

EXILE'S CARNITAS

Recipe by Nicolás Medina Mora

Serves 20

For the pork:

8 pound pork shoulder, de-boned
2 pounds pork belly
1 cinnamon stick
1 piece star anise
1 tablespoon ground cumin
2 tablespoons mustard seeds
2 cups lard
1 white onion, coarsely chopped in rough 1/2-inch pieces
10 garlic cloves
1 bottle of Mexican coke (or any cola made with real sugar)
2 sprigs dried epazote leaves (or a big pinch, if they're crumbled)
2 dried bay leaves
2 tablespoons dried Mexican oregano
1 orange

For the smoky red salsa:

5 dried guajillo chiles
5 dried chipotle chiles
5 medium, ripe tomatoes
1/2 white onion, peeled
10 garlic cloves
2 tablespoons apple cider vinegar

For the tart green salsa:

8 tomatillos
4 fresh serrano peppers
4 jalapeño peppers
1/2 white onion, peeled
6 garlic cloves
4 limes
1/4 bunch cilantro, coarsely chopped (leaves and stems)
2 tablespoons apple cider vinegar
1 ripe avocado

For the spicy pickled onion:

1 red onion
2 habanero chiles
2 cups apple cider vinegar OR distilled white vinegar
1 teaspoon dried Mexican oregano
kosher salt

For the beans:

1 pound dry pinto beans
3 cups chicken stock
1 white onion, divided
2 dried bay leaves
1 tablespoon lard
1 pound raw chorizo sausage
5 tomatoes
6 garlic cloves
4 jalapeños
1 red onion

For the rice:

2 cups uncooked white rice
12 fresh poblano chiles
1/2 white onion, peeled and cut in large chunks
4 garlic cloves, peeled
4 cups chicken stock
1 tablespoon lard
1 bay leaf
1 sprig dried epazote leaf

For the garnishes:

1/2 pound of chicharron (that's fried pork skin, gringo)
1 white onion
2 ripe avocados
5-6 limes
3 pounds small corn tortillas

Special equipment:

1 very large (at least 3 gallon) stock pot or Dutch oven, for the pork
2 medium (at least 4 quart) sauce pots or Dutch ovens, for the rice and beans
blender

PREPARATION:**At least 12 hours before you start cooking:**

Soak the your beans: Put 1 pound of pinto beans in a large bowl or Tupperware container, and cover them with water by at least 2 inches. Let them sit out at room temperature to soak overnight, 12-24 hours.

For the pork:

Before you start cooking, you need to cut your meat. Start by cutting the pork shoulder into rough 2-inch cubes. The size doesn't matter so much, as long as all the pieces are pretty consistent. Leave all the fat on. Yes, all of it. Cut the pork belly into cubes the same size, but keep the cubed pork shoulder separate from the cubed pork belly.

Heat a large (at least 3 gallon) stock pot or Dutch oven over medium heat, then add the ground cumin, mustard seeds, star anise, and cinnamon stick. The moment the cumin becomes fragrant, add the lard. Two cups may seem like a lot, but push your lard tolerance as far as it will go.

When the lard is completely melted and quite hot, add the chopped white onion. Fry the onion in the lard until it becomes soft and translucent, but not brown, about 3 minutes.

Add the cubed pork shoulder all at once, and season generously with about a tablespoon of salt and some freshly ground pepper. No need to work in batches or be elegant about it. Cook, stirring occasionally, until all the cubes of pork are coated with lard and starting to cook, about 5 minutes.

Add the pork belly and whole garlic cloves, then stir everything together. Slowly add the bottle of Mexican coke, then add just enough water to cover everything. Add epazote leaves, bay leaves, and dried oregano. Give the whole thing a good stir.

Chop the orange into thick slices and place the slices on top of the meat. Cover the pot and bring the braise to a boil over high heat. As soon as the liquid starts to boil, reduce the heat to a low simmer and half-cover the oven.

Cook the braise for two hours, stirring it maybe once just to make sure nothing is sticking to the bottom. The less you touch the braise, the better. After 2 hours, remove and throw away the orange slices, otherwise they'll make everything bitter.

Remove the lid and continue to simmer the braise, uncovered and over low heat, for as long as it takes for the broth to evaporate almost completely, the meat to become impossibly tender and the pork belly to become a glorious pig goo, about 6-8 hours more. There will still be some liquid in the pot, but it will be mostly fat. Which is delicious.

In the meantime, start drinking and make the salsas, toppings, and side dishes (below).

When you are ready to serve, use a slotted spoon or strainer to take your carnitas out of the pot while draining some of the excess fat. Fish out the leaves and the whole spices and throw them away.

Preheat your broiler to high, and line a large, rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper or foil.

Use a pair of tongs to toss and shred your pork, until you have little pieces of meat — carnitas. What did you think that meant, gringo?

Take about half of the carnitas, spread them over a baking sheet, and broil them until they get crispy — 8 to 10 minutes.

For the smoky red salsa:

Preheat your oven to 500°F.

Cut the top off the dried chiles, cut them in half lengthwise, and use a knife or your finger to scrape out the seeds. Throw the seeds away.

In a cast iron skillet without any oil or lard, toast the dried chiles until they are lightly blackened on all sides, about 3 minutes.

Fill a small sauce pot about 2/3 of the way with water, and bring the water to a simmer.

When the water is simmering, turn off the heat and submerge the blackened chiles in the water. Let the chiles sit for 15 minutes, until they're soft and mostly rehydrated. Drain and discard all but half a cup of the water.

While chiles are soaking, place tomatoes, white onion, and garlic cloves in the cast iron skillet. Roast in the hot oven until the vegetables start to blacken, 15-20 minutes. Be careful not to burn the garlic.

While they are still hot, transfer the tomatoes, onion, and garlic to a blender. Add the chiles and about 2 tablespoons of the chile soaking liquid, then add the apple cider vinegar. Season with a teaspoon of salt and some freshly ground pepper.

Blend until there are no large chunks, adding a little bit more of the chile soaking liquid if the mixture is too thick. Pour the finished salsa into a bowl or Tupperware container, and refrigerate until you're ready to serve.

For the tart green salsa:

Take the husks off the tomatillos and cut the stems from the serrano chiles and the jalapeños.

Fill a medium (at least 3 quart) sauce pot about 2/3 of the way with water, and bring to a boil. When the water is boiling, add the serrano chiles, jalapeños, tomatillos, white onion, and garlic. Reduce to a simmer and cook until the tomatillos and the chiles turn a bright green and start to soften, 10-15 minutes,

With a slotted spoon, take the veggies out of the water and place them in a blender.

Cut the limes in half and squeeze the juice out of them, directly into the blender.

Add apple cider vinegar and chopped cilantro, then season with a teaspoon of salt.

Blend until everything is evenly combined and the salsa has no large chunks. Taste for salt, and add more if you need to.

Pour the salsa into a bowl or Tupperware container. Peel the avocado and cut it into rough 1/4-inch cubes, then mix the cubes into the salsa. Refrigerate until you're ready to serve.

For the spicy pickled onion:

Chop the onion into rough 1/4-inch pieces. Cut the stems off of the habaneros, then finely mince the flesh, leaving the seeds in.

Transfer the mixture to a bowl or plastic container, and cover with distilled white vinegar or apple cider vinegar. Add dried oregano and a pinch of salt, then stir together just to combine.

Leave the mixture out at room temperature for at least an hour before serving, so that the onions pickle slightly.

For the beans:

Drain the beans from the water in which they soaked overnight, and put the beans in a medium (at least 4 quart) pot or Dutch oven.

Add bay leaves and half the white onion (peeled but not chopped) cover and bring to a boil. Add chicken stock and 3 cups cold water. Reduce to a simmer and cook with the lid ajar for as long as it takes for the beans to become tender, about 2 hours.

Meanwhile, remove the chorizo from the sausage casings and crumble it into bite-sized pieces. Chop the remaining half of the white onion, tomatoes, and jalapeños, into rough, 1/4-inch cubes. Mince the garlic cloves.

Heat lard in a large skillet over medium-high heat, then add the chorizo and fry until it's almost cooked through and starting to brown, about 2 minutes. Add the chopped onion, and fry until it starts to get translucent and soft, about 3 minutes. Add the chopped tomato, jalapeño and garlic, stir everything together, and reduce the heat to medium low. Cook until the tomatoes are broken down and the onions are very soft, about 30 minutes. (This is called a sofrito, gringo).

When the beans are nearly done, taste for salt and add more if needed. Remove the onion half and the bay leaves, then turn the heat up to high just to boil away the excess liquid, no more than 3 minutes.

When you are ready to serve, heat the sofrito until it starts to sputter, then pour it over the beans. Give it a good mix, then serve.

For the green rice:

In a large bowl or container, cover the rice with cold water by at least 2 inches. Soak the rice for at least 20 minutes, then drain it into a strainer or colander and rinse until the water runs clear. Shake the rice in the colander to get rid of excess water.

Meanwhile, heat a large skillet over high heat, then add the poblano chiles. Let them sit in the skillet until the underside has started to blacken, about 3 minutes. You should hear popping noises. Turn the chiles and repeat until they are blackened on all sides, about 12 minutes total. Place the hot, blackened chiles in a ziplock bag, seal the bag and let them "sweat" for about 15 minutes, until they are deflated and cool enough to handle.

When the chiles are cool, slice off the stem and about half an inch from the top of each chile, then throw away the tops. Slice the chiles lengthwise so that they lay flat on a cutting board, then scrape out the seeds. Try to peel off as much of the gooey skin as you can. It's no big deal if you can't get all the skin off.

Put the chiles in a blender along with the white onion, garlic, chicken stock, and a teaspoon of kosher salt. Blend until the mixture is a thin liquid with no large chunks. This is the cooking liquid for your rice. Set the liquid aside while you fry your rice.

Heat lard in a medium (at least 4 quart) pot or Dutch oven, over medium heat. Dump in the rice and toast it, stirring constantly so that it doesn't burn. You want it to become the color of hay, like the hair of gringos from the Midwest.

Once the rice is golden, add the blended liquid. Stir, add bay leaves and epazote leaves. Cover and cook over high heat until the mixture boils. Reduce the heat to medium low and cook, still covered, for 20 minutes.

After 20 minutes, turn off the heat and let the rice steam for 15 more minutes. Do not take the cover off. If you like a slightly crispy crust at the bottom (which I do), leave the pot on the burner, even if it's off. If you don't, move it off the stove and let it cool.

To serve, fish out the epazote and the bay leaf, then fluff the rice with a fork or spoon.

For the garnishes:

To heat your tortillas: Heat a large griddle or a couple of large skillet over high heat. Add a single layer of tortillas and cook until the tortillas are starting to blister on the underside, 1-2 minutes. Flip the tortillas and repeat on the other side. When the tortillas are heated, transfer them to a large basket or bowl lined with a towel or cloth napkin, to keep them warm. Repeat until all the tortillas are warmed.

To prepare the chicharron dust: Put the chicharron in a large ziplock bag and roll over the bag with a bottle or rolling pin until the chicharron are crushed to a coarse dust. You will dust your carnitas with this glorious star powder. It has all the healing properties of unicorn horn.

Coarsely chop the rest of the cilantro, leaves, and stems, and place in a bowl for people to sprinkle upon their tacos.

Slice the avocado in impossibly thin slices.

Cut the limes into quarters.

Coarsely chop the white onion into rough 1/4-inch pieces.

To serve:

Serve carnitas with warm tortillas and all the garnishes. Rice and beans go on the side. DO NOT ADD CHEESE, SOUR CREAM, CHOPPED TOMATO, OR, GOD FORBID, LETTUCE. Why? Because if you were foolish enough to eat lettuce at el Guero's, you'd be setting yourself up for a weekend in the toilet. And we're going for the real thing here, right? Health concerns affect a cuisine, bro.

A note on building tacos:

Proper tortillas have two sides to them — one that is more resilient, and one that will peel away easily if you rub the tips of your fingers against it. The latter is the inside of the tortilla — it will absorb the pork juices much better, granting your taco more structural integrity. Lastly, you don't want to overstuff your taco. It's a recipe for disaster.