



AARON ROHDE/IN.H. UNION LEADER

THE CHILI KING

Columbus' Tom Hoover has the most famous chili in the world – and he's willing to give you a taste

BY TRAVIS HOEWISCHER

Tom Hoover possesses a savvy for marketing. Once, after seeing a crying child on the news after someone stole and butchered his prize pig, he and his restaurant saved the day by replacing it live on TV. Another time, a chili cookoff he held in Grandview included a captive — and later, runaway — steer.

But, when it comes to his chili, it's an extremely simple recipe that has won him a massive collection of accolades, including most recently, the coveted International Chili Society world title. No beans, no extreme heat. Just meat and spices, he says.

"I call it the 'no-flaw' method," he said. "You want a lot of flavor, but nothing else that's overpowering. The middle of the road tends to do better than some really wacko, knock-ye-head-off stuff. The flavor is all you need to do the talking."

When Hoover, a lifelong Columbus resident and former owner of campus bars The Oar House and Travel Agency, as well as Grandview pub Knotty Pine, hoisted the trophy over his head this fall, it was the culmination of decades of practice for what has now become a family tradition.

It started in 1984, when local foodie Jim Budros urged him to enter a chili cookoff at Scioto Downs.

"It was kind of a dare – and I did very poorly in that contest," he said with a laugh. "There's some elusive standard that you have to figure out, but no one's gonna tell you what it is."

It didn't take long for the Hoover and his family to crack the chili code. Soon, he and his wife and children began logging thousands of miles, and carrying home tons of hardware on the national chili circuit. His son has won the Kentucky state championship, and his daughter once claimed the top chili in West Virginia.

"We just wanted a reason to travel together as a family," he said. "We've met people in over 30 states and have friends all over. All because of chili."

Now that his wife has passed away and his children are raising families of their own, Hoover hopes to ease back on the travel, and parlay his victory – and the hefty \$25,000 prize purse – into a commercial presence for his Happy Trails chili mix. It's currently for sale at the North Market, Huffman's Market in Upper Arlington and Rife's Market in Grandview among others.



To taste Tom Hoover's championship recipe, all you need to do is purchase a package or two of his Happy Trails Chili Seasoning Mix. For more information visit www.happytrailschilli.com.

Although he is updating the package to ensure that consumers know who the champ is, Hoover reiterates that the taste is what should set his mix apart.

"I think I've developed a flavor profile that people like, as opposed to a marketing gimmick," he said.

Hoover still has a competitive flame burning, adding he plans to challenge for the ICS Green Chili and Fresh Salsa titles, but, ever the humble champion, he is glad to have been on top at least once.

"There's obviously a lot of luck involved. The skill is needed for the chance to be judged," he said. "The rest? That's up the chili gods." ■

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