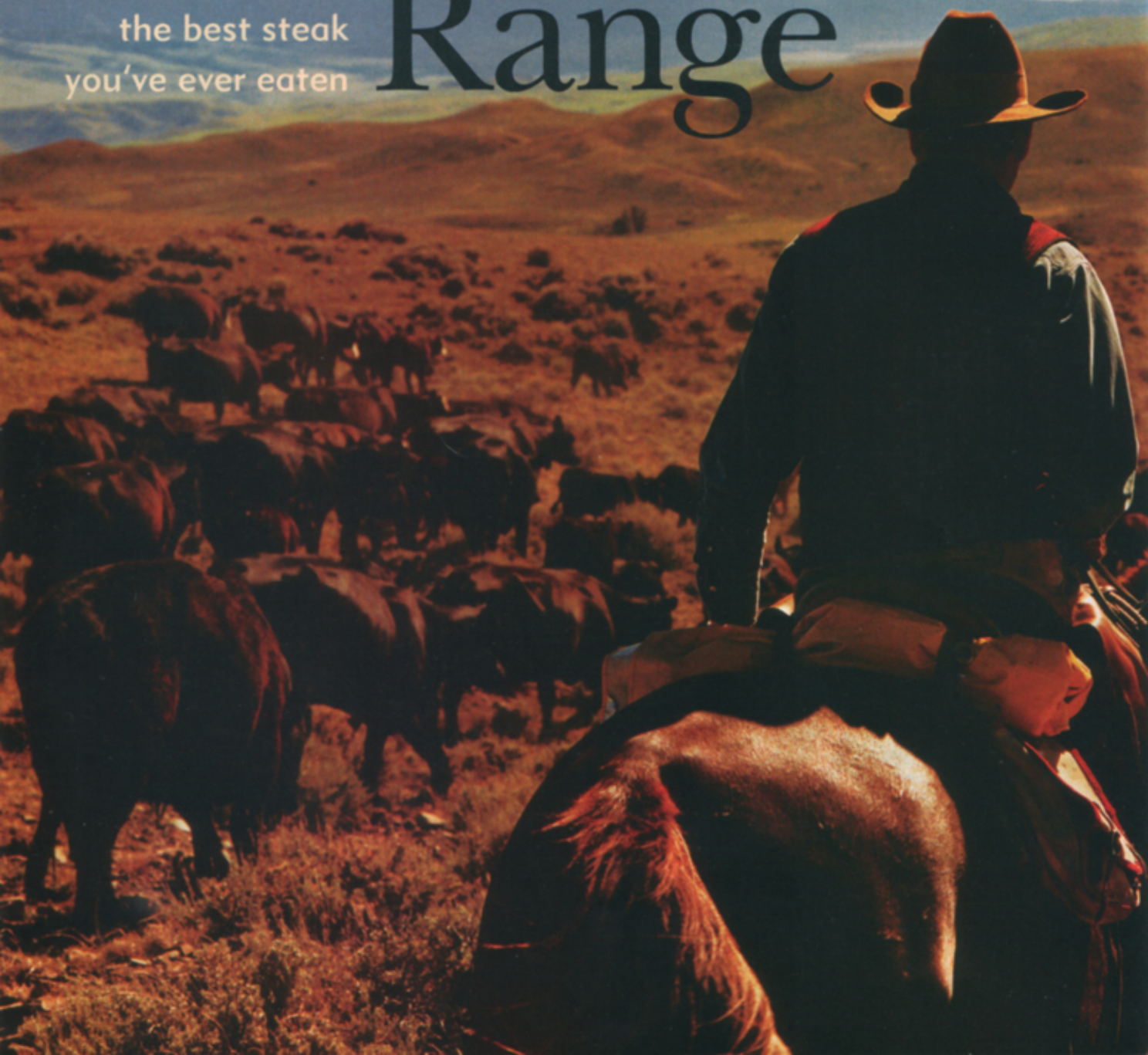


Montana  
ranching families  
want to raise  
healthier beef  
for you—and  
save their way  
of life. Plus:  
a rich chili and  
the best steak  
you've ever eaten

# Home on the Range





# M

orning across America: Red taillights stretch endlessly ahead on the freeway, cell phones chirp, Escalades cut off Mini Coopers.

But not here in central Montana, where Rick Jarrett tugs his lariat from the saddle strap and nudges his cow horse, Foxy, to a trot. Jarrett swings the loop easily as he heads down the sage-covered ridge toward a stray. Wearing a work-stained Stetson and a ratty vest patched with duct tape, he looks like he means business; the steer's impressed enough to rejoin the herd.

From here Jarrett can see a good chunk of the state. To the south are the snowcapped Absaroka and Beartooth ranges and the wilds of Yellowstone National Park. To the north, closer and sharp against the clear morning sky, the ragged peaks of the Crazy Mountains. In between, tucked along Duck Creek, is his "office," the Crazy Mountain Cattle Company.

It's a pretty picture, but though Jarrett's a fifth-generation Montana rancher living a 19th-century lifestyle, he has no desire to be a poster boy for the vanishing Old West. If anything,

A wrangler helps move Rick Jarrett's cattle down to the main ranch of the Crazy Mountain Cattle Company, among the trees.

BY JEFF PHILLIPS

RANCH PHOTOGRAPHS BY ROB HOWARD

FOOD PHOTOGRAPHS BY LEIGH BEISCH



he and a few of his neighbors near Big Timber hope to represent the future of small family ranching.

At the very least, they intend to be your answer to that occasional but irresistible craving for a good steak. In the process, their natural, range-fed beef just might make you—and the environment—a little bit healthier.

Jarrett actually does have his own traffic to deal with this morning: 10 riders funneling 350 head of cattle through a basin toward a gap leading down to the ranch. Waving hats and ropes, the riders whoop and holler as they bring the herd together. Cows and calves—bawling to find each other in the eddies and flows of a bovine river—jostle and push. The air is thick with dust and the pungent scents of trampled sage, manure, and sweaty hides.

By the time the last animal has been moved to a pasture overlooking the Yellowstone River, the last gate wire is looped over its post, and the last of the dusty, sore crew has unsaddled his horse, a mountain of food is ready back at the ranch house. Around the kitchen table, the talk drifts from the day's adventures—a horse spooked by a rattlesnake—to the ongoing drought, the price of beef, and, inevitably, the plight of the family ranch.

While cattle ranching has changed since Jarrett's family settled in Montana in 1862,

it—along with the beef we eat—has changed most dramatically since 1950. The small Western cattle operation has become dominated by big industrial agribusiness. Jarrett and his neighbors in the town of Big Timber are increasingly rare exceptions in the cattle industry.

"Over the last 10 years, the retail price of beef has increased 50 to 60 percent," Jarrett says, "but the money hasn't trickled down to ranchers; the buyers and packers have all the control."

And they pocket most of the profits. According to the American Meat Institute, approximately 71 percent of all beef sold in the U.S. is processed and marketed at plants owned by four giant meatpacking companies. The big players in the industry control distribution and pricing, and that's slowly strangling the ranchers around Jarrett's kitchen table.

Jarrett's wife and partner, Karen Scarle, puts her arm around her 8-year-old granddaughter, Jordan. "The other morning, Jordan was helping us sort some cattle," Scarle recalls, "and as we're riding along, she looks up at Rick and says, 'Grandpa, someday I want to buy this ranch from you just like you bought it from your granddad.'"

Everyone chuckles at Jordan's red face, but the laughter rings hollow. All of these cattlemen, whose roots go generations deep in Montana's Sweet Grass County, would like to pass their ranches on to their kids, but not one of them is sure he can make it happen.

While the consolidation of the beef industry has kept prices relatively low for consumers, it has also drastically changed how cattle are raised and what goes into the meat we now eat.

Steaks you'll find in most major supermarkets today bear little resemblance to steaks cowboys grilled on the range a century ago. Before World War II, when Jarrett's grandfather ran the ranch, it generally took most ranchers three to five years to grow an animal from an 80-pound calf to a 1,200-pound steer on the open range with a natural diet of grass. Today, commercial steers typically pack on that weight in 18 to 20 months—half of it gained in huge industry feedlots where penned animals are "corn-fed" a diet that includes corn, "protein supplements" (which can include chicken feathers), and, as a matter of course, antibiotics. They're also injected with growth hormones.

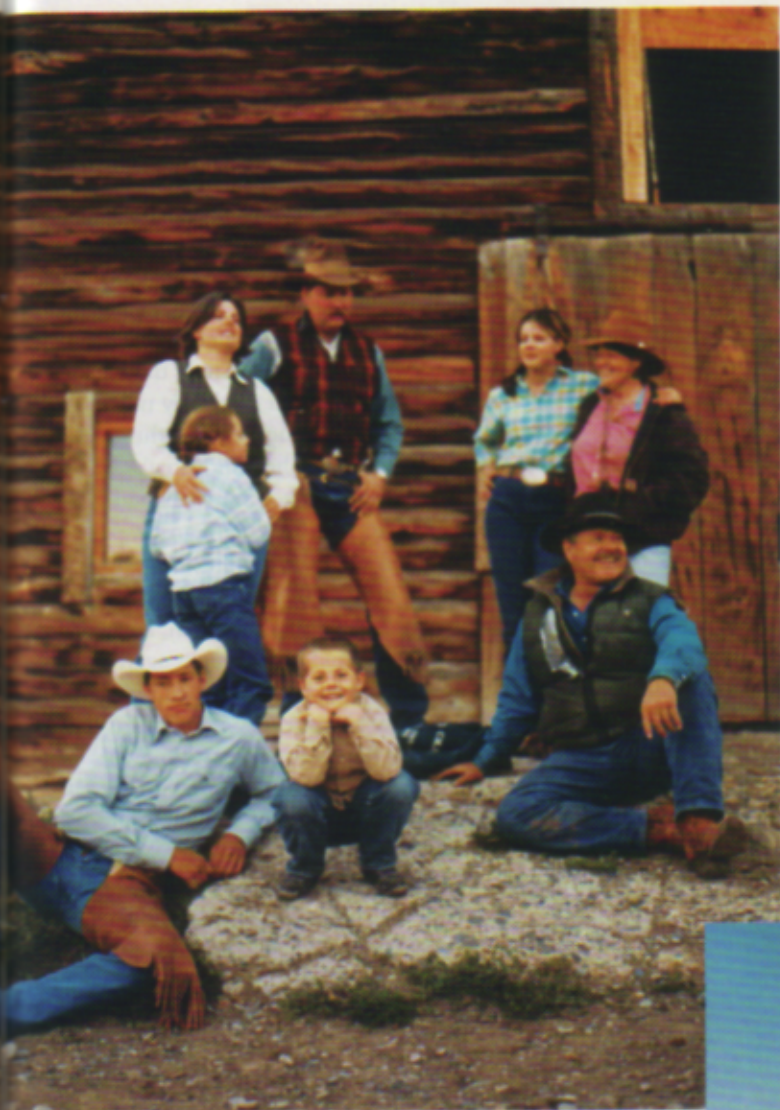
Proponents of "natural" beef claim that meat from grass-fed animals grown without hormones or antibiotics (except as needed to treat a sick animal) is healthier for consumers. According to the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, grass-fed beef is typically leaner than corn-fed and contains slightly more omega-3 polyunsaturated fat and a higher amount of conjugated linoleic acid, which has been shown to have cancer-fighting properties. Cattle that are grass-fed also have much less potential for being infected with mad-cow disease.

The morning after the cattle drive, Montana cattle broker Steve Christensen stops by for coffee. With help from Jarrett and a few other like-minded ranchers, Christensen has started the Montana Branded Beef Association. "I'm seeing the market for natural beef growing 25 percent to 30 percent a year," he says. While the cooperative was still working on its marketing plan at press time, Christensen's biggest challenge is "finding a packer and distributor who will process our beef separately from all the factory beef."



Farrier John Cosgriff smooths a hoof before attaching a new shoe on a horse bound for the Cow Camp on the Gallatin.





Clockwise from top left: Jarrett, in tape-patched vest, with family and friends at the ranch; a rusting car isn't junk, it's a spare-parts cache; calves get numbers, not names, at Crazy Mountain Cattle Company.





A growing number of ranchers in most Western states have found ways to accomplish this, producing small quantities of all-natural and organic beef. The challenge for consumers is finding it—and deciphering the words on the package labels (see below).

"We do most ranch work on bikes or ATVs," says Jarrett, "but cattle are still best moved the traditional way—by horse."

Later that morning, farrier John Cosgriff stops by to shoe horses that—along with most of the cattle—will soon be trucked up to Jarrett's summer grazing leasehold in the Gallatin National Forest on the edge of Yellowstone National Park. While wolves have become a problem there—in 2003 Jarrett lost a 500-pound calf to a pack of 12 wolves—the supply of abundant grass on the summer lease is a vital part of his operation.

Jarrett watches as Cosgriff carefully taps on a new shoe. "It's not just money," Jarrett says. "Cow camp is a part of our heritage—it's the most romantic thing we do. The mountains there are so pristine, and there's so much wildlife—working up there just brings out the inherent goodness in people."

After adjusting the irrigation on the upper pasture (Jarrett insists he's "really more of a farmer than a rancher"), he pauses to watch 16-year-old stepdaughter Saundra training a horse in the old log corral near the barn. She gently works the 2-year-old gelding, trotting bareback around a massive

snubbing post sunk deep in the packed earth.

"My grandfather used to break colts here," he says. "This corral has seen everything over the years, from brandings to family rodeos; there's a lot of history here, a lot of living."

As determined as Jarrett and his neighbors are to keep on ranching, ultimately the biggest threat to their survival may not be the price of beef, the weather, the wolves, or even the beef industry's favorite scapegoats—environmentalists and government regulators. It may be themselves.

The town of Big Timber, once the region's largest wool producer, today has only 1,700 residents, but Montana State University Extension agent Marc King, who works with both farmers and government agencies in Sweet Grass County, says the face of that population is starting to change. "Most every ranch in this county has been in the family for at least three or four generations," explains King, "but as those families are forced to sell, new owners are taking the land out of production."

Last spring, for example, an out-of-state partnership including former anchorman Tom Brokaw and actor Michael Keaton purchased a 640-acre ranch for a reported \$8 million, creating a private hunting and fishing preserve. Members of that partnership now own at least 12,000 acres of ranchland in the heart of the region.

"The fact is that working ranchland here is more productive for wildlife than nongrazed lands," says King. "Ranchers here have been good stewards, providing for wildlife, keeping exotic weeds under control, and restoring watersheds to improve water quality. I can't say that for a lot of the newcomers. Taking the land out of production increases fire

## What do beef labels mean?

**Most beef sold in markets comes from animals that spent much of their life packed into feedlots, being fattened quickly on grain. The resulting "corn-fed" beef is marbled with fat that carries the flavor we've come to love. But shoulder-to-shoulder feedlot conditions and the fact that grain is an unnatural diet for cattle—it makes them sick—require constant doses of antibiotics. And the desire for quick profits calls for the use of growth hormones.**

Alternative beef is increasingly available. Here's what the labels mean.

### ■ Free-range

Not regulated, but generally means that the animal was not confined to a feedlot. Doesn't preclude hormones or antibiotics.

### ■ Grass-fed

The animal's main diet was grass, not grain. Grass-fed beef is leaner than grain-fed; it has less saturated fat and more omega-3 fatty acids. The grass-fed claim on a label is not independently verified, however, and producers may "finish" the cattle on grain (usually without the hormone and drug additives).

### ■ Natural

Officially—that is, according to the USDA—all raw beef is natural because it's minimally processed and contains no artificial ingredients or preservatives. In practice, though, most producers of all-natural beef avoid hormones, antibiotics, and animal by-products; some finish the animals on grain (without additives) in a feedlot.

### ■ Organic

Federally regulated since 2002. Indicates that the animals were raised without antibiotics or growth hormones, had access to a pasture, and were fed organically produced, plant-based feed (could be grain or grass). Vaccines are allowed.

### Sources for alternative beef

[www.colemannatural.com](http://www.colemannatural.com)  
[www.eatwild.com](http://www.eatwild.com)  
[www.meyerbeef.com](http://www.meyerbeef.com)  
[www.nimanranch.com](http://www.nimanranch.com)  
[www.oregoncountrybeef.com](http://www.oregoncountrybeef.com)  
—SARA SCHNEIDER



Rick Jarrett and a few  
of his neighbors near  
Big Timber, Montana,  
hope to represent  
the future of ranching  
in the West





danger, degrades the habitat for wildlife, and endangers native grasses."

Still, the rising price of land makes it more attractive for ranchers to cash out. "The way things are going," King says, looking Jarrett straight in the eye, "I'm having a hard time believing ranching will continue to be a mainstay in our county."

**T**he next morning, the Jarrett clan heads over to the Terland Ranch to help Terry Terland with branding—still the only foolproof way of determining cattle ownership.

In this close-knit community, where neighbors help each other, branding is a seasonal chore that's an excuse for a party.

Parents lean on the top rail of the corral and gossip and laugh as boys and girls in cowboy hats, boots, and chaps try to rope the hind hooves of skittering calves. By the time the dust has settled, everybody's hungry.

Down by the creek, in the shade of old cottonwoods, Terland's sister, Sheryl Richert, has platters of baked beans, biscuits, and beef kabobs stacked on the fold-down tailgate of her chuckwagon. Among the families digging in are a couple of out-of-state visitors. Ten Sweet Grass County ranches have started Montana Bunkhouses Working Ranch Vacations. "It's not a dude ranch," explains Karen Searle as she serves up blueberry cobbler. "It's for families that want to experience firsthand what life on a ranch is really like. Even a few days give people a genuine appreciation of the value of the small Western rancher," she says.

Later, Jarrett sips a cup of camp coffee down by the stream. "The truth is, the economics of ranching up here really don't work anymore. Most of us are too ornery to admit it and too stubborn to quit, so we have to find ways to pull together to survive."

As he watches the older kids showing the younger ones how to skip stones, his voice softens. "We have to make it work. We're not just businesses, and for most of us, selling isn't an option. We don't look at the land as something we inherited from our fathers. It's like a trust—we're really borrowing it from our children."

**INFO:** Montana Bunkhouses Working Ranch Vacations ([www.montanaworkingranches.com](http://www.montanaworkingranches.com), 406/932-6719, or 406/222-6101)



Clockwise from top left: A pepper steak from our kitchen; Karen Searle on the range; a bowl of our hearty chili; and the young hands digging into beef kabobs from Sheryl Richert's chuckwagon.







FOOD STYLING: MERLEE BORDIN (2); PROP STYLING: SARA SLAVIN (2)

## Bring out the beef

A bowl of authentic beef chili or a full-flavored steak on the table is the best argument for ensuring the supply of good beef. Here's one of each, from our test kitchen. —S.S.

### Multicolored-Pepper Steaks with Balsamic Onions

**PREP AND COOK TIME:** About 45 minutes

**MAKES:** 4 servings

**NOTES:** To crack the peppercorns, whirl briefly in a spice or coffee grinder or crush with the flat side of a large knife or the flat bottom of a heavy glass.

- 2 tablespoons butter
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 sweet onions (1½ lb. total), such as Walla Walla, Vidalia, or Maui, peeled and sliced lengthwise
- About ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon sugar
- 2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
- 1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves
- 4 boned tender beef steaks (each 1 to 1½ in. thick and 9 to 12 oz.), such as top loin (New York strip) or rib eye
- ¼ cup fresh-cracked multicolored peppercorns (see notes)

1. Melt 1½ tablespoons butter with 1½ tablespoons olive oil in a 12-inch frying pan over medium heat. Add onions and stir in ½ teaspoon salt. Cover and cook, stirring occasionally, until onions are limp, about 8 minutes. Uncover and sprinkle with sugar. Increase heat to medium-high and stir often until onions begin to brown, 5 to 7 minutes. Add balsamic vinegar and 1½ teaspoons thyme leaves; stir often until liquid has evaporated, 1 to 2 minutes longer.

2. Rinse steaks and pat dry. Sprinkle both sides lightly with salt, then coat with pepper. Melt remaining ½ tablespoon butter with ½ tablespoon olive oil in a 12-inch oven-proof frying pan over medium-high heat (divide among two pans if there's not enough room for steaks in one). Add steaks and cook until well browned on the bottom, 4 to 5 minutes. Turn steaks over and cook until beginning to brown on the other side, about 2 minutes. Transfer pan to a 375° oven and bake until medium-rare (still pink in the center; cut to test), 7 to 8 minutes, or until as done as you like (steaks will continue cooking for a few minutes after you take them out of the oven).

3. Transfer steaks to warm plates. Spoon onions over the top and sprinkle with remaining 1½ teaspoons thyme leaves.

**Per serving:** 813 cal., 65% (531 cal.) from fat; 52 g protein; 59 g fat (23 g sat.); 19 g carbo (4.2 g fiber); 503 mg sodium; 186 mg chol.

### Ranch Chili

**PREP AND COOK TIME:** About 3¼ hours

**MAKES:** 6 servings

**NOTES:** Top chili with chopped onions and cilantro; serve with avocado, crumbled cheese, sour cream, and warm flour tortillas.

- About 2 cans (14½ oz. each) fat-skimmed low-sodium beef broth
- 6 to 8 dried New Mexico chiles (about 5 in. long, 1½ to 2 oz. total)
- 12 ounces bacon, chopped
- 4 pounds boned beef chuck
- Salt
- 2 onions (8 oz. each), chopped
- ¼ cup minced garlic
- 1½ teaspoons ground cumin
- 1½ teaspoons dried oregano
- 2 cups (16 oz.) dark beer
- 4 fresh poblano chiles (10 oz.)

1. Pour 1 can broth into a glass measure; heat in a microwave until simmering. Stem and seed dried chiles; rinse, cut into chunks, and put in a blender. Pour hot broth over chiles and let stand 10 minutes. Holding lid down with a towel, whirl until smooth.

2. Meanwhile, in a 6-quart heavy pan over medium-high heat, stir bacon often until browned, about 10 minutes. With a slotted spoon, transfer to paper towels. Discard all but 2 tablespoons fat from pan.

3. Rinse beef and pat dry; cut into 1½-inch chunks, trimming off any large lumps of fat. Sprinkle beef lightly with salt. Working in batches, add beef in a single layer to pan and turn pieces as needed to brown all over, 5 to 6 minutes per batch. Transfer beef to a bowl. Add onion, garlic, cumin, and oregano to pan; stir often until onion is limp and beginning to brown, 5 to 6 minutes.

4. Return beef and bacon to pan. Add chile purée, beer, and remaining can broth; bring to a boil, scraping up browned bits. Cover, reduce heat, and simmer, stirring occasionally, for 1 hour. Uncover and simmer, stirring occasionally, until beef is very tender when pierced and sauce is thickened, 1 to 1½ hours longer; if sauce gets too thick before beef is done, add more broth as needed.

5. While beef cooks, in a roasting pan, broil poblano chiles 4 inches from heat, turning once, until charred all over, 11 to 13 minutes total. When cool enough to handle, peel, stem, seed, and coarsely chop. Stir into chili about 30 minutes before it's done.

**Per serving:** 672 cal., 47% (315 cal.) from fat; 68 g protein; 35 g fat (12 g sat.); 19 g carbo (3.7 g fiber); 777 mg sodium; 213 mg chol. ●