

The Heat is On

CaJohn's helps make Westerville a spicy destination for chili lovers

IF YOU THOUGHT CINCINNATI WAS big on chili, just wait until you see what Westerville has in store for Labor Day weekend.

Westerville is making a name for itself in the chili community. With two championship cook-offs taking place the first weekend of September, the city will be seeing a surge of chili enthusiasts.

John Hard, a Westerville native and owner of CaJohn's Fiery Foods, is hosting both events in the spacious parking lot next to his specialty foods store on Green Crest Drive.

CaJohn's is a well-known name in the world of chili, so it's only fitting that Hard

will be hosting the competitions. His products have won a total of 464 awards, and Hard himself has received 79 prestigious Golden Chiles – more than anyone else in the fiery foods business. His products have even been featured on television's Food Network.

"I'm one of the leading hot sauce manufacturers in the country," says Hard. "People just can't believe we're from Ohio – it brings some notoriety to Westerville."

Hard has participated in and won numerous championship cook-offs, but now he's focusing on a more administrative role within the chili community. Aside from hosting the competitions, he recently took on a position as senior consultant for Spicy Food Productions, the organization behind the Golden Chiles. The awards are given to the Fiery Food Challenge winners at the annual ZestFest convention, which in 2013 will be held in Las Vegas.

Though he has his plate full, Hard is happy to be in the business he loves.

"I'm very passionate about it," says Hard. "It's really what I enjoy doing, and I don't even think of it as work most of the time."

The two cook-offs, sanctioned by the International Chili Society, are scheduled for Sept. 1 and 2.

The first is the Buckeye Regional ICS Chili Championship, with the majority of competitors coming from Ohio, Kentucky, Indiana, Michigan, Pennsylvania and



Columbus resident and 2010 World Chili Champion Tom Hoover

West Virginia. The second is the Ohio State ICS Championship, which is partnering with the annual Westerville Sertoma Car Show to form the Cool Cars, Hot Stuff Festival.

Although the two championships are for different levels of qualification, one regional and one state, the cook-offs themselves are identical in nature. Both events feature competitions for best red chili, best green chili and best salsa, and money is awarded to the winner of each category.

The red chili is the main focus, says Hard, with a \$1,000 prize for first place. The best green chili is awarded \$250 and the salsa winner receives \$50.

Many of the cooks taking part in the events will be professional chili chefs, but restaurants and amateur cooks are also participating. Samplings are available for those in attendance, with the People's Choice Award going to the crowd's favorite recipe. There will also be a Fiery Foods Marketplace with some 20 vendors selling their products.

The competitions are expected to attract about 500 contestants and exhibitors from around the country. Having these people in the area will do a lot to boost Westerville's economy, Hard says.

"These competitors and vendors will surely visit many local businesses in their free time," he says. "It will be great exposure for our community."

Columbus resident Tom Hoover has participated in numerous chili competitions. In 2010, Hoover was named World Chili



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Champion – the most prestigious title one can receive in the industry. Cook-offs like these are important steps for those aspiring to receive the same international recognition for their chili recipes, Hoover says.

“It should draw cooks from a long distance who are trying to get qualified for the world championship,” he says.

While these are the first cook-offs that Hard will be hosting, he is dedicated to continuing Westerville’s development as a desirable destination for chili lovers. He believes the “good vibes” from the chili community can take up a permanent residence in Westerville.

“We plan to make Westerville the home of these events for many years to come,” says Hard.

Rose Davidson is a contributing writer. Feedback welcome at gbishop@cityscenemediagroup.com.

CaJohn’s CaBoom! Chili-Mac

- 2 lbs. ground beef or pork sausage
- 6 Tbsp. CaBoom! Chili Fixins
- 1 lb. cooked shell macaroni
- 2 cups water
- 2 jars CaJohn’s Picante Sauce, 16 oz.
- 1 jar Cheez Whiz, 15 oz.

Prepare ground meat in a large skillet and drain.

Add the Chili Fixins and water. Simmer until the gravy is thickened, stirring occasionally.

In a large bowl, fold the Cheez Whiz into the cooked, drained macaroni and stir.

Add the two jars of CaBoom! Picante Sauce and stir in the prepared meat. Serve.



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