having fun, you bet, but don't think I don't want to win every time."

The competition boils down to three areas of expertise: salsa, chili verde (the newest category, added in 1999), and the big granddaddy of them all, red chili. Competitors often enter all three categories in a quest for ICS's coveted Triple Crown. The red chili still carries the grandest prize: \$25,000 and a silver bowl. The winner's recipe is published on the official cook-off Web site.

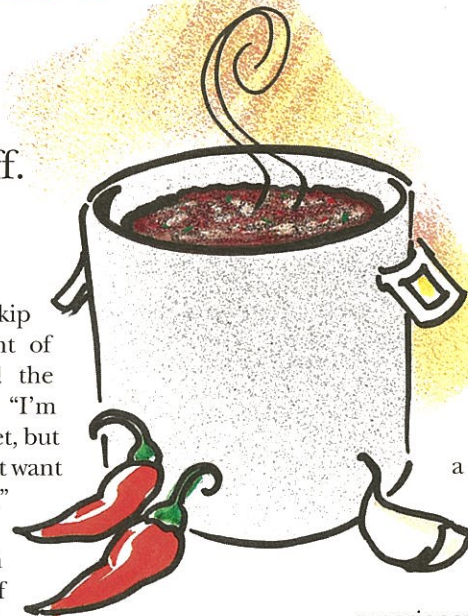
ICS defines red chili as "any kind of meat or combination of meats, cooked with red chili peppers, various spices, and other ingredients, with the exception of beans and pasta, which are strictly forbidden." But it's the magical combination of ingredients that chefs work on all year, winning regional competitions to get to the big finale in Reno.

"You might like cilantro, but not all the judges will," says Cooley, who will be competing this fall.

Ed Pierczynski, also from Carson City, says, "I've tried every kind of meat—bear, venison, alligator, even duck—but I always go back to the old standby, tri-tip beef."

Sonny Allen of Dayton, chairperson of the Nevada State Championship, buys his powders from the 1986 world champion, Jim Beaty of Sespe Creek Chili in California. Another cook told me he won a competition when he discovered the magic of adding prunes to the mix.

Don't feel sorry for the judges—they are provided an ample supply of beer,



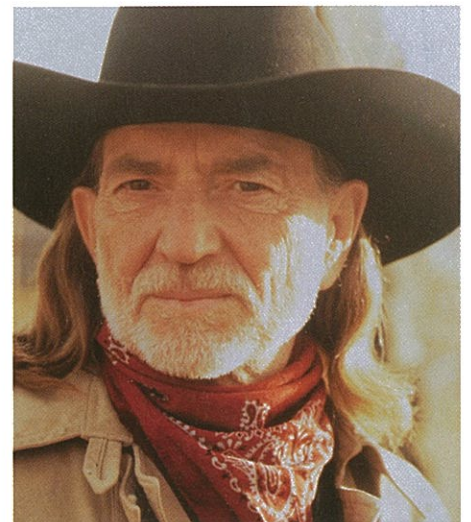
soda, water, and bread to cleanse their palates between bites.

Spectators can enter a chili-eating contest. Last year's winner, Rich LeFevre of Henderson, ate 166 ounces of chili in 10 minutes, an

experience that certainly would qualify as a Tums moment.

For details on Willie Nelson's shows call 888-288-1833. Discounts of \$5 are available for showgoers buying tickets through the Silver Legacy, Harrah's Reno, Eldorado, or Circus Circus and for those who have room reservations at the participating hotels for the chili cook-off. Visit www.chilicookoff.com for more information on the World's Championship Chili Cook-Off. ♣

Brian Kluepfel is a freelance writer and chili aficionado from Berkeley, California.



Willie Nelson and his band will be cookin' during the International Chili Society cook-off in Reno.