The Heat Is On!

□ By Robb Howard



My eyes were burning and tears ran down my face.

It began in October when I signed up for the competition. Sally Myers said she would partner with me, Sally has professional cooking experience and my hobby is cooking. We added my wife Linda and Sally's husband Mike as helpers and we were ready. Watch out Texas, here comes a guy from Detroit and a gal from Cincinnati and we mean to win.

We talked about our personal chile recipes and they were both good but not cook off winners. We decided to take turns making chile hoping each batch would be better than its predecessor.

My turn first. I had a recipe from *Cook's Magazine* called, "Our Best Chile". It had a long list of ingredients, was labor intensive and made my mouth water. I made the Cook's chile and my regular chile and we had our inaugural tasting. The Cook's chile won easily though not quite a winner. Mike in his epicurean wisdom, or maybe it was what he has done with food since his baby highchair days, mixed the two chiles and voila! We had the beginning of our chile entry.

My turn. I went back to the beginning, took what we liked about our chiles and added some of those ingredients to the Cook's chile. We desperately needed to seduce more flavor from our chile. I added cocoa powder to give a faint bittersweet flavor akin to a Mexican mole and switched the water to beer to enhance the balance. I used chunks of beef, a cut called, "deshebrar de res", a cross between chuck steak and flank steak. Gristle, muscle and covered on 1 side with a slippery, shiny membrane that is a lot of fun to try and remove. Probably why women don't wear girdles anymore.

I bought two kilos, about 4 ½ pounds, of deshebrar and after an hour of cutting, trimming and lots of unmentionable comments, I had 3 ½ pounds of chile ready beef. I stemmed, seeded and cut into pieces ancho, arbol and jalapeno chiles. I ran from the kitchen out on the deck every five minutes to breathe. The pain was excruciating. How do these Mexican senoras work with these chiles every day? The chile cooked in the oven for three hours and the tasting began the next night.

A winner, some minor changes and the unanimous vote of the tasters, "We're ready."

I ordered six kilos, 30 pounds, of deshebrar, spent over four hours cutting and trimming and developed carpal tunnel. I could not squeeze the toothpaste tube with my left thumb and index finger without pain for over a week. I moved the chile cleaning operation out on the deck and it helped to have the lake breeze blowing. The same operation minus the meat trimming was going on at Sally's and in the end we had six gallons of "The Sheriff and Miss Sally's Saloon Style Chile."

We served 540 samples in 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ hours while dressed as a sheriff with twin ivory handled six-shooters, my authentic Arizona sheriff's badge and too tight cowboy boots and Sally as a saloon girl. I occasionally pulled my six- shooters to coerce a vote or two. The results, we took 2nd place. Not bad for our first competition but a little bittersweet not to be the winner. We'll be back next year to move up one place.

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My throat tightened and I gasped for breath. There was a burning sensation on my cheek where I had touched it with my finger. Was it a raid? Was there a S.W.A.T. team lobbing tear gas canisters into my house and about to bellow through their bullhorns, "come out with your hands in the air"? Not quite, I was cleaning and cutting three different kinds of chiles for our entry in the Mexican National Chile Cook Off in Ajijic, Mexico.