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Dash of fire and chili: A winning recipe for a good time in Waterbury

BY BRYNN MANDEL | REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN



Christopher Clifford, left, of Naugatuck, and Jimmy Serra, of Waterbury, both with Legendary Dean's Tavern, sample a competitor's chili at a 5-alarm chili cookoff at the Waterville Fire House, organized by the Waterbury Firemen's Historical Society and the Waterbury Neighborhood Council on Sunday, July 27, 2008. (T.J. Kirkpatrick/Republican-American)

They didn't have to unfurl any fire hoses to douse suffering tongues, but the Five Alarm Chili Tasting at Waterbury's Waterville Fire House proved a hot time for a few hundred people Sunday.

The event, hosted by the Waterbury Neighborhood Council and the Waterbury Firemen's Historical Society, pitted those from local restaurants and fire brigades against each other in an attempt to concoct the best-tasting chili. Submissions ranged from shredded chicken to corn-laced varieties.

The culinary cowboys and girls from Crossroads Cantina, a local Tex-Mex restaurant, took home top honors with a chili that married classic ground beef and beans, imbued with what general manager Mike DePaulo called "Western spices."

Like any winning recipe, DePaulo preferred to keep the ingredient list close to the apron. But he offered this hint: a few dashes of a locally-originated sauce line, Sweet Sunshine, went into the winning recipe — a variation on the regular menu chili. Though he would not disclose which variety of Sweet Sunshine sauce was used, DePaulo offered general tips for making good chili, starting with the oft-dreaded kick.

"You can't be afraid" of spices, he said. "A lot of people say they don't like hot, but when they taste it, they realize they do like hot."

And don't forget the love that foodies often say can be detected in the most mouthwatering morsels. Quality ingredients are also key to the recipe the restaurant has used since its opening in 1996, DePaulo said. A regular menu item at the Meadow Street restaurant, he chuckled that if guests want the slightly spicier-than-usual version that won Sunday, they should ask for the "award-winning" chili.

The Cantina beat six other recipes in a competition that organizers hope to turn into an annual event. More cooks than could be accommodated wanted to enter, said Joshua Angelus, president of the neighborhood council, explaining that a handful of entrants were turned away after showing up on Sunday without pre-registering. Judging was performed by attendees who purchased \$5 chili-tasting tickets.

The event raised about \$3,000 for the Waterbury Neighborhood Council, a group working to improve life in the city.