

“Cincy” Chili – Comfort du Jour

Cincinnati Chili is unlike any other chili you’ve tried. It does not have spicy Mexican or even smoky Tex-Mex flavors, and that’s because its roots are Mediterranean. The cooking begins not with browning meat and onions, but with water and a small amount of tomato juice in the pan. The meat gets cooked in the water with a bunch of warm spices, and the most noticeable difference is in the presentation—this “chili” is served on a bed of spaghetti and buried under shredded cheddar cheese. Honestly, it doesn’t seem like chili at all. But it is delicious and easy to make at home, Cincy style!

INGREDIENTS

2 3/4 cups water
1 cup tomato sauce or strained puree (no chunks!)
1 lb. lean ground meat* (see ingredient notes)
4 cloves fresh garlic, minced
¼ cup red wine vinegar*

SEASONINGS:

1 Tbsp. chili powder*
1 ½ tsp. cocoa powder
1 tsp. ground cinnamon
1 tsp. sweet Spanish paprika
1 tsp. smoked paprika*
½ tsp. ground cumin
½ tsp. dried oregano
¼ tsp. ground cloves
¼ tsp. ground allspice
1 tsp. kosher salt (or 3/4 tsp. regular table salt)
Several twists freshly ground black pepper
2 dried bay leaves

FOR SERVING:

½ lb. spaghetti (I used whole wheat), cooked al dente and tossed with butter or oil
1 can light red kidney beans, rinsed and warmed
½ cup finely minced onion
4 oz. finely shredded cheddar (I used medium sharpness)
Oyster crackers, if desired

*NOTES

Any combination of lean (90%) ground beef or turkey works well in this recipe, but for a vegetarian version you could substitute with a combination of cooked lentils and cracked bulgur wheat, as they do at the restaurant where I first enjoyed this dish. Follow the package recommendations for cooking time of those products and add them to the pot at the appropriate time to avoid overcooking them.

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Apple cider vinegar would probably work in this recipe as well, but given that the recipe has Mediterranean roots, I used red wine vinegar, which is typical in Greek cuisine.

Chili powder is one of those spice ingredients that is different from one brand to the next. Peek at the label to see whether your chili powder contains salt or any other ingredients you may want to adjust in the overall recipe.

My smoked paprika is a sweet (not hot) variety. The slight smokiness was nice in this dish, but if you don’t have this, you could simply double the amount of regular sweet paprika.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Combine all the dry seasonings (except bay leaves) in a bowl and set aside.
2. Combine the water and tomato sauce in a large saucepot, over medium-low heat. Stir in the dry seasonings, garlic and red wine.
3. Crumble the raw ground meat into the pot and use a utensil or potato masher to break it up as much as possible into a fine texture. Add the bay leaves. Bring the mixture to a low boil, then reduce heat and cover the pot. Simmer, stirring occasionally, until liquid is reduced, and sauce is thick but not dry. Add a bit more tomato sauce and water, as needed, if the sauce has cooked down too much. It should be more meaty than “saucy.”
4. Cook spaghetti noodles to al dente stage, then drain and immediately toss with a bit of oil or butter to keep the noodles from sticking.
5. Plate spaghetti and top with meat sauce, plus any of the other toppings you like. Here’s how they break it down, Cincy style:

“2-way” = spaghetti with chili only

“3-way” = with chili and cheese

“4-way” = with chili, cheese and onion OR chili, cheese and beans

“5-way” = with chili, cheese, beans AND onions (the best)!