

Mary Chamberlin knows her soups including chili — yes, chili!

Carmel culinarian and author to be judge at contest

By Mike Hale

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Mary Chamberlin's love of soup began as a young girl growing up on a farm in rural Illinois in the 1940s. The idea of making a stock and extending it into a full family meal by adding fresh vegetables or legumes intrigued her.

One summer day on her birthday, Mary's mom caused a stir in the community by serving a newfangled "soup" from the Southwest called chili con carne (chili with meat).

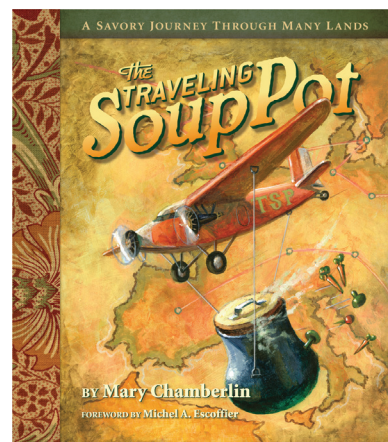
"No one in the Midwest had ever heard of chili," said Chamberlin, a Carmel resident, celebrated culinarian and author of "The Traveling Soup Pot," a third-print edition featuring recipes from her life spent circling the globe. "I tell you everyone was so impressed. Chili has always been the ultimate comfort food."

Over the course of her lifetime, Chamberlin estimates she has prepared more than 140,000 servings of soup — including some spectacular chili — and she features three recipes for chili in her book (available at www.marychamberlincookbook.com; or call 917-6185 to order a signed copy).

And for those who think chili is not a soup: "Of course it is, that's ridiculous," said Chamberlin, who claims a soup can be thick like gumbo or thin like consommé, prepared hot or cold, served in a cup or bowl — limited only by imagination. She classifies chili as a "potage" or "paysanne" (peasant style), which are broths or stews heavy with ingredients.

Chamberlin loves chili con carne because a cook can go in so many directions (even eliminating the "carne," or substituting turkey or chicken for beef). The common denominator is some form of chilies, and dried spices such as cumin or coriander.

The first American chili came from Texas, and was made with dried beef pounded together with suet and dried chilies into a sort of pemmican-like "brick" intended to serve as a quick re-hydrated meal for cowboys on the range.



Mary Chamberlin

These days, it seems to be against Texas state law to put beans in chili (and adding tomatoes could at the very least get you publicly shunned). All this has sparked generational debates about chili's method and preparation, proving that there is nothing as sacrosanct — at least in The Lone Star State.

Like any popular food, chili spread across the country, and of course it was morphed, modernized and mutated. The vegetarians and health nuts created a meatless version, someone else thought to substitute turkey for beef, and folks added all types of beans along with strange toppings (including Fritos). In Cincinnati they use seasonings such as cinnamon, cloves and chocolate and ladle the thin chili over spaghetti. This is called two-way chili (three-way means adding cheese; four-way is cheese and onions; five-way is cheese, onions and beans).

Chili is a favorite subject of cook-off events, and two local chili fests sit on the culinary horizon. On Sept. 17, the Carmel Valley Chamber of Commerce hosts the 21st annual Great Bowls of Fire at Carmel Valley Ranch, with both novices and professionals vying for the Golden Ladle (I will be on hand as one of the judges with a large bib and a bottle of antacids). Then on Sunday, Oct. 12, Pass the Word Ministry hosts Circle the Wagons Chili Contest, with Chamberlin as lead judge (and proceeds benefitting their cause to help homeless women).

“What I’m looking for first and foremost is a deep flavor, but not necessarily spicy,” said Chamberlin, who heads the local chapter of Les Dames d’Escoffier that raises money for culinary scholarships for women.

Chamberlin believes so many versions of chili blow apart her palate with fiery peppers. “You’re not impressing anyone when you do that,” she said.

At the Carmel Valley Ranch event, chef Tim Wood will try to defend the title on his home turf, winning the judges’ award and people’s choice last year with his American Style Snake River Kobe Beef Chili.

Wood’s secret? He uses top-quality ingredients, including American Kobe beef, natural chuck, six different chilies and produce from the Carmel Valley Ranch organic garden. “We’re still at the top of the food chain, so it may as well taste good,” he said.

Many chili recipes remain a closely guarded secret. But here we feature Chamberlin’s Hot Tamale Chili and Detroit Free Press food writer Susan M. Selasky’s simple “anything goes” chili that incorporates spicy bloody Mary mix as the base.

Mike Hale can be reached at grubhunter@comcast.net. Listen to his weekly radio show “Food Fodder” at noon Wednesdays on KRML, 102.1 FM.

RECIPES

Hot Tamale Soup

1 lb. lean ground beef or ground round

1 onion, chopped

2 cloves garlic, minced

1 T. chili powder

2 tsp. cumin

1/2 tsp. cayenne pepper

4 cups chicken stock

1 16-oz. can stewed tomatoes, chopped, with juices

1 15-oz. can pinto beans

1 cup frozen or canned corn

Salt and pepper

12 prepared tamales (3 oz. each)

For topping

Shredded cheddar cheese

Chopped cilantro

Sour cream

Corn or tortilla chips, crumbled

Steps: In a heavy saucepan, cook the beef, onion and garlic over medium heat until onions are soft and beef is browned — about 4 minutes. Break up mixture with a fork, and be sure to lightly salt ingredients as they cook.

Stir in the chili powder, cumin and cayenne, and continue to cook another 2 to 3 minutes. Add chicken stock and tomatoes, and simmer, covered, for 30 minutes.

Stir in the beans and corn. Simmer the soup, covered, for 10 minutes. Adjust the seasonings to taste.

Steam the tamales until cooked through. Break or cut into pieces about the size of a tablespoon. Place tamale pieces in bottom of each soup bowl, and ladle the soup over the top. Garnish with toppings of your choice.

— From Mary Chamberlin, “The Traveling Soup Pot”

Super Easy Beef Chili

1 T. canola oil

1 large onion, peeled, chopped

1 1/2 lbs. ground beef (such as sirloin)

2 cups favorite bloody Mary mix (spicy preferred)

2 cans (14 oz. each) diced tomatoes with green chilies (or 28-oz. can diced tomatoes with juice)

2 cans (14 oz. each) kidney beans, drained and rinsed well

4 T. (or more if you like) favorite chili powder, divided

For toppings

Corn chips

Shredded cheese

Sliced green onions

Sour cream

Steps: In a medium pot, heat the oil. Add the onion and sauté about 8 minutes until it becomes lightly golden brown. Add the beef and cook until it browns, breaking it up as it cooks. Stir in the bloody Mary mix and heat on medium-high, stirring and scraping up any browned bits on the bottom of the pan. Add the tomatoes, beans and 2 T. of the chili powder. Stir well. Bring to just a boil and reduce the heat to a simmer. Cover slightly and simmer 30 minutes. Just before serving, stir in the remaining 2 T. of chili powder. Serve with desired toppings.

— From Susan M. Selasky, Detroit Free Press

IF YOU GO

What: Circle the Wagons Chili Contest, a benefit to help homeless women

When: 1-4 p.m., Sunday, Oct. 12

Where: Community Church of the Monterey Peninsula, 4590 Carmel Valley Rd., Carmel Valley

Tickets: \$20 adults, \$5 children age 10 and under

IF YOU GO

What: 21st annual Great Bowls of Fire, benefitting Carmel Valley Chamber

When: 5-8 p.m., Wednesday, Sept. 17

Where: Carmel Valley Ranch, 1 Old Ranch Rd., Carmel Valley

Tickets: www.carmelvalleychamber.com; \$30 for chamber members; \$35 nonmembers; \$40 day of event

Information: 659-4000