Classic Drive-Thru Chili

Serves 8–10

When Wendy's opened in our town in the early eighties, I thought chili in a paper cup was a revelation. Add a Frosty, and I was sold. This is my homemade take on the drive-thru favorite I've loved ever since.

Ingredients

2½ pounds ground beef
1 large yellow onion, finely diced (about 1½ cups)
1 large red bell pepper, finely diced
3 celery stalks, finely diced (about 1¼ cups)
3 garlic cloves, minced
1 (29-ounce) can tomato sauce
1 (14.5-ounce) can diced tomatoes, with juice
1 (15-ounce) can dark red kidney beans, undrained
1 (15-ounce) can pinto beans, undrained
1 to 2 cups water or beef stock, optional, only if needed at the end
2½ tablespoons chili powder
1½ teaspoons ground cumin
1 teaspoon paprika
1 teaspoon garlic powder
1 teaspoon onion powder
½ teaspoon granulated sugar
⅜ teaspoon cayenne pepper
1½ teaspoons kosher salt, plus more to taste
½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
Sour cream, thinly sliced fresh jalapeños, and tortilla chips for serving

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Instructions

1. Place the ground beef in a large pot or Dutch oven over medium heat. Cook for 7 to 10 minutes, stirring occasionally and breaking it into very small pieces, until browned and no pink remains. Spoon off excess fat, leaving about 1 tablespoon in the pot for flavor.

2. Add the onion, red bell pepper, and celery. Cook, stirring often, for 8 to 10 minutes, until the vegetables are very soft and the mixture looks almost stew-like. Add the garlic and cook for 1 minute more.

3. Stir in the tomato sauce, diced tomatoes with their juice, kidney beans, and pinto beans with their liquid. Add the chili powder, cumin, paprika, garlic powder, onion powder, sugar, cayenne, salt, and black pepper. Stir well.

4. Bring to a gentle simmer over medium heat, then reduce the heat to low. Cook uncovered for 45 minutes to 1 hour, stirring occasionally, until the chili is cohesive and the flavors are fully blended.

5. After simmering, check the consistency. If the chili is too thick, stir in water or beef stock a little at a time, up to 2 cups total, until it reaches your preferred consistency. You may not need any. Simmer a few more minutes to warm through.

6. Taste and adjust the salt and other seasonings if needed. The chili should be mild, savory, and slightly sweet, not overly spicy. Ladle into bowls and serve hot, with sour cream, sliced jalapeños, and tortilla chips on the side, if desired.

Storage & Kitchen Notes

Refrigerate: Store in an airtight container for up to 4 days.

Freeze: Freeze for up to 3 months. Thaw overnight in the refrigerator.

Reheat: Warm gently over medium-low heat, stirring often. Add a splash of water or beef stock only if needed to loosen.