

Chilly Outside? Reach for a Bowl of Chili



On a cold wintry day nothing takes the chill off like a steaming bowl of chili. This thick spicy soup or stew warms you up not only because it is a hot meal but also because the phytochemicals in the chili peppers can actually raise your body temperature. [1] This filling, comforting dish is also a nutritional powerhouse that can boost your intake of protein, vitamins, minerals, and phytochemicals.*

There is no actual consensus on the origins of chili, but one legend contends that a chili recipe was brought to San Antonio, Texas by immigrants from the Canary Islands in the 1700s. By the 1800's San Antonio's Military Square was alive with chili stands, where brightly dressed women called *chili queens* cooked and served chili, known as *bowl's o' red*. At the 1893 Chicago World's Fair it was served up at the San Antonio Chili Stand, introducing people from all over the country to what is now the official state dish of Texas.[2]

Original chili recipes consisted of chili peppers, meat (usually beef and pork), fat, onions, garlic, salt, and other spices. Chili became an early trail food with the invention of chili bricks, a dried mixture of dehydrated beef, suet, salt, and chili peppers that with a pot of boiling water made a quick campfire meal. As people and chili moved around the country many regional variations evolved. By the 1920s some chili recipes included beans, although there is still great debate as to whether “real chili” can include beans, and by the 1940s tomatoes became a mainstay of most chili recipes.



Chili recipes come and go, but the chili peppers, from which chili gets its name, are always present. Botanically, chili peppers are considered berries, and categorized as fruits, but we eat them like a vegetable and use them like a spice. Nutritionally, they are an

excellent source of beta-carotene (a precursor of vitamin A, which gives them their red color) and vitamin C (a hot green chili has more vitamin C than an orange), both of which are antioxidants. There are thousands of different varieties: Ancho, Habanero, Pasilla, Mulato, Serrano, and Jalapeno to name a few. Each has a different shape, size, color, and degree of hotness. The hot, burning feeling you get when eating chili peppers is from the phytochemical capsaicin. The level of capsaicin determines how hot the pepper tastes and is measured in Scoville Heat Units (SHU), a hotness scale invented in 1912 by a pharmacologist named Wilbur Scoville.[3] At one end of the scale is the bell pepper, which has no capsaicin so has a 0 SHUs. In the middle is cayenne pepper with 3000 to 5000 SHUs and the world’s hottest pepper is Pepper X with 3.2 million SHUs.

Chilis add flavor to our food and also have a rich history in traditional medicine; the Mayans used them to treat stomach aches, skin rashes, and arthritis.[4] Today we know that the capsaicin in chili peppers has anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties. Capsaicin is sold in lotions and patches to treat muscle and joint pain as well as pain caused by migraines and peripheral neuropathy.[5,6] Chili peppers and capsaicin supplements are suggested to promote weight loss by increasing energy expenditure and reducing appetite. [7] These have also been studied in the prevention and treatment of heart disease and cancer without conclusive results.[8,9] Only minor side effects such as stomach pain, burning sensations, nausea, and bloating have been reported with daily intakes up to the amount of capsaicin in 2 jalapeno peppers (4mg). [10]

So, rustle up a bowl of chili. It's warm and comforting, takes only a little bit of effort to make, and fills you up fast. The peppers in chili are not the only health promoting ingredient. Beans such as kidney beans or black beans add protein and fiber. The original chili recipes were probably higher in saturated fat from the beef, pork, and suet than would be recommended today, so to limit the saturated fat choose a leaner meat such as extra lean ground beef or ground turkey breast or experiment with a plant-based meat substitute. Most recipes include tomatoes, which provide phytochemicals such as lycopene, an antioxidant that gives them their red color, and lutein, an antioxidant that is good for eye health. [11] There's no right or wrong way to make chili, so get creative. Add other vegetables such as onions, garlic, carrots, celery, sweet potatoes, corn, cauliflower, and zucchini; this reduces caloric density and adds flavor and texture as well as vitamins, minerals, fiber, and phytochemicals. You can prepare it in a pot on the stove or allow it to simmer all day in a slow cooker, so it is waiting for you when you get home. And left-over chili often tastes better than it does the day it is made. Eat it straight out of a bowl or use it to top pasta or a baked potato.

*Phytochemicals are compounds found in plants. They give plants their color, taste and aroma.

Editor's comment- if you suffer from chronic acid reflux, esophagitis or chronic gastritis you may want to avoid spicey chili.

References

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