



The History of Ben's Chili Bowl



It was the summer of 1958. Eisenhower was president. Federal troops were ordered into Little Rock, Arkansas to aid in the integration of public schools. Explorer I was launched, as was NASA. The first-ever Grammy Awards were given, and Ella Fitzgerald won two of them.

That same year, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. published his first book, *Stride Toward Freedom*. Griffith Stadium was home to the Washington Senators, and 30% of D.C.'s black population owned homes. Nelson Mandela wed Winnie. And, in 1958, newlyweds Ben and Virginia Ali gave birth to a new enterprise.

Despite a national business failure rate of 55.9%, the Ali's used \$5,000 to begin renovating the building at 1213 U Street. It had high-arched ceilings, character, and plenty of history. Built in 1910, it first housed a silent movie theater called the Minnehaha Theater. Later, Harry Beckley, one of D.C.'s first Black police detectives, converted it into a pool hall.

On Aug. 22, 1958, **Ben's Chili Bowl** opened for business.



It was an exciting time on the U Street corridor, which was then known as "Black Broadway." Top performers could be found playing sets in clubs along the corridor, as well as eating and just hanging out at Ben's. It was not uncommon to see such luminaries as Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, Ella Fitzgerald, Cab Calloway, Nat King Cole, Redd Foxx, Dick Gregory, Martin Luther King Jr., Donny Hathaway, Roy Ayers or Bill Cosby at "The Bowl."



In 1968, the assassination of Dr. King lit a fuse of rage. Riots ensued. Most of the city closed down. Ben's remained open. Stokely Carmichael of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which was located across the street, obtained special police permission to allow Ben's to stay open after curfew to provide food and shelter for activists, firefighters and public servants desperately trying to restore order.

● Outside The Bowl in 1960 ●



After the riots, the area was in shambles. Businesses shut down. But there was some glimmer of hope in the neighborhood as the concept of "Black is Beautiful" emerged. Ben's continued to serve an eclectic crowd of regulars. People saw Ben's as a place where community could be re-built. The owners stayed open until 3:00AM to feed stomachs, but also to feed the soul and hope.

But revitalization was not easy after the riots. In the 1970's, black films gained in popularity, and the Lincoln Theatre next door was often packed. Still, the effects of the riots continued to take their



The Bowl and U Street in the 1970s

toll. By the mid 1970's, drug dealers began peddling heroin in open-air drug markets. Many of Shaw's black-owned businesses closed. Ironically, the riots ended segregation, but also diminished the black community. Even so, the flame of hope could not be extinguished.



Mayor Marion Barry, Jr. had the vision to build the Frank D. Reeves Municipal Center at 14th and U Streets. For the first time in years, hundreds of new jobs were created on U Street. In September of 1985, Bill Cosby—who in fact courted his wife Camille here in the early 1960's—held a national press conference at Ben's Chili Bowl to celebrate his number one rated television program *The Cosby Show*, thrusting Ben's into the national limelight. Business improved and things were looking up, but there were more problems ahead.

In 1987, construction of the Metro's Green Line along U Street virtually closed the block for five years. This section of U Street became nothing more than a 60-foot hole. Business came to a halt overnight. Ben and Virginia made the decision to keep their business open with only two employees serving Metro workers and faithful regulars each day. Through more than five years of construction and upheaval, Ben's managed to survive. The community saw Ben's as more than just a hot dog joint. In Ben's Chili Bowl, they had a real neighbor and a real friend indeed.



After the Metro construction ended and the subway finally opened, normality began to return to U Street. U Street was back, and new people, businesses and energy were popping up and down U Street. But the famous Chili Dogs and Chili Half Smokes stayed the same. Regular customers kept coming to Ben's, from the monthly gathering of the St. Louis Breakfast Club to the many locals who stopped by every day. They enjoyed sharing Ben's not-too-secret recipe of friendship, family and fun with



new comers discovering the joys and resonance of U Street's history, culture and community. Ben's had its share of blessings as well. In August 2003, Bill Cosby and hundreds of others attended its 45th Anniversary celebration.

● Bill Cosby addresses the crowd on the 45th Anniversary ●



In August 2008, Ben's turned 50 years old with a grand street party where thousands of customers turned out for a birthday celebration. Also, Mr. Cosby emceed and Roberta Flack performed at Ben's 50th Anniversary free Gala at the Lincoln Theatre. Ben's has now become a familiar scene in movie scripts and a place for superstars to hang out after their DC performances. President Barak Obama had to have a Chili Half Smoke before he was sworn-in in January 2009 in order to make him, as daytime manager Maurice said, "a true Washingtonian." More recently, President Sarkozy of France and his family enjoyed lunch at Ben's. But most importantly, Ben's is still the same Ben's that long-time customers have loved since 1958. Everyday, people still sit on the same stools, at the same counter, eating the same homemade secret recipe Chili Sauce on the same Chili Dogs, Chili Half Smokes, and Chili Burgers, just like they did over half a century ago.

Throughout the years, Ben's has also been blessed with the kindness of strangers visiting from all over world who have now become part of our extended family.



We have been honored with many awards and accolades: In 1999, Councilmember Jim Graham named the alley adjacent to Ben's Chili Bowl 'Ben Ali Way'; Ben and Virginia were inducted into the D.C. Hall of Fame (May 2001); in 2004, Ben's won the prestigious Gallo of Sonoma 'America's Classics' Restaurant Award from the James Beard Foundation; and in 2008 Mayor Adrian Fenty gave Ben & Virginia Ali the Key to the City; in 2009, the National Restaurant Association presented Ben's with the Faces of Diversity American Dream Award, the DC Urban League honored Virginia Ali with a Lifetime Achievement Award.

Add to these wonderful honors an immense amount of press coverage, including segments on CNN, Oprah, Anthony Bourdain's No Reservations, CBS Sunday Morning, Good Morning America, PBS, the Food Network, the Today Show, the Travel Channel, Man vs. Food, and stories in Washingtonian, Gourmet, Southern Living, The Washington Post, Politico, The New York Times, and numerous international press outlets, Ben's has become recognized world-wide as the "must go" place to eat when visiting Washington.



Ben's Chili Bowl is a place that symbolizes all that is great about this country. America was built on the values of family, friends, community, diversity and good will. Just take a look around and you will see all of America sitting together, laughing together, sharing stories and memories, listening to classic soul, rock & roll, R&B, and funk while doing what we all enjoy so much – having a good meal with good people.



Diversity is Ben's hallmark. In 2010, the George Washington University enshrined Ben's Chili Bowl 's historic papers, documents and photos into its Africana Research Center in its main Gelman Library. Ben's papers and photos are currently on display at GWU. The historic documents are digitized for students and scholars throughout the world to examine. They will be preserved forever.

● The Ali's on their wedding day ●



After a 55-plus year journey, business is now booming. The new U street is enjoying a renaissance. Ben's tenacity to believe in its community and its people is credited as one of the anchors that stabilized U Street during its tough times. Ben's is purely a family affair, and everyone at Ben's appreciates values that include family, community, faith, and a love of one's roots, history and culture.

Moving forward: Ben's has expanded beyond itself by the popular demand of our loving and loyal customers. A new restaurant and bar called Ben's Next Door stands right next door to Ben's Chili Bowl. Next Door features a totally different menu, a 53-ft full bar and 9 big screen TV's. Ben's has also expanded into the Washington Nationals baseball stadium, The Redskins FedEx Field, and an upcoming location on H Street, NE. We have the Ben's Chili Bowl World Chili Eating Championship at the Taste of DC, and we even offer mail-order shipping on our website, in addition to operating Ben's Gift Shop & the Greater U St Neighborhood Visitors Center upstairs above Ben's Next Door.



We are extremely proud of our non-profit organization, The Ben's Chili Bowl Foundation, which sets aside profits and raises money to support local community building efforts in Washington, DC. Our commitment to our community started in 1958, and it has been growing ever since.

Ben's will continue to help anchor our community as it changes, progresses, and re-defines itself through the eyes and experiences of today and tomorrow. But there are some constants at Ben's that have not changed since 1958. Our loyal customers have spoken, and we have listened. They have told us very clearly, "Whatever changes happen on U Street, please don't ever change a thing about Ben's. Keep the ambiance, energy, good service, and that secret, homemade from scratch fresh Ben's Chili Sauce."



Some of Ben's youngest fans



The counter, stools and booths at Ben's are all original from 1958. Our homemade Chili Sauce, Chili Con Carne and Veggie Chili are all still made with fresh ingredients and love. Ben Ali left us in 2009, but we feel his presence every day. Virginia still comes in daily, and she always enjoys greeting customers & friends from around the world. Her sons, Sage, Kamal, and Nizam, along with their wives Vida, Sonya, and Jyotika, plus nephew Rob, have taken over operations. The love remains.

To our customers and especially our regulars: We truly appreciate you, and we sincerely thank you for supporting Ben's. To those of you who still have yet to visit Ben's, we look forward to seeing you soon! Thank you for taking the time to read our history, and thank you for helping to make Ben's Chili Bowl a beloved treasure.

