

= Ben 's Chili Bowl =

Ben 's Chili Bowl is a landmark restaurant in Washington , D.C. , located at 1213 U Street , next to Lincoln Theatre , in the Shaw neighborhood of northwest D.C. It is known locally for its chili dogs , half @-@ smokes , and milkshakes , and has been an integral part of the neighborhood 's history since its founding in 1958 . It was frequented by both police and protesters during the 1968 Washington , D.C. riots , and is regularly visited by celebrities , such as Bill Cosby and Chris Tucker .

In January 2009 , Washington , D.C. Mayor Adrian Fenty took then @-@ President @-@ elect Barack Obama to eat at Ben 's as part of his welcome to the city .

= = History = =

Ben 's Chili Bowl was founded on August 22 , 1958 by Ben Ali , a Trinidadian @-@ born immigrant who had studied dentistry at nearby Howard University , and his fiancée , Virginian @-@ born Virginia Rollins . The two were married seven weeks after opening the restaurant . The building they chose was that of Washington 's first silent movie house , the Minnehaha , which was established in 1911 . The building is a contributing property to the Greater U Street Historic District . Most of the furniture in the restaurant is original to the 1950s . At the time , Washington was officially segregated , and U Street was known as " Black Broadway " . Many jazz greats of the day , such as Duke Ellington , Miles Davis , and Nat King Cole , would stop by the restaurant when they performed at U Street clubs .

The U Street corridor was devastated by the 1968 riots that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King , Jr . During the riots , black activist Stokely Carmichael , leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee , asked Ben to keep his restaurant open and the Alis obtained permission to stay open past curfew . The restaurant fed both the police officers and firemen working to impose order on the neighborhood , as well as the black activists . The violence and arson reached such an extent that Ben wrote " Soul Brother " in soap on the front window in the hopes that it would stop the angry mobs .

The destruction of so many businesses led to the flight of residents towards the suburbs and the economic decline of the neighborhood through the mid @-@ 1970s to mid @-@ 1980s . As the area became known for its drug addicts , Ben 's Chili Bowl reduced its staff to one employee . Ben and Virginia 's son Kamal recalled , " We stayed and had a following , because the Chili Bowl was like the neighborhood barbershop . People would sit here and chat . There was always a family presence and the locals protected us . " The restaurant stopped serving pies and cakes , which attracted addicts , while police conducted surveillance on drug dealers from an upstairs window of the building .

The extensive construction of the U Street Metro station across the street from the restaurant , completed in 1991 , forced still more U Street businesses to close , but Ben 's Chili Bowl stayed open to feed the construction workers . The Washington Post commented that Ben 's Chili Bowl is " probably the only business on this strip that survived both the 1968 riots and the construction phase of the Metro Green Line " . The Metro and lower crime rates helped the gradual revitalization and gentrification of the neighborhood . From the early 1990s , business revenues grew by 10 % annually , to \$ 1 @. @ 5 million in 2005 , and the number of employees at the restaurant grew as well , to a staff of 20 .

In the summer of 2007 , the owners of Ben 's led a coalition of ten small local businesses to broker a deal with a local energy company to convert operations to 100 % wind energy . The New York Post quoted Nizam Ali as saying , " We see this as part of being involved in what is good for the neighborhood , what 's good for the city It 's a good idea that helps the environment and , it turns out , makes economic sense for all of us . "

In 2008 , Ben 's Chili Bowl opened a second location in the newly built Nationals Park , though it has a more limited selection than the original restaurant .

On October 7 , 2009 , Ben died at the age of 82 . He and his wife , Virginia , had retired from the

restaurant business , having passed daily operations of Ben 's Chili Bowl to their sons , Kamal and Nizam . Ali 's death was mourned in many ways throughout the city , including a written statement by Mayor Adrian Fenty , which read in part : " I am deeply saddened to hear of the passing of the founder and namesake of Ben ? s Chili Bowl , one of the greatest treasures in the District of Columbia . Ben Ali was a man who invested his life in a small business that weathered many storms and became the soul of a neighborhood and the pride of our city . "

In 2009 , Ben 's sons , Nizam and Kamal , opened an upscale restaurant and bar , Ben 's Next Door , at 1211 U St , NW , adjacent to the original building . Featuring alcohol (something not available in Ben 's) , the restaurant 's goal is to " complement " Ben 's , according to Nizam , who says that the goal is to stay " true to ourselves " . The restaurant offers everything on the Ben 's Chili Bowl menu from 11am to closing , in addition to its own lunch , dinner , and late night menu .

= = Menu = =

Ben 's menu features the " original chili half @-@ smoke " as its " signature dish " . It is a one @-@ quarter pound half @-@ pork and half @-@ beef smoked sausage on " a warm steamed bun , " topped with mustard , onions and spicy homemade chili sauce . In addition to the pork @-@ beef half @-@ smokes and all pork or all beef hot dogs , the menu also features " healthy choice " items such as turkey burgers and turkey hot dogs (" turkey dogs ") , and vegetarian chili , burgers (" veggie burgers ") , and hot dogs (" veggie dogs ") . Chili (both the beef variety and the all @-@ vegetarian variety) is also available in various sizes . In addition to serving food for customers who eat inside or order for take @-@ out , the restaurant ships food nationwide .

Today , many of the restaurant 's sausages are produced in Baltimore , Maryland by the Manger Packing Corporation .

= = Customers and recognition = =

The Boston Globe described Ben 's diverse customers as " punk @-@ looking kids and fashionable business people and everyone in between " . In 2001 , Ben and Virginia 's son , Kamal , commented on the changes of what types of people were eating at the establishment : " You hear comments . Even the white customers . They want to think they 're the only whites who 'd been hip enough to go to the Chili Bowl . Now they look around and there are a lot of other whites and they are not so happy about it . "

The most famous regular customer is comedian Bill Cosby , who took his future wife to Ben 's when they were dating . He recalls that he first became a frequent visitor while serving in the Navy and stationed in Bethesda , Maryland in 1958 , and frequently visited the U Street jazz clubs . Cosby recalls that during some of his visits with Camille , who was then a student at the University of Maryland , he would " eat as many as six half @-@ smokes at a time . " Cosby returned to Ben 's in 1985 to hold a press conference in the restaurant to celebrate the success of his television series , The Cosby Show . He continues to stop by Ben 's while in town for servings of half @-@ smokes . A sign posted in the restaurant proclaimed that Bill Cosby is the only person who eats for free at Ben 's Chili Bowl . On November 3 , 2008 , a new sign was posted to add " the Obama family " .

Many other celebrities , including Chris Tucker and Bono , have visited over the years . When journalist Ted Koppel stopped hosting news program Nightline , he held his 2005 farewell party at the restaurant . Then @-@ President @-@ elect Barack Obama ate at Ben 's on January 10 , 2009 .

The Washington Post asserts , " By the late 1990s , no D.C. politician would dream of running for office without dropping into Ben 's . " Anthony A. Williams appeared at Ben 's immediately after his successful mayoral election .

However , celebrities at Ben 's are not limited to American citizens . In 1998 , former DC mayor Marion Barry described having traveled to Ghana and meeting the Mayor of Accra , an alumnus of Howard University , whose greeting was , " Glad to have you in Accra . Is Ben 's Chili Bowl still there ? " And when French President Nicolas Sarkozy and his wife Carla Bruni @-@ Sarkozy visited

Washington , D.C. in March 2010 , they reportedly each had two of Ben 's half smokes during their visit to the restaurant .

Scenes from films including The Pelican Brief and State of Play have been filmed in the restaurant , and it has been in " dozens of TV shows . " The short film , Breakfast At Ben 's was filmed almost entirely in the restaurant . Additionally , it has been used in novels as the setting for fictional meetings ? especially meetings that involve individuals from " different sides of the law " ? as it was in George Pelecanos 's King Suckerman .

Ben and Virginia Ali were inducted into the D.C. Hall of Fame , and in 1999 , the alley adjacent to the restaurant was renamed " Ben Ali Way " . On the occasion of Ben Ali 's 2009 death , D.C. mayor Adrian Fenty released a statement calling the restaurant " one of the greatest treasures in the District of Columbia " .

The restaurant 's founders have been inducted into the D.C. Hall of Fame .

= = = In popular culture = = =

A Washington @-@ based episode of the Travel Channel 's Man v. Food (S02E12) , which first aired in the summer of 2009 , featured Ben 's Chili Bowl as one of the stops . The host , Adam Richman , helped Nizam Ali prepare his chili before trying out a chili Half @-@ Smoke ; Richman sat in the same seat that President Barack Obama had sat in earlier in the year .

In the 2009 movie State of Play , reporter Cal McCaffrey (Russell Crowe) visits Ben 's Chili Bowl and appears to be a regular customer . He orders his " regular " : Chili Cheese Burger , Chili Cheese Fry and a Chili Half @-@ Smoke . The scene features the sign : " List of who eats free at Ben 's : Bill Cosby , NO ONE ELSE " .

= = = Reviews = = =

In 2004 , the James Beard Foundation named Ben 's one of the " down @-@ home eateries that have carved out a special place on the American culinary landscape " . Michael Stern , a writer specializing in U.S. regional foods , penned a 2008 review raving " The half @-@ smoke is sensational ! " and " Ben 's serves one of the best sweet potato pies anywhere " , and describing the chili as " sensational stuff : thick , peppery , full @-@ flavored and positively addictive " . In January 2009 , food magazine Bon Appétit named Ben 's one of the country 's ten " Best Chili Spots " , asserting , " No reasonable discussion of great chili joints can take place without mention of this U Street institution . " In a 2016 Washington Post restaurant review , Ben 's received one star and the food was described as " awful . "