

THE SOUND OF ONE CHIP DIPPING

A SEARCH FOR THE MEANING OF ARKANSAS CHEESE DIP

by Phil McCausland



Heights Taco & Tamale Co., Little Rock.

MY FIRST EXPERIENCE with a gallon vat of cheese dip was more emotionally complex than I expected. The giant vessel stared out from the refrigerator and called to mind alarming questions. How many bags of tortilla chips would be necessary to eat my way through it? Could I afford that many chips as an unpaid magazine intern in a small Arkansas town? Would my roommate

help me? Should I let him? And would I have to consume the cheese dip while perched sadly on the futon mattress (sans frame) that functioned as my bed and couch?

I did know that it would trump all other sustenance in the house. There are only so many days in a row you can make supper out of rice, a can of black beans, and a container of salsa. I ripped open a bag of Tostitos, plopped

Photographs by Kelly Kish

on my floor mattress, and introduced myself to the world of Arkansas cheese dip. A novice, I didn't know Arkansans ate it warm. At fridge temperature, the dip was defiant.

Conway, Arkansas, where I lived, is known for three colleges, archaic liquor laws, and native son Kris Allen. When Allen won season eight of *American Idol* in May 2009, local diner Stoby's offered him free cheese dip for life. For one brief, brilliant segment of network television, the rest of the world learned about Arkansas cheese dip. But, as with Kris Allen's career, everyone but Arkansas soon forgot. My upstairs neighbors, who made Stoby's dip for the restaurant in a small-scale industrial setup, gave me the container as a sort of welcome-to-the-boarding-house gift.

"I fucking love Stoby's cheese dip," the bartender at ZaZa—a salad and pizza restaurant, and one of the few places in Conway to get a drink—told me as she filled a pitcher of beer.

"It's pretty good," I said with a nod, not looking up from the crawly snake I'd made with a straw wrapper.

Her tone turned to gravel as she wiped the sides of the pitcher with a rag. "*Pretty good?* How're you here only for a couple weeks and already have a connection for it?"

I shrugged, ignorant of the vaunted place of cheese dip in central Arkansas cuisine. I knew nothing of the debates, passions, or loyalties it inspired. Still, I

promised to bring the vat to the house party she planned to host later that night. She grinned.

MANY SOUTHERNERS know the cheese-dip drill: Toss cubed Velveeta, a can of Ro*Tel, and maybe some cumin into a Crock-pot. Heat until liquefied. Arkansas restaurants finesse their own recipes. The degree of complexity varies, as do the secret ingredients. Stoby's recipe is the pride of Conway—and my unsophisticated palate assumed it deserved top honors—but it earns sneers in Little Rock.

After logging a bit more time in the state, I learned of Arkansas's long history with the dip and the expectations that surround it. My most important directive from

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the cognoscenti of Arkansas was to never confuse it with the white stuff called queso. That's blasphemy. In this state, the dip is orange, but even that is hardly a firm rule. (Stoby's has a B-side white dip, slightly spicier than the original.)

Some Little Rock establishments eschew Velveeta and instead borrow from French techniques to build a Mornay-style sauce or some variation of queso flameado. As an outsider, I could



ABOVE: Mexico Chiquito, North Little Rock.
CENTER: Stoby's, Conway.

never discern the vagaries that determine where a restaurant's dip lands on the spectrum from good enough to canonical.

Though locals tend to look kindly on all cheese dip efforts, they're also proud as hell of their personal favorites. More often than not, it is familiarity or reputation, not recipe, that determines allegiance. And anyway, most restaurants' cheese dip methods are closely guarded secrets.

In 2009, Nick Rogers—a former Little Rock attorney, current sociology PhD student at Georgia State University, and the founder of the World Cheese Dip Championship, held annually in Little Rock since 2010—made a twenty-minute documentary called *In Queso Fever: A Movie About Cheese Dip*. In the film, he claims Arkansas as the birthplace of cheese dip, placing its genesis at a Hot Springs restaurant named Mexico Chiquito in 1935. *The Dallas Morning News* responded that

Texas was the true home of cheese dip, and told Rogers he would rue the day he entangled himself in the debate. After months of research, the reporter contacted Rogers again and said she couldn't prove Texas had an earlier claim. Cheese dip was Arkansan—probably.

Rogers considered that a big win for the state. “The revelation that cheese dip appears to have originated in Arkansas gives Arkansas a culinary cultural identity that it has always wanted and lacked,” Rogers says. “Arkansas, by virtue of where it is geographically—just to the north of Louisiana, just to the south of Missouri, just to the east of Texas—is at the intersection of these different regions of the Midwest and Southwest and Cajun Country and the Deep South. As such, Arkansas is a little bit all of those and a little bit none of those. It's a melting pot of its own.” A melting pot that defines its cuisine by

a liquefied cheese product.

Most Arkansans agree on the gist of the cheese dip origin story, though it's the kind of history that would elicit a nervous laugh from an academic. The tale begins with a man named Blackie Donnelly, owner of the aforementioned Mexico Chiquito. Like any eighty-year-old oral history, the vague and the unconfirmed abound. Donnelly worked as a pilot and flew a small twin-engine plane between Texas and Mexico for a time. Some say he ended up in Arkansas because he crashed his plane there. According to the current owners of Mexico Chiquito, Donnelly's wife came up with the cheese dip recipe—informed by their frequent trips across the border. It allegedly showed up on the Mexico Chiquito menu in 1935.

If we were to accept this narrative and get Biblical, following “the law of first mention,” Mexico Chiquito cheese dip is God's

cheese dip. Not a bad slogan, if the owners were ever inclined to use it. But because the recipe has remained secret for more than eighty years, no one is really sure what's in it. A few enterprising souls on the Internet think it might just be Kraft American cheese, milk, flour, hot sauce, cumin, and some other powdered spices—but it's the combination of an ambiguous history and a secret recipe that is so enticing.

Donnelly brought his business to the Little Rock area in 1936, explains Lisa Glidewell, who owns and operates Mexico Chiquito with her husband and siblings. Lisa's father bought the restaurant and its *very* secret recipes in 1978 and turned it into a local franchise. Today, Little Rock is still ravenous for Mexico Chiquito's dip.

“It was kind of outside North Little Rock,” Lisa says of the Prothro Junction location, swirling a chip into a bowlful of the

ABOVE: Heights Taco & Tamale Co., Little Rock.



THE FOOD WORLD MIGHT ALWAYS LOOK DOWN ITS NOSE AT CHEESE DIP.

dip that serves her family like a trust fund. “You actually had to drive there. It was probably a good thirty minutes because the interstates weren’t so great. It was this old, old building with dirt floors. It was just a place that you came to because you loved the food.”

ON MY MOST RECENT visit to Little Rock, I wanted its citizens to utter the ineffable: to explain why cheese dip mattered. Was Arkansas’s cheese dip phenomenon akin to attaching a “World Famous” sign to an unexceptional burger joint? The assertion of provenance is a secret known only to Arkansans, who are unaware that it’s a secret to anyone else. Acquaintances in Little Rock told me of their shock on leaving

The ConcheeZtadors, cheese dip champions.



central Arkansas for the first time and not finding cheese dip on menus. One man said his son insisted a Colorado restaurant make it for him. The confused waiter returned with a bowl of melted cheddar cheese.

This dichotomy is what makes Arkansas cheese dip so fascinating to an outsider. Arkansans claim cheese dip as part of their culinary history, yet I kept wondering if that gooey birthright was a mere accident of geography. Gumbo, discussed to the point of cliché, tells the story of Louisianans mixing the traditions of its native and immigrant cultures: Choctaw, French, German, Spanish, and West African. It relies on ingredients with deep ties to people and place—andouille sausage, filé powder, okra, Gulf shellfish. The terroir of Arkansas cheese dip isn’t rarefied. A delivery from the Sysco truck, or a visit to any American grocery store, yields the necessary components.

Despite Arkansans’ insistence that cheese dip is their creation, it’s also a first cousin, if not a sibling, to Tex-Mex. When critics first differentiated Tex-Mex from Mexican food thirty years ago, it was a cuisine deemed an edible mess—an American bastardization marked by huge platters with too much dairy. It described a food as both native and foreign. There has been a small shift in appreciation since then, and chefs aren’t as afraid to attach themselves to a cuisine that was once considered a slur. But the food



world might always look down its nose at cheese dip.

As I left Little Rock, I burrowed deeper into these viscid rabbit holes. The numerous origin explanations, the slack history, and the shadow of Tex-Mex added to my frustration. I couldn’t ascribe a tidy symbolism.

Maybe cheese dip matters simply because Arkansans love it. While the region evolves, cheese dip is unflinching. Most people have a nostalgic affinity for a food that is less than haute cuisine. For me, a Pennsylvania-raised child of Irish and German parents, it’s Oscar Meyer’s spreadable liverwurst or a plate of corned beef

hash that almost certainly came from a can. I associate these dishes with happy memories, and they just taste good. Beyond my need for basic sustenance, that’s all I really want out of a meal.

Arkansans get that every time they hit the drive-through at Mexico Chiquito or slide into a booth at Stoby’s or switch on their Crockpot, and it’s even better because it’s naturally social. No matter the petty divisions created by politics or religion or pop culture, the people of central Arkansas will unite around a bowl of cheese dip—even if one of them thinks there’s a better version just up the road. 🐾

Blackie Donnelly in front of Mexico Chiquito, North Little Rock.

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Courtesy Mexico Chiquito