



Perris Press Release

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Chili Champs Cook Off in Perris

The chili cooks who gathered Saturday at American Legion Post 595 in Perris are a friendly bunch, always willing to pose a photo and provide a taste of their wares to those walking past.

Don't kid yourself.

Beneath the smiles and laughter, these "chili-holics" take their job very seriously. They purchase only the finest cuts of meat for each competition, buy spices from exotic locations and shops they never disclose and carry their own pots, utensils and groceries on airplanes when traveling far from home.

The object is to create the best-possible red chili and win a spot at the annual World Champion Chili Cook-off in Charleston, West Virginia, in October. To earn a spot in that coveted competition, they must win at a regional cook-off like the one in Perris.

So it was game-on for the dozen or so chili-masters from California, Arizona and Nevada who gathered early Saturday morning at the Legion Post on D Street. More than 25 classic cars and vintage vehicles also came to Perris to show their stuff as part of the day's events.

The Legion hosts the chili cook-off/car show as a fund-raiser to support its veterans and youth-related activities, including sending young men and women to Boys State and Girls State—camps where they learn the ins-and-outs of government and spend time organizing their own their own legislature. The legion also supports various programs to assist wounded warriors and elderly military veterans confined to Veterans Administration hospitals. The legion sponsors "Operation Backpack" that provides school supplies to the children of men and women in uniform.

"This is a great event," said Perris City Councilwoman Joanne Evans, a member of Post 595 and a former Marine who sold entrance tickets to the cook-off. "It's absolutely fun. We work really, really hard but we have a lot of fun as well."

Cookers competed in three categories during the Perris cook-off: Competition red chili, chili verde (green chili) and People's Choice Chili. The first two categories allow no beans; the latter does.

Many chili cooks know each other, competing regularly on the cook-off circuit. Among these teams, there's a banter back-and-forth while the chili simmers.

"It's fabulous and it's fun," said Marian Donato, of Corona, who entered the competition as Horsepower Chili. "I like to cook so they might as well call it a competition."

Like other competitors, Donato uses tri-tip in her competition chili, along with chili peppers and other spices. No one reveals their exact recipe. Attempting to cook competition chili with ground beef or hamburger or turkey meat would net looks of disdain from contest judges.

Dick Swenberger drove to Perris from Mesa, Arizona, to take part in the chili cook-off where he competes under the banner "Gone With the Wind Chili."

He might attend up to 30 regional competitions a year to qualify for the world championships. He's finished second three times at the world championships. Swenberger said he always enjoys his weekend in Perris.

"This is a great location and all of our chili friends are here," he said. "We always have a good time here. This American

Legion Post is very active in the community and does a lot of good things on behalf of the community."

While the chili cooks went to work, classic car enthusiasts gathered to show off their vehicles, which included pickup trucks, coupes, convertibles and models long-since discontinued. For Manuel Zamora, the show was a chance to display the 1957 Chevy pickup he restored in honor of his son, Gabriel, who was killed in a 1995 motor-vehicle crash. Zamora said the restoration project proved therapeutic in the difficult times following his son's death.

"It helps keep the memory of my son alive," Zamora said.

As the day wore on, the temperature and the competition at the chili cook-off got hotter. That suited the trio from On the Road Chili, who won the world championship last year in Manchester, New Hampshire, just fine.

The trio of Clark McGee, Ken Hook and Chuck Harber say they like the challenge and camaraderie that each cook-off brings.

"We love interacting with the people," Harber said. "We enjoy the people who come here."

McGee said the team the people who taste On the Road Chili often comment about how much they enjoy it. He never tires of that.

"Love the comments they make about the chili," he said.

The On the Road Chili team walked away with two of the day's three prizes—for the best chili verde and the People's Choice award. The award for best competition red chili went to the Moose Tracks Chili from Bakersfield.



Marian Donato, of Corona, displays her chili verde at the chili cook-off Saturday at American Legion Post 595 in Perris.



A pot of People's Choice Chili simmers on the grill.



The team from On the Road Chili—Clark McGee, Ken Hook and Chuck Harber—enjoy visiting with their competitors and the public.