



The Chili Bowl

For students in the University of Oklahoma's School of Art and Art History, the study abroad experience may begin not with three cups of tea, but a hundred bowls of chili. From France to Finland, students have taken flight with proceeds from the school's annual Chili Bowl, pitting students against faculty and staff in a fiery competition that is always in good taste.

Three years ago School of Art and Art History Director Mary Jo Watson was brainstorming with staff and supporters to find a new source of funding for art and art history student travel. Someone suggested a chili cook-off. Another observed that the art school was filled with—well, art students who could channel their creativity into one-of-a-kind bowls for each patron. The idea was simple. Choose a bowl, choose your chili. Send kids abroad.

Timed for the first cold snap of the fall semester, the event is now hotter than a habañero pepper. On Chili Bowl day, a line starts forming in the hallway of the Fred Jones Jr. Art Center with the first whiff of cumin and cayenne, snaking its way to the Lightwell Gallery, where red-checked tablecloths spread over long plank tables await the masses.

All summer and fall, shipments from the ceramics studio on OU's South Base find their way to Watson's office. By October, visitors to the director must vie for seating with stacks of bowls produced by the students of ceramics professors V'lou Oliveira and Jane Aebersold and members of the Red Clay Faction, a student-run ceramics club.

"This year we started with over 200 bowls and made over \$3,400," says Watson. "It was a record-breaker." More than 300 people lined up to browse the bowls and help themselves to more than 40 varieties of homemade chili, topped with a slice of hot cornbread and accompanying beverage for \$15 a pop. Chili also was available minus the handmade bowl for \$8.

Faculty members, graduate students and spouses compete for bragging rights in what has grown into a range of chilis as diverse as the personalities in the School of Art and Art History itself. Mediterranean chilis, white chilis, red chilis, mild chilis and wild chilis with fire alarms. Ingredients include everything from bison meat to Tyson chicken and tofu.



Robert Taylor

Before deciding on lunch, participants in the Chili Bowl must first choose from more than 200 one-of-a-kind ceramic bowls created by students and faculty in the School of Art and Art History.

With names like "IftoldjawhatwasinitIwouldhaftakill ya," "Passive-Aggressive," and "Heaven's Gate," samplers are amply warned what they are biting into. Perhaps to a fault, as in the case of "More Fartsy, Less Artsy," an entry that was not one of this year's prize-winners.

Those honors went to Brad Stevens, preparator at the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art; Julie Rushing, graphic designer for the OU Press and wife of Adkins Presidential Professor of Art W. Jackson Rushing III; and Jennifer Gourley, administrative assistant. Rushing has entered the contest each year with a variation on her "Silver Palette Chili."

"This is just a great event," says Rushing, who took home a new crock pot for her second-place finish. "My office is off-campus, and I enter every year for the opportunity to visit the art school and see what's going on there among the students."

For Stevens, the initial incentive was less altruistic. "I wanted to beat last year's winner [ceramics professor Jane Aebersold]." He did so with a base of sirloin steak, which he built up with bell peppers, onions, tomatillos and black beans.

The recent OU MFA graduate says he also likes the event as a way of staying connected with the art school. "Having been there, I just want to help out the art program as much as I can."

—Lynette Lobban