

Ptomaine Tommy's Chili Sauce

By Ernest Miller

Like tamales, chili con carne was a popular dish in early twentieth-century Los Angeles. Served from carts or hole-in-the-wall chili joints, it was an inexpensive and filling meal, served plain or over beans. Sometime in the 1920s, however, it was the genius vision of Thomas "Ptomaine Tommy" de Forest to combine his chili with a hamburger for that classic variation on the original hamburger sandwich. One of his tricks was to thicken the chili with masa and flour so that it would adhere better to the burger. Ptomaine Tommy is also why the chiliburger is sometimes called a chili "size" – based on the size of the ladle he used.

The hamburger might have its origins on the East Coast (Louis' Lunch in New Haven, CT, is generally credited with its invention), but it is in Southern California that the hamburger achieves the status it now holds as America's quintessential meal. Not only is the chiliburger invented in Lincoln Heights, but the cheeseburger is invented in 1926 at the Rite Spot in Pasadena.

This may not be the original Ptomaine Tommy's recipe, but it is probably pretty close. It's good, darn good, so you can see why Tommy was able to get away with naming his restaurant after what was thought to cause food poisoning.

- 1 pound ground beef (80/20% fat content)
- 1 raw carrot, grated
- 13 ounces beef broth
- 2 tablespoons chili powder
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon paprika
- ½ teaspoon garlic powder
- ½ teaspoon onion powder
- ½ teaspoon black pepper
- 1 tablespoon masa flour
- 4 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- ⅛ teaspoon cayenne

In a large stainless steel pot or cast-iron pan over medium high heat, add beef and carrots, and begin to brown. Reduce heat, add broth and all seasonings. Mix thoroughly and bring to a simmer. Slowly add flours 1 tablespoon at a time, whisking in thoroughly as you go to prevent lumps. Once all flour is added, continue to simmer and stir over low heat until thickened, about 10 minutes.

