Dedicated members of Texas’s cowboy and ranching community keep chuckwagon cooking alive for special events, cook-offs, and demonstrations. Photo courtesy Texas Tourism

Cowboy Camp is a group of friends who support the Original Terlingua International Chili Cookoff, held annually in Terlingua, Texas. It is a campground and a place to eat, where cooks feed up to 200 people on the Friday night of the cook-off. The spread includes twenty entrees, dessert, and wine. Photo by Andy Reisberg

The state of Texas is big in size, legend, and diversity. Geography and cultural background usually determine what’s on a Texan’s plate and what suits a Texan’s palate. Bountiful peaches, rice, oysters, pecans, nopalitos (cactus), and citrus fruits “flavor” the local culture and cuisine where they are harvested. Just as important are the legacy of the state’s cattle and ranching industries and Texas’s intertwined history with Mexico. They influence Texas’s signature dishes—chili, chicken-fried steak, barbecue, and cheese enchiladas, which are eaten proudly by Texans of all stripes whether at home or in restaurants. Many great home cooks start restaurants that become centers of cultural life for their communities. They give community members, who may be too busy to cook or never learned to cook, a place to eat foods with which they most identify.

Lunch in Texas might include smoked sausage and German potato salad in Fredericksburg (Central Texas), a steaming bowl of pho in Houston’s Vietnamese community (Southeast Texas), a pot of boiled crawfish in Orange (Southeast Texas, on the border of Louisiana), a gargantuan hamburger in Fort Worth (North Texas), fresh asadero cheese wrapped in a warm tortilla in El Paso (far West Texas), or grilled shrimp and fried oysters in Rockport (on the Gulf Coast).