

Never Beans! How Texas Chili Makes Texas Real



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## Never Beans! How Texas Chili Makes Texas Real

*“Texas truly is the home of chili.”  
Chili is a “symbol of the heritage of Texas.”*

Texas and Chili, like American and apple pie, are often paired together as inseparable and dependent upon each other<sup>1</sup>. “World Championship” Chili cook-offs use the Texas Red version of Chili as their mainstays. Chili mixes depict symbols of Texas on their packages. Texas “expatriates” will search for ways to make or obtain a “true” Texas Chili just to get that taste of home. What makes these two ideas so intertwined? A superficial reading of the phenomena might suggest a long-term connection between beef and Texas-Mexican history that represents itself in the regional cuisine. This interpretation is not completely wrong. However, I argue that Chili is more complex and that it is a symbol of Texas identity and a tool through which Texans maintain their group identity. In contrast, I also suggest that Chili, the dish, depends on the myth of Texas to maintain its own credibility as a unique food style. Using a construct of authenticity and ethnicity, this paper will explore popular conceptions of Texas Chili<sup>2</sup> as a symbol of Texas identity.

Although a member of the United States since 1845, Texas has a unique history as a former republic in which Texans find the base for a unique, state identity. The first section of this paper will define how “Texan” has developed as an identity that is recognized as distinct by both group insiders and outsiders. Using an historical framework, I will also map the history of Chili as a part of Texas history through which contemporary Texans maintain a tie to an ancient heritage. Using data collected from an on-line survey, I will demonstrate how people tie the dish, Chili, to aspects of Texas’ past.

As a food, Chili holds a special place among Texas symbols. Like any symbol, it has multiple interpretations and meanings for different people. The phrase “you are what you eat” represents how food and identity are linked. Texas Chili, however, represents a specific type of individual and belonging

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<sup>1</sup> Starting quotes and quotations as section titles are from on-line survey data.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise specified in the text, “Chili” will refer to Texas Chili, whereas “chili” will refer to the larger types of chili styles. “Chile” with an “e” refers to the pepper and not the dish.

to the Texas identity. In section two, I examine how food is a symbol of identity through the characteristics of Texans and Chili. We can see direct parallels between specific ingredients or Chili-related elements and values or attributes associated with “Texan.”

Not just any chili, though, works as a symbol of Texas. It must be Texas Chili, or a Bowl of Red, to some. Authenticity to “true” Texas Chili is important to the maintenance of the group’s heritage. In section three I will present different forms of authenticity and how Chili gains legitimacy as Texan through their employment. I conceptualize authenticity in three ways. First, I consider Edward Bruner’s notion of authenticity as verisimilitude (Bruner 1994) and define Texas Chili by what it is not through survey data. Although not all people may agree on what Texas Chili *is*, they usually agree upon what it is not. A second use of authenticity, also from Bruner, is based on the quest for genuineness and historical accurateness. Discourse on ties to heritage and simulation of frontier or trail cooking, in addition to indigenous ingredients, places Chili in a direct descent line through Texas history. Finally, I consider food and eating as performance and analyze chili as a product of cultural-historical authenticity (Bigenho 2002). Performance is a venue through which people establish a sense of belonging that is felt through a particular representation of one’s past and the relationship of that past to the individual’s future (Bigenho 2002:19). Chili-eating is often a community activity, in both private and public gatherings. Cook-offs are public events through which competitors and the public share their knowledge of chili expertise. Through shared narratives, both implicit and explicit, Chili lovers recognize both continuity with a shared past, that of Texas history, and membership in a group, that of Texans.

In addition to using Chili as a way in which Texans authenticate their stake in Texas, the image and “branding” of Texas characteristics can help to legitimize chili mixes on the market. Itself, the image of Texas, has been commodified through feature films, television and sports. Adding this image to a chili product aids in authenticity of the product as “real,” enabling the consumer to partake in the group identity. In section four I will provide a brief survey of chili mixes as evidence that “Texas” is an important advertising scheme for the producers.

## **Methodology**

For the foundation for this paper I use data that I collected in a November 2006 on-line survey.<sup>3</sup> I recruited participants from two pools – members of the Chili Appreciation Society International (CASI) and my personal friends and family from Texas. I asked original recruits to forward the survey to anyone whom they thought might be interested in the project, thereby employing a snowball sampling method. The survey consists of three sections: demographics, ingredients, and ideas about chili. In the demographics section, I ask participants to identify themselves as Texan or not, how they affiliate with the state, how often they eat Chili and their participation level in chili cook-offs. The ingredients portion of the survey polls participants on what types of ingredients “can be used in” Chili. This portion helps to identify participants’ expertise and knowledge levels regarding chili. The last portion of the survey consists of five open-ended questions:

1. What is the difference between Texas Chili and other types of chili?
2. Where do you think Texas Chili came from? What was its origin?
3. Why is chili such a symbol of Texas? Why do we (Texans) feel so strongly about it?
4. Do you think chili is important to people in other parts of the USA? If so, where and how?
5. Is there anything else about chili and/or Texas that you would like to add?

I use excerpts from these answers through this paper in order to illustrate my points regarding Texas identity and symbolism. I received a total of 89 survey responses; I discarded two surveys due to duplication errors and one survey because the survey taker did not fill out any information other than demographics. I am using data from a total of 86 respondents.

## **“Our identity as Texans”**

Who are “Texans”? According to one survey respondent, Texans are people who identify with their state (Texas) first and country (USA) second. It is a self-ascribed status. Evon Vogt considers Texans to be a variation of American culture called a “historically derived subcultural continuum” (1955), or a subculture for short. In his definition these subcultures have only partial relationships to region, ethnic or religious affiliation, social class or other types of social differentiation groupings. Instead, he

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<sup>3</sup> The survey instrument is available at <http://mypage.iu.edu/~hbludau/chilisurvey.htm>.

argues that Texans produce their relationships with each other through a recognition of a “chain of historical circumstances” from which the group derives and maintains the subcultural unit through “special patterns and values” that cut across axes of differentiation in American culture (Vogt 1955:1163). Although Vogt’s theory is somewhat outdated, it is a useful framework through which we can still study Texan identity.

The most useful aspect of Vogt’s analysis is the idea that Texas is both an immigration and emigration region which makes Texas culture both a derivative and carrier of broader American culture. Essentially, through early immigration from the eastern portion of the United States, traditional American values became part of Texan ideology. Additionally, large migration movements in the twentieth century, specifically Depression-era movements to the west coast, extended the region that Texans call home. Vogt also makes the point that “Texan” is typically associated with “Anglo”. Historical memory of the fight for independence from Mexico leads to a tension between Hispanic and Anglo culture in Texas society.<sup>4</sup> Mark Nackman supports this aspect and claims that Texas identity has little or no meaning for Mexican, black or Native American residents of the state (1975:5). Additionally, Texas was a slave state during the antebellum period and ideas regarding belonging for African-Americans remain conflicted. However, through personal communication with black natives to Texas, I suggest that this concept is changing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (emails to the author, November 18, 2006; December 3, 2006).

Vogt’s analysis fails to include, though, the historical fact of Texas independence and nine years as a republic or sovereign nation. Another framework, not mutually exclusive with the subcultural continuum, for Texas identity is that of a lingering nationalism (Nackman 1975). The struggle for national viability is a large link in Vogt’s chain of historical circumstances. Nackman argues in *A Nation within a Nation: The rise of Texas nationalism*, that Anglo-Texans built camaraderie through events such as battling an inhospitable frontier wilderness, contact with and border defense against alien cultures (Mexican and Native American) and a revolutionary war. He further states that it is these experiences

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<sup>4</sup> Although referenced later, this is a topic that is too complex for the scope of this paper.

that make Texans distinct from Americans (Nackman 1975:6). The concept of Texan in relation to American will arise later in discussion regarding Chili as a symbol for Texas.

Using the concept that an ethnic group is also a reference group that people who share a common history, based on overt features and values, invoke as an identity (Royce 1982:18), we can also explain why the characteristics of Chili and Texans act as counterparts in identity performance. Under this rubric, Texans fit the definition of ethnic group, as well, and theories regarding group maintenance will apply. In order for an ethnic group, or subculture, to exist, it must have boundaries of a sort. Group insiders have cultural knowledge that group outsiders lack (Royce 1982:29).<sup>5</sup> The inside knowledge is complex and varied and can tolerate ambiguity. Outsiders only have limited knowledge and interaction across the group boundary is restricted. Due to the amount (or lack) of shared knowledge, individuals will perform their identity to other members differently than to non-members. The ability to make a claim on an identity relies upon an individual's ability to adequately perform the cultural role (Royce 1982:30). Therefore, Texans who share a common historical knowledge will both evoke and recognize symbolism within performance of Chili events, including selection of ingredients. I will demonstrate later how the most blatant symbols of Texas are utilized in the commodification of chili mixes for a wider appeal to non-Texans.

### ***Myth and nation***

The myths regarding Chili's origins include a wide variety of Texas' history, including the "pre-Texas" era of Texas. However, I will demonstrate that Chili's characteristics more closely parallel those that relate to the Anglo history of Texas, therefore tying it more directly to the Texan-Anglo identity. Texas chronology has an inverse relation to the reference of origins in my survey's responses, with cowboy culture, frontier life, Mexican references<sup>6</sup>, and Native American origins decreasing in response rate.

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<sup>5</sup> Royce's theory of Double Boundaries states that the boundaries between ethnic groups are maintained from within and imposed from without. These boundaries result from the interaction between individuals from within and without the group.

<sup>6</sup> Mexican references also include such entries as "San Antonio" and "Chili Queens" which are most associated with the Anglo colonial era but index the Mexican heritage of the state and contrast Texas independence.

## **Native American**

Part of Texas history, romanticized as it may be, is the long-term habitation of Native American peoples. Many people recognize that native peoples spawned the creation of chili through their use of pemmican, a proto-chili of sorts that consisted of dried game with chiles or berries. Non-native settlers borrowed the technique, pounding together “dried beef, beef fat, Chiltepins, and salt” to create a trail food that could be carried in leather pouches for long distances. Called “chili bricks,” these concoctions could be soaked all day and ready for boiling at dinnertime (Day 2006). Survey participants recognize this potential with about 5% referencing a Native American origin. Others also mentioned that inhabitants of the area (implied Anglo) used ingredients that were “native,” or “locally available.” From a practical viewpoint, this is also a reasonable explanation for chili’s development (DeWitt and Gerlach 1990). Other tales link Native American and colonial histories. “The lady in blue” was a Spanish nun, Sister Mary of Agreda, who would take “incorporeal visits” to the New World in the 1600s. During her trances, the Native Americans whom she was trying to convert gave her a recipe for chili con carne: “chile peppers, venison, onions, and tomatoes” (DeWitt and Gerlach 1990:147).

## **Tex-Mex**

The second most referenced origin for chili (15%) is a Mexican heritage. Although the French had an early colonial presence in Texas, the Spanish, and subsequently Mexican, heritage has had the most lasting effect. Álvaro Núñez Cabeza de Vaca is known as the first European to touch Texas soil in 1528 and the area was under Spanish control until 1821 when Mexico gained its independence. Stephen F. Austin began bringing American settlers into Mexican Texas in 1823. It is not surprising to see Texas’ history of Spanish and Mexican culture evident in myths regarding the origins of chili.

For instance, in order to explain why cumin (or comino) is a common ingredient in chili, we find reference to a group of colonists from the Canary Islands who arrived in San Antonio in the early 1700s (Lowe 2006). Recruited by the Spanish government to increase the population in its Texas colony and create the aristocracy of Texas, Canary Islanders brought a taste for cumin in their food. Although often credited with introducing the item to the region, shipping lists indicate that Franciscan monks had prior

access to the spice (Walsh 2004:44). However, the Canary Island women are reported to have made stew with “cumin, chile peppers, wild onion, and the available herb,” which were cooked “outdoors in copper kettles in the village plaza” (Walsh 2004:44). This scenario repeats itself in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1836, Texas gained her independence from Mexico and joined the United States nine years later. However, the Spanish-Mexican-Native American culture and heritage endures. Approximately 10% of the survey respondents listed San Antonio and/or the Chili Queens as the birth place or progenitors of Chili. In the beginning, the Chili stands in San Antonio were simply part of the vegetable vendors set up in the plaza in front of the famed symbol of Texas independence, the Alamo. The Chili Queens worked as laundresses by day and set up their stands at night. By the late 1800s, however, an elaborate system, like a portable restaurant had evolved (Walsh 2004:44). The Chili Queens helped to turn a makeshift meal into an identifiable dish (Jamison and Jamison 1993:108). Subsequently, an “authentic” chili booth exhibit based on the Chili Queens at the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago helped bring the “flavor” of Texas culture to the national scene. Between the national exhibit and travel or tourists’ accounts of the “bewitching” Chili Queens, the ethnic dish of Chili was placed firmly in Texas’ local cuisine (Pilcher 2006).

## **Cowboys**

An overwhelming number of survey respondents, however, state the frontier and cattle culture as the impetus for the creation of Chili. Sixty-six percent of survey participants listed one or more of the following types of origins: cowboys, cattle/trail drives, ranching, chuck wagons, use of local ingredients, spoiled meat/lack of refrigeration<sup>7</sup>. After the Civil War, Texas experienced a population boom and although cotton was “king,” cattle were a vital part of the Texas economy. Cowboys drove cattle from starting points in Texas to rail lines in Kansas and Missouri for shipment to eastern meat-packing factories. Dime novelists romanticized and perpetuated the life of cowboys on the trail (Lee 1993:4).

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<sup>7</sup> Most respondents who reference spoiled meat also refer to the lack of refrigeration at that time and include the notion that chiles would mask the bad taste.

In more recent decades, Hollywood has helped continue the connection between cowboys and Texas through movie and television stereotypes. The movie *Giant* (Stevens 1956), based on Edna Ferber's novel by that name (1952), popularized the image of the "real Texas" in 1950s cinemas. Movie stars such as James Dean, Rock Hudson and Elizabeth Taylor epitomized the characteristics associated with Texas of vulgarity, wildness and opulence in Texas cattle ranching. *Giant* was nominated for 10 Academy Awards, including two best actor awards; Stevens won Best Director (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences 2006). The acclaim for the film only helped to legitimate, or "authenticate," the image of Texans as rough, cattle ranchers. Audie Murphy, the most decorated American soldier of World War II and native Texan, showed that Texans can kill any villain from Nazis, in reality and celluloid, to Apaches and claim jumpers (Internet Movie Database Inc. 2006).

However, James Ward Lee's chapter on "The True History of Texas," best demonstrates the proliferation of movies that have Texas as a setting (Lee 1993). In this piece, Lee cites the names of actors and their "roles" in Texas history instead of the names of historical figures or fictional characters. Lee's special treatment of John Wayne's movies, linking even Wayne's non-Texas related films to his substantial body of Texas films, demonstrates how the public can link specific actors to a place, even when it is not the case. Adding to John Wayne's imagined portrayals of ideal Texans, two of John Wayne's Oscar nominations, and his one win, were for movies about Texas: *The Alamo* (Wayne 1960) in which Wayne not only played the infamous Davy Crockett, but also directed and produced; and, *True Grit* (Portis, et al. 1969) for which Wayne won Best Actor for "Rooster Cogburn" (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences 2006). More recent films such as *Urban Cowboy* (Bridges 1980) and *Happy, Texas* (Illsley 2002) still depict cowboy culture as a lifestyle.

Finally, since 1960 the two terms, "cowboy" and "Texas," have been inextricably linked through the NFL football team, the Dallas Cowboys. One the most winningest teams in the NFL, the Cowboys have had eight Super Bowl appearances (Dallas Cowboys 2006). Dubbed "America's Team" in 1979 by Bob Ryan, the Vice President and editor-in-chief of NFL Films, the Cowboys reference both the Texan cowboy heritage while firmly placing Texas within the sphere of American culture. With the national

media focused on the cowboy image relating to Texas, it is not surprising that Chili – THE cowboy dish - is so closely linked to Texas as well. With such a long and dynamic history, Chili has a number of meanings through which it can be interpreted as a device for identity communication.

## Food as Symbol

“On many occasions people define themselves with food; at the same time, food consistently defines and redefines them” (Mintz 2002:26). Food can be a very simple, yet complex, tool for communication of cultural information. As I explained previously, the ability to adequately communicate with shared cultural knowledge is pertinent to placing oneself and others into groups. Food can be a significant tool for this communication process. Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney describes food as a “metaphor of self” and suggests that staple foods play important roles in identity construction (Ohnuki-Tierney 1993:4). People create traditions related to foodways in order to help redefine their own identities; food consumption for humans is rarely purely biological. The foods we eat have histories associated with them and how food is prepared, served and eaten employs cultural processes. Therefore, consumption of food is conditioned by meaning (Mintz 1996:7).

Meaning engenders tradition. I am using ‘tradition’ in the sense that Eric Hobsbawm defined as a “set of practices, normally governed by ...rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (Hobsbawm 1983:1). Tradition is the context in which an action is performed, as well as the tools necessary for the action (Hobsbawm 1983:2). Finally, elements of tradition are liberated for full symbolic use when practical use no longer necessitates the practice (Hobsbawm 1983:4).

Hobsbawm’s framework is very useful for analysis of food items. First, for a dish to have symbolic value, it must have a recipe with common elements that make it recognizable as the particular dish, in this case, Chili. According to survey results, norms for Texas Chili include beef or game, chiles or chile powder and a hearty or thick sauce. Beans are a highly contestable ingredient that I will discuss in more detail below. However, the elements that I list have a direct link to Texas past. Ingredients are

the “tools” necessary for the performance of this tradition. Additionally, over half of the survey respondents (69%) reported eating chili in a public place, and 15% listed specific social atmospheres in which they eat chili, such as friends’ homes, church functions or family gatherings. The context in which the tradition is understood is one of hospitality, friendship and community, characteristics associated with Texans. Finally, 85% of survey participants eat chili at home and indicate knowledge, if not expertise, in chili preparation, including personal recipe components. With a variety of canned chili options on the market, home preparation is no longer necessary, freeing chili for purely symbolic use. In other words, if an individual simply wants chili, there are easy and simple options available on the supermarket shelf. However, if an individual makes Chili from scratch, using ingredients and techniques that create a very specific type of chili, then the individual invokes the symbolic nature of the dish.

### ***Texans are like Chili...***

Combining a staple of the Texas diet, beef, with a staple in Tex-Mex cuisine, the chile, I suggest that the dish Chili is a significant symbol and metaphor for Texan identity. Ohnuki-Tierney states that foods are significant, or dominant, if they occur frequently in both itself and iconic representation and if it serves as a window revealing something important (1993:5). Survey respondents report eating chili at least once a month. Additionally, as I will illustrate in the last section, chili-related products are common food stuffs. In this section I will map characteristics of chili to perceptions of Texas. Table 1 outlines the correlations between Chili components and characteristics related to Texas and Texans. Apart from the obvious relation between Texas hot weather and Texas hot Chili, the different aspects of Chili directly relate to various features of Texas culture.

*Texas as frontier.* The idea of Texas as a frontier territory has had a long history. Even after statehood, Texas was still relatively unpopulated. Although the phrase “Gone to Texas” or “G.T.T.” was already common in the eastern half of the United States before the Civil War, Texas is a large territory. Even though Texas’ population almost tripled in the twenty years after 1860, the rural population was still

only about 5.3 people per square mile in 1880.<sup>8</sup> The frontier mode of subsistence was “using what was available” such as wild game and indigenous plants coupled with hard work trying to make a successful settlement. I suggest that descriptions of Chili as “hearty” and “easy to prepare” are indexical to the frontier way of life because many responses elaborated on these terms with references to the Old West, frontier cooking or hard work. Along with the frontier spirit arise the characteristics necessary for success in this inhospitable environment.

*Vulgarity and wildness.* After 1846, Texas was a haven for people who wanted to start a new life. Immigrants from Eastern Europe began to land in Galveston in the 1850s. However, the majority of migrants were from other parts of the United States. Although the greater part of the settlers were decent, law-abiding folk, a large number of debtors, criminals and scoundrels of one shape or another, found anonymity and a fresh start in Texas (Nackman 1975). The frontier life described above required daring and enterprising natures for success. These

Texas/Texans	Chili
Hot weather	Spicy
Mexican heritage	Spicy, Tex-Mex cuisine, beans
Cattle, cowboys	Beef
Frontier	Wild game/hunting, indigenous ingredients, hearty, simple to prepare, accompanied by cornbread
Vulgar, wild	Accompanied by beer, hunting, cook-offs
Friendly	Associated with social gatherings
Hospitality, moral	Chili cook-offs raise money for charities
Independent, sovereign	No beans
Tough	Spicy, hearty
Ostentatious, extreme, opulent	“The spicier the better”

**Table 1. Correlations between Texas/Texan characteristics and Chili components**

features often partner with “wild” and “tough.” Another element of Texas identity that is an underlying current in these characteristics is masculinity. I have already explained that the idea of Texan is an Anglo, but he is also a man. One saying goes that Texas is a “great land for men and mules but it was hell on women and horses” (Lee 1993:4). Vulgarity is still found in jokes and branding surrounding chili. Additionally, the Terlingua International Chili Championship has been described as “pretty rough” with “a lot of nudity and carrying-on – like spring break only in the high desert” (Sutherland 2003:158).

<sup>8</sup> The 1860 census recorded the population in Texas at 604,000, 4% of which were urban. By 1880, the population had risen to 1,592,000, 9% urban.

*Hospitality and friendliness.* Although the bad boys in Texas received the media attention, the decent folk were known for their friendliness and hospitality, not to mention intelligence, fortitude and morality (Nackman 1975:9). These characteristics continue in the modern society. Texas roadways are dotted with signs asking motorists to “Drive Friendly,” which means taking the needs of other drivers into consideration, specifically those involved in towing agricultural paraphernalia. In relation to Chili, hospitality and friendliness is directly related to the context in which Chili is cooked and eaten. It is a social food; you cannot really make just a few servings. I stated previously that over 15% of survey participants related Chili to community or charity work. Most Chili cook-offs act as charity fundraisers of some sort. CASI prominently displays their charitable mission on their front webpage; they claim to raise over \$1,000,000 annually (CASI 2006).

*Beans. NO beans!* The debate over beans in Texas Chili is possibly the largest controversy in Chili’s symbolic communication system. A CASI motto states that “Anybody who knows beans about chili knows there ain’t no beans in chili” (DeWitt and Gerlach 2006). Other than individual taste, there does appear to be a practical reason for beanless Chili. Beans breakdown after too long in the pot and they do not hold up to reheating (Dorsch 1998). CASI rules state that fillers, which include “beans, macaroni, rice, hominy, or other similar ingredients” are not allowed (Chili Appreciation Society International 2005). Regardless of the reason, the split between beans and no beans has entered Texas folklore. One legend states that Texas law prohibits making Chili with beans (Wright 2002:50), which supports another which claims that putting beans in Chili has “replaced horse thievery as the number one hanging offense” (Duckworth 2006). However, I purposefully left beans out of the core elements of Chili because my data indicates that this axiom is no longer (if it ever was) true. Forty percent of survey respondents (41% of Texan and 31% of non-Texan respondents) reported that beans in Chili is acceptable. Some acknowledged the controversy but use personal taste and preference. Others were very vehement about the inclusion of beans *in* the chili; some added that beans added as a garnish or eaten on the side was perfectly suitable.

In Table 1, I correlate “no beans” with Texas independence and sovereignty and “beans” with Mexican heritage. I argue that Texans’ revulsion to beans in Chili relates to the symbolic use of beans for Mexico. Much like “frog” and “kraut” for French and Germans (Gabaccia 1998:9), respectively, Texans use “bean eater” as a common derogatory name for Mexicans. Beans are a common item in Mexican cooking and an indigenous food item. The exclusion of beans from Texas Chili symbolizes the Texas revolution and independence from Mexico. Additionally, by relegating beans to side dish classification, Texans symbolically subjugate and even emasculate the Mexican people. However, Texans who feel a closer affiliation with or acceptance of the Mexican past may accept beans in the dish.

*Ostentatious, extreme and opulent.* Another theme that many survey respondents brought up is the concept that “everything is bigger in Texas.” As the largest state in the Union, until Alaska joined in 1959, Texas has a history of being big. In comparison to other states, when Texas joined the Union it had the provision that it could split into no more than four states. The mammoth cattle ranches such as the King Ranch in South Texas and the XIT Ranch in West Texas, with holdings of over one million and three million acres, respectively, demonstrated the sheer size of the state. The oil barons in *Giant* and the long-running television series, *Dallas*, only fuel the image. In a different way, Texas also experiences extremes climatically. Temperatures across the state range from summer averages above 100°F to winter averages below 0°F. Prone to other climactic deviations such as tornadoes, hurricanes and drought, Texans have learned to live with extreme conditions. With this perception of excess in mind, I suggest that extreme spice, in relation to chili heat, correlates to Texas extremes and opulence.

### ***Distinctly Texan, Distinctly American***

Previously, I explained the way in which Texans are both American and distinct from America. Texas symbols, including Chili, helps to maintain this dual nationalism. The Lone Star is possibly the most ubiquitous symbol of Texas. It represents a maverick nation, geographically and culturally isolated from the rest of the country (Nackman 1975:131). However, Chili also represents both Texas’ uniqueness and its national solidarity. Although the previous section outlines how Chili represents Texas, some of its

individual characteristics may represent other groups in the American cultural kaleidoscope. Therefore, taken as whole, Chili is unique. Stews, soups, casseroles and even other types of chili may share some of the elements with Texas Chili but they do not represent unique characteristics the way that the components of Texas Chili do. It represents a specific Texas history, even possibly “hijacking” the dish from its Mexican originators (Smith 1999:6).

At the same time, chili is American. In a recent conversation, an acquaintance claimed that when asked by another person to name a truly “American” dish, the only thing he could come up with is chili. Additionally, my data supports the placement of chili in American cuisine. Comments like “If there is a ‘typical’ American food, it would be chili” or referencing the pervasiveness of chili in other parts of the country support the idea that chili is not merely a regional dish. The one caveat to this statement is that American chili does not necessarily equate to Texas Chili. Many respondents recognized various forms of chili found in different parts of the country, most noticeably Cincinnati Chili, which I will discuss below. Therefore, while the genre of chili is American, the dish known as Texas Chili is a specific variety that represents the unique identity of Texans.

## **Authenticity**

Since there are various forms of chili, claims to Texas identity must be made through authentic versions of Texas Chili. Richard Peterson states that authenticity is a social construct that we utilize when making claims on a specific identity (Peterson 2005). Defining authenticity, however, can be controversial. I will conceptualize authenticity in three ways, exploring how these different ways of authentication strengthen Texas Chili’s symbolic power.

## **Verisimilitude**

“I envision cowboys cooking it out on the range and having cookoffs in the ‘olden’ days” (on-line survey, 2006) Edward Bruner defines “historical verisimilitude” as authentic in a way that makes the item credible to the modern public (Bruner 1994:399). In order for Chili to be a viable symbol that connects contemporary Texans with their Texas heritage, Texas Chili must seem like it could have been

cooked in the past. Applying core elements of meat or game, chiles and thick sauce, this still leaves much room for variation. I suggest that individuals today recognize what *could have been* Chili in the past through contemporary Chili or chili-like dishes that were probably not produced in the past. Shun Lu (1994:6) suggests that when authenticating ethnic foods, the maintenance of a food pattern is not measured by whether or not it is *identical* with an original model but whether or not the fundamental characteristics, or core components, of the food are defined as being continuously present. With a variety of origin myths from which to choose, this mode of authenticity is a practical means through which to view Chili. Comparisons to stews, soups or even jambalaya appeared in survey data as examples of what does not count as Texas Chili. However, the most common challenge to Texas Chili is Cincinnati Chili.

### **Cincinnati Chili**

Cincinnati Chili is most often described as sweet, with cinnamon and over noodles. It was invented by Tom Kiradjieff, an immigrant from Macedonia (Gabaccia 1998:109). After being introduced to chili in New York, Kiradjieff moved to Cincinnati in 1922 and developed his own chili. It is a meat sauce with chile pepper, cinnamon and all-spice. Kiradjieff developed a new twist to the Tex-Mex dish in order to grab attention for his lunch stand. He soon added other “ways” to eat the chili, such as over noodles, to appeal to a wider, multiethnic clientele. He started to market his chili in the 1940s and Skyline restaurants opened in competition with Kiradjieff in the 1950s. Although Cincinnati Chili has the basic components of Texas Chili (meat, chile, sauce) because it include elements that would be unbelievable for Texas cooks through time, it is not accepted as a viable option for Chili. Many survey repondents refer to chilis found in other parts of the country, occasionally specifically targeting Cincinnati, as “so-called” chilis and not the real thing.

### **Simulation**

A second way in which to authenticate Texas Chili is through simulation. Another Bruner construction, simulated items are historically accurate to the original period (Bruner 1994:399). Similar to verisimilitude, simulated items must be believable to someone from the past. In relation to food, Lisa

Heldke might consider this a form of cultural food colonialism. Under this concept, food is authentic when it is prepared in the way it would be in its culture of origin, using the same methods and the same ingredients that members of the ethnic group would (Heldke 2003:29). Although a modern-day Texan recreating an historic recipe for Chili is drawing from her own ethnic group, considering the contestation regarding the origins of Chili and the exclusion of non-Anglos in the Texas identity, colonial highjacking of the Chili dish can be argued.

### ***Cultural-historical Authenticity***

The final way in which I view authenticity of Chili is as a cultural-historical performance. All forms of identity claims are a performance of some sort. Individuals are either performing for the in-group to demonstrate shared knowledge or belonging or they are performing for the out-group and distinguishing themselves from the others. I have already demonstrated how chili is directly tied to the Texas past and therefore how its consumption creates a direct line between earlier Texans and the present-day individual. Bigenho (2002:19) states that cultural-historical authenticity often builds on narrative structure. As a food item, chili is part of a broad discourse regarding its place in Texan cuisine.

### ***Contradicting Authenticity***

One feature of Texas Chili that appears in both literature and survey data is the concept that Chili is very versatile. No “authentic” recipe for Chili exists. Even the Chili Queens, who more or less codified the dish into a recognizable food item, had their own recipes. Chili recipes are as individual as the cooks themselves. Ray Calhoun states that “anyone can cook your recipes, but no one else can cook your chili” (DeWitt and Gerlach 2006:10). Even the cooking style lends itself to variation. In addition to the “secret” ingredients that cooks do not list in their recipes, length and temperature of cooking, or the quality of spices and other ingredients, can alter the dish at each attempt. Additionally, although survey participants found consensus on some Chili ingredients, the variety of meat options, alone, showed a wide range of acceptable entries. The one conclusive agreement on meat, however, is that Texas Chili should not use fish or fowl. Additionally, non-Texans show a greater variety in acceptable meat options in

comparison to Texans. The other major variant includes whether or not the dish uses real chiles, including a variety of chile options. Nine different types of fresh chiles appeared as recipe components. Finally, a controversy almost as severe as the bean war concerns the meat preparation. Common meat preparation includes cubed, hamburger grind or chili grind.<sup>9</sup>

I also suggest that the versatility of Chili is a symbol of the dish, itself. Texans are known for being individually independent (Lee 1993:8; Nackman 1975:131; Vogt 1955:1168). By creating one's own recipe for Chili that stays true to the core values of the dish, Texans display their own independence. Meredith Abarca (2004) considers deviation from the norm in her work on ethnic cuisine as a specific type of authenticity possessing an inherent authority. She states that "cooking... involves intellectual knowledge, skillful manual process, and personal as well as collective historical, political, and social stories" (Abarca 2004:3). By deviating from an original recipe but maintaining the essence of the dish, an individual displays personal knowledge and skill. This is a more dramatic way to prove insider knowledge.

## **Chili for sale**

Earlier in this paper, I briefly described ways in which Hollywood has romanticized and exploited the image of Texas that has perpetuated an image of the "Wild West Texas." I have spent the bulk of this work extrapolating the ways in which Texans use Chili as a means to not only authenticate the Texan identity but also their places within it. However, producers of chili mixes and products turn the tables on this process and use the idea of Texas as a means of authenticating their products for increased sales. In this final section, I will explore the commodification of Texas identity through Chili products.

## ***Branding ain't just for cattle***

Consumption is never just the depletion of a durable good but also the symbolic consumption of the images and dreams that consumers have about objects (Girardelli 2004:311). Branding and commodification of an image, such as Texas, is what Baudrillard calls a "commodity-sign," the link

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<sup>9</sup> Chili grind is a coarse grind using three-eighths or half-inch holes in the grinder and is not available in a wide part of the United States.

between the tangible (commodity) and the intangible (sign) (Girardelli 2004:311). Essentially, by consuming the product, you are also consuming the sign that represents the image that is symbolically connected to the commodity. Consumers buy products not merely for their physical attributes but also for what they symbolize (Levy and Rook 1999:233). Therefore, using the right image to represent the product is crucial. We return to the idea of “you are what you eat” only on the inverse. Instead of an individual strategically choosing to consume a particular food item, such as chili, the production force is trying to manipulate the public into choosing a specific product with the promise of in-group status.

The most obvious form of consumer manipulation is through label or brand symbolism. Symbols are powerful because different people will interpret different symbols in different ways (Turner 1967); there is something for everyone. Marketing campaigns, evident in product labels and advertising, employ images that will invoke more common interpretations. For example, the Dallas Cowboys symbol is a single, or lone, star. Although an outline of a star and not the solid shape that we see on the Texas state flag, the idea of the single star references the flag and the concepts of independence and strength that are part of it. Therefore, in order to reach a wider audience, product imagery should use symbols that have both meaning to the masses but also invoke similar meanings in order to maintain the image of the product.

In regards to food products, the concept of *terrior* can be a useful tool for authenticating a product. Terrior ties food to the entire environment that is unique to that place. Originally a French term used in relation to wine appreciation, it is the “sum of the effects that the local environment has had on the manufacture of a product” (Terrior n.d.). In essence, the land and its history are implicitly linked and the product of the land is the “realization” of the local spirit in material form (Guy 2003:44). Although rarely connecting actual production of the chili mix components to the physical Texas soil, I suggest that through using symbols of Texas state identity, chili mix producers invoke the terrior of Texas in order to sell their products.

## ***Survey of products***

With just a quick search of the internet, I found a wide variety of chili mixes for sale or advertised on-line<sup>10</sup>. The most common theme among them was actual photographs or drawings of chile peppers (40%). However, 31% of the mixes referenced Texas through some combination of the state image, state name or the Lone Star; all of these use “Texas” in the title or on the packaging (“French's Chili-O Texas Style Seasoning Mix”, “Lone Star Ranch Texas Chili Mix”, “Texas Chili Works”). However, more common than references to Texas are references to the West (40%; “Cowboy Kettle Chili Mix”, “Old Style Southwestern Chili Mix”, “Old El Paso Chili Seasoning Mix”) and use of an individual’s name (33%; “Wick Fowler 2 Alarm Chili”, “Gringo Billy's Gourmet Spices Chili Mix”, “Shotgun Willie's”, “Albert Agnor’s Championship Chili Seasonings”).<sup>11</sup> Three of the Texas Chili mixes distinctly reference the West and seven utilize an individual’s name. However, if we consider the West and Texas to be one area, 65% of the chili mixes display some reference to the larger region. Under the category of the West, I included images of cowboys, western scenery, Mexican heritage and frontier cooking, such as chuck wagons and outdoor cooking. I have already illustrated how through Hollywood romanticism and historical and geographical realism, all of these images could invoke the idea of Texas for many people.

Just as Texans invoke the symbolism found in chili as an act of group legitimacy, chili mix producers reference the same symbols to add credibility to their products. Which symbols are used indicate what is “outsider” knowledge and how non-Texans view this group. Even when Texans are marketing their own product, they will use outsider symbols in order to broaden the appeal of their product, much like Kiradjieff added 5 ways to his chili in order to appeal to a broader field.

## **Conclusion**

I now return to the question I asked at the beginning of this paper: What ties Chili and Texas so closely together? I suggest that it is the interpretation of Chili as the embodiment of all things Texan. By

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<sup>10</sup> For this brief survey, I used the Google search engine. On the first 10 pages of the search for “chili mix,” I found 52 distinct chili mixes advertised. Results are a mixture of corporate and small-business products.

<sup>11</sup> Nineteen percent of the chili mixes make a reference to chili cook-offs through phrases such as “championship” or “award-winning.”

eating a Bowl of Red or simply discussing the nuances of a finely cooked pot, Texans perform their identity as members of that group. Therefore, the real question that this paper addresses is how the Texas identity was formed and how Chili is a tool for its maintenance. Texas Chili invokes the aspects of Texas history that make it unique to other parts of the country. The combination of cattle and cowboys (beef) with touches of Mexican and frontier heritage (chiles) and independence (versatility) create a dish that represents how Texans feel about their place in American culture. As a former sovereign nation with extreme weather and vast acreage, Texans pride themselves in strength, hospitality and independence. Chili is simply all of that in a bowl.

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I heard all about how Texans don't put beans in chili. He measured all the spices in "œpalmfuls". I thought that was just incredible. I still do think his chili is incredible. How to Make Chili Texas Style " scroll down for recipe. Subscribe to my YouTube channel to get notified of new videos. Texas-Style Chili Recipe. Print. Never made it before, but I figure I would use my cast iron Dutch Oven for frying with peanut oil, and add some smoked ham (or smoked bacon) to the fritter, since I am a pork, and pork fat fan. Kinda like a sweet and salty dealio. Reply. Hilah, if you want to make real Texas chili like they did back in the 1800s don't use hamburger. Use meat cut in 1/4 to 1/2 inch chunks or if you don't like that use a chili ground meat and you will have a much better chili" in my opinion. Reply. Best Answer: Authentic Texas chili contains no beans or vegetables except chiles which have been prepared by being boiled, peeled, and chopped. The beans should be cooked separately and served alongside, to be mixed at the diner's discretion in his or her own serving bowl. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chili\\_con\\_c](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chili_con_c) It is all a matter of taste. I'm from Texas, but prefer beans in my chili. Source(s): GracieM 1 decade ago.