

A DATE IN RIO: Bold Brazilian Dinners for Two

Cuisine[®]

at home

Issue No.67 February 2008

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SUPER recipes
mini steak sandwiches
italian chili, thai skewers
& open-faced po' boy

Do-Ahead Calzones

dough tonight—
pizza tomorrow

**Slim
& trim**
meatloaf
dinner



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MEXICAN FIESTA pork



Rugged and rustic, this braised Mexican fiesta is just begging to be shared with family, friends, or both—there's enough for everyone!

This is the time of year when a beach in Mexico really sounds appealing. But this meal, loosely based on carnitas, where pork is braised, shredded, then fried, is *almost* as good as having a reservation at an island resort.

Braising is a moist-heat cooking method that requires long simmering over low heat in a small amount of liquid. As the liquid is heated, it creates steam which condenses on the lid of the pot, then drips back into the pan. The moist steam, coupled

with the lengthy braising time, melts fat and breaks down tough fibers and connective tissues in the meat. It's just what a tough cut like pork shoulder needs to turn juicy and fork-tender.

Another neat thing about this meal is that the braised vegetables create the base for the Salsa Verde on Page 19—a two-for-one deal. Easy! And while the pork simmers away, you'll have loads of time to get the bean and sweet potato side dishes made. Don't skip them. They're *muy bueno*.

Slow and steady

Pork shoulder (also called Boston butt) is a big cut. It ranges from 6 to 10 pounds (including a bone), but once cooked, you'll end up with 3 to 4 pounds of meat. Don't need that much? It's sometimes split in half and sold as a "shoulder roast" or "boneless pork shoulder." If you use a smaller cut, follow the recipe exactly as written (including the Salsa Verde), but make just half the amount of rub.

Spice rubs are everywhere you look anymore, but I like to make my own so it's as fresh as it can be. Before applying it to the pork, blot the meat dry with paper towels so it sticks.

A critical step in braising is using the right pot. You need something with ample room for searing the roast, plus enough space for steam to circulate. A Dutch oven (see Page 27) or large pot is the way to go.

As you sear the rubbed pork, resist the urge to peek at it or move it around much. Constant contact with the pan's surface ensures a good crust on the meat. Because of that, though, some rub may burn in the pan during searing. If that does happen, just wipe it out before continuing. Charred spices will overpower the flavor of everything else cooked in the pot.

Mexican Braised Pork Shoulder

Makes 8 servings; Total time: about 4½ hours

COMBINE AND RUB OVER; SEAR IN

2 T. OLIVE OIL:

- 2 T. ground cumin
- 2 t. ground coriander
- 2 t. table salt
- 1 t. ground cinnamon
- 1 t. black pepper
- 1 t. cayenne
- 1 pork shoulder, trimmed and patted dry (6–8 lb.)

LINE AND BRAISE; BROIL:

- 1 pkg. frozen banana leaves, thawed (1 lb.)
- 1 lb. tomatillos, husks removed, halved
- 1 cup onion, chopped
- 2 poblanos, chopped
- 3 garlic cloves, smashed
- 1 jalapeño, halved, seeded
- ½ cup chicken broth

Preheat oven to 325°.

Combine seasonings in a small bowl; rub on all sides of pork. Sear pork in oil in a Dutch oven or large pot over high heat until browned on all sides. Remove pork, pour off oil, and wipe out the pot.

Line pot with a banana leaf, the ends hanging over the sides, then place a second leaf crosswise on top of it. Add tomatillos, onion, poblanos, garlic, and jalapeño, then place seared pork on top. Pour broth over pork, fold leaves over the meat, and cover pan with a tight-fitting lid. Braise in the oven until tender, about 3½ hours.

Remove roast from oven and preheat broiler to high with rack 8" from the element. Transfer pork to a baking sheet and broil until surface is crisp, 10 minutes. Let roast stand while you prepare salsa as on Page 19. To serve, pull pork from the bone in large chunks. Serve with Salsa Verde, beans, sweet potatoes, and flour tortillas on the side.

Per ½ recipe: 518 calories; 43% calories from fat; 25g total fat; 1g carb.; 864mg sodium; 1g fiber; 68g protein

Banana leaves

Native to Mexico, these pliable leaves of the banana plant aren't eaten, but are commonly used to wrap foods for steaming or baking, which gives them an earthy flavor. Since the leaves are rarely found fresh in the U.S., look for frozen 1-lb. packages in Latin or Asian markets. To avoid breaking the leaves, completely defrost before unwrapping, then wipe with a damp cloth. Store the leaves in the fridge, well sealed, for up to a month or freeze for up to a year. If you can't find banana leaves, parchment cut to fit the pan works too.



▲ Sear the meat on all sides until brown. For the best color, try not to move the roast around too much.



▲ Wipe out scorched spices in the pot, then line it with 2 banana leaves layered crosswise over each other.

Seal the deal

Since braising is a moist-heat cooking method, liquid is, obviously, a must, but you don't need much. A 1/2 cup of broth may seem skimpy, but the meat and vegetables will release juices, too, providing more moisture. The key, actually, is to keep the steam from those simmering liquids *inside the pan*.

A properly fitting lid for the pot is critical to the braising process. But I also enclose the meat and vegetables in banana leaves to trap even more steam (they also add a slightly herbal flavor). If you can't find the leaves, cut a circle of parchment paper to fit the pan and place it over the pork before putting the lid on.

Because the pork cooks for more than three hours, oven braising (rather than on the stovetop) is the way to go. It ensures a constant temperature for gentle, even cooking.



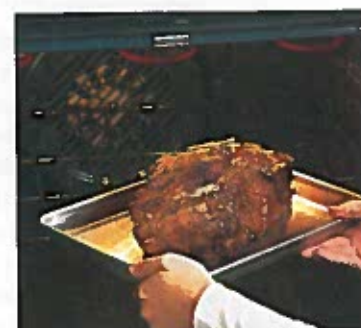
▲ Once the banana leaves are positioned in the pan, add the vegetables, then top with the seared pork.



▲ Only a small amount of broth is needed since the meat and vegetables release juices in cooking.



▲ To prevent steam from escaping, form a seal with the banana leaves by folding the leaves on top of each other.



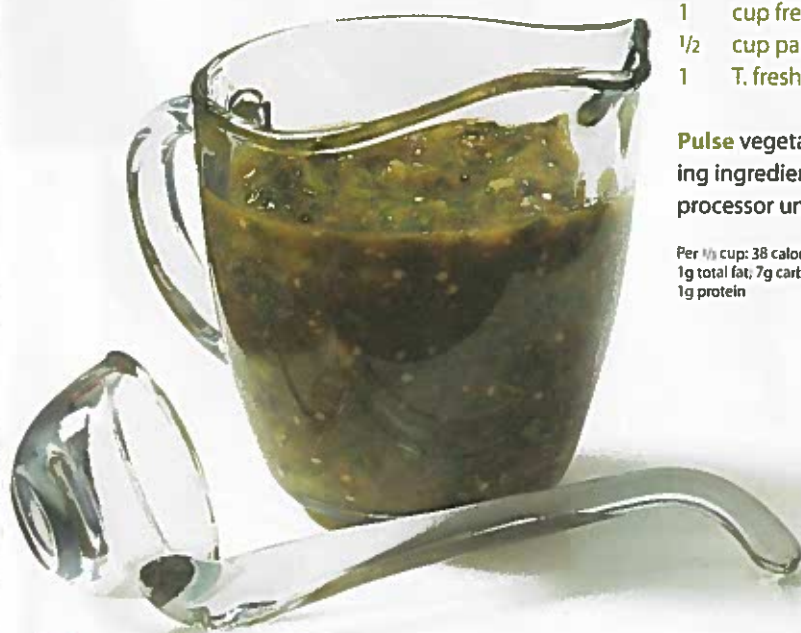
▲ After braising, carefully transfer the roast to a baking sheet and broil until the surface of the meat is crisp.

Easy being green

The cool thing about this salsa verde is that most of the work was done once you put the roast in the oven. All that's left to do now is buzz those vegetables in a food processor.

Green vegetables lose their vibrant color when cooked for long periods of time. So to give the salsa more green color and fresh flavor, toss in a few more raw tomatillos. They look like green tomatoes with a papery husk and a lightly tart taste. When buying, choose firm fruit with tight-fitting husks.

Even though the pork was trimmed before braising, it's likely the pan juices will be quite fatty. Degrease them before adding to the salsa or the salsa will turn thick and oily as it cools.



▲ Poblanos, tomatillos, and jalapeños are key ingredients in salsa verde, a fairly mild, tangy salsa commonly served with pork dishes in Mexico.

Salsa Verde

Makes about 3 cups

Total time: 10 minutes

PULSE:

- Braised vegetables
- 3 tomatillos, husks removed, halved
- 1 cup fresh spinach
- 1 cup fresh cilantro leaves
- 1/2 cup pan juices, degreased
- 1 T. fresh lime juice

Pulse vegetables with remaining ingredients in a food processor until chunky.

Per 1/3 cup: 38 calories; 20% calories from fat; 1g total fat; 7g carb.; 13mg sodium; 2g fiber; 1g protein



▲ Scoop braised vegetables from the pan with a slotted spoon, leaving behind as much liquid as possible.



▲ The pork releases a lot of fat while braising so be sure to degrease the pan juices before adding to the vegetables.

On the side

In Mexico it's not unusual to roast sweet potatoes and serve them with honey and butter—a good idea but a little rich with the pork. So instead, I roast the potatoes until tender, then douse them with a mixture of honey and lime juice.

Another workhorse of Mexican cooking is black beans like the recipe on Page 21. Yes, you *can* make beans from scratch! There's plenty of time while the roast braises. Depending on how old the beans are, cooking time may vary, so to test, eat some periodically as they simmer—the beans are done when they're tender but not chalky.

Roasted Sweet Potatoes with honey-lime glaze

Makes 8 cups; Total time: 45 minutes

TOSS WITH 1/3 CUP OLIVE OIL;

ROAST:

3 1/2 lb. sweet potatoes, peeled,
cut into 1" chunks

1/2 t. cayenne
Salt to taste

WHISK TOGETHER:

1/2 cup honey
1/4 cup fresh lime juice
1/4 t. ground cinnamon

GARNISH WITH:

Chopped fresh cilantro

Preheat oven to 425°.

Toss sweet potatoes with oil, cayenne, and salt in a large bowl until coated. Transfer to a baking sheet and roast until fork tender, 25 minutes.

Whisk honey, lime juice, and cinnamon together in a small bowl while potatoes roast. Once potatoes are tender, coat with glaze and roast 5 minutes more.

Garnish with cilantro.

Per cup: 317 calories; 26% calories from fat; 9g total fat; 58g carb.; 110mg sodium; 6g fiber; 3g protein



▲ Be sure the cayenne is evenly distributed among the sweet potatoes so no one bite is too spicy.



▲ Once the potatoes are tender, pour the honey-lime juice mixture over them, stir to coat, and roast again.

Ultimate Black Beans

Makes 6 cups; Total time: about 3 hours

COMBINE AND SIMMER:

- 1 lb. black beans, rinsed
- 1 cup onion, diced
- 2 T. garlic, chopped
- 1 t. dried thyme leaves
- 1 t. dried oregano leaves
- 1 bay leaf
- 6 cups water

FINISH WITH; GARNISH WITH:

Tabasco and salt to taste
Crumbled queso fresco
Sliced jalapeños

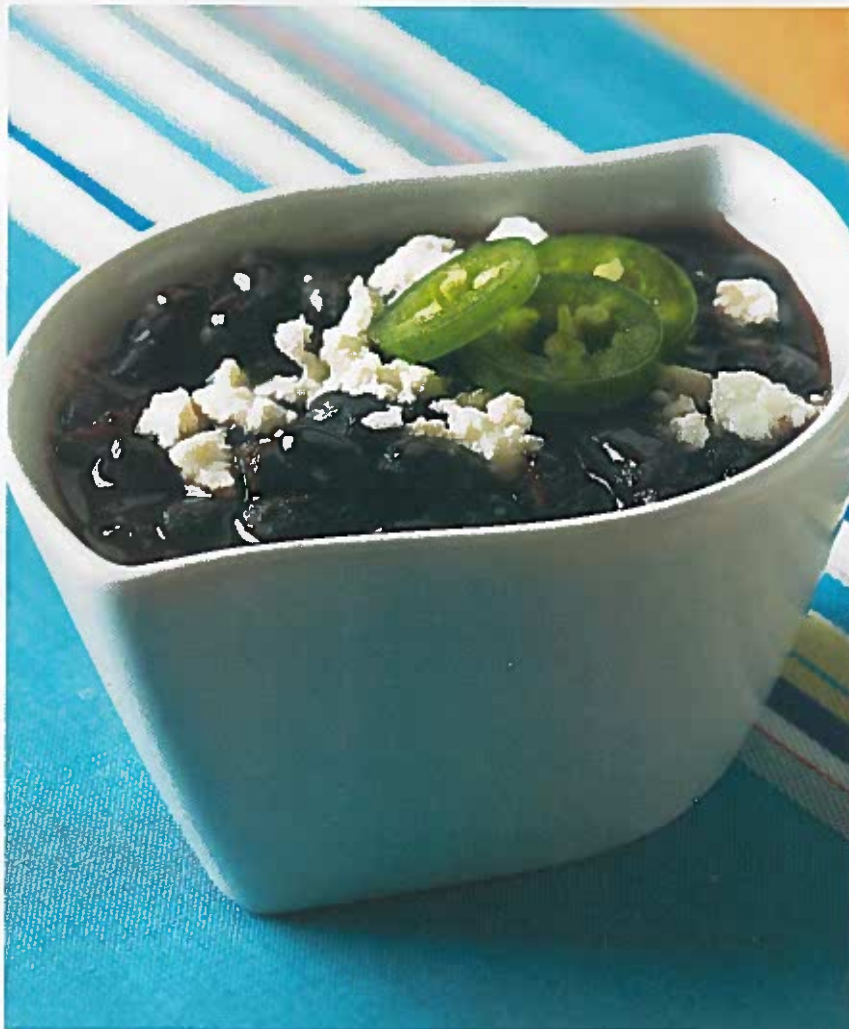
Combine beans, onion, garlic, thyme, oregano, and bay leaf in a pot. Cover with water and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to low and simmer, partially covered, until beans are tender and no longer chalky inside, 2–2½ hours.

Finish with Tabasco and salt. Garnish each serving with queso fresco and jalapeños.

Per ¾ cup: 225 calories; 5% calories from fat; 1g total fat; 39g carb.; 25mg sodium; 5g fiber; 13g protein



▲ Queso fresco, a fresh, mild Mexican cheese available in most supermarkets, is firm enough to slice or crumble.



▲ As the beans cook, be sure they're submerged in water. If needed, add up to 1 cup more during cooking.



▲ Finish beans with a touch of Tabasco and keep warm until ready to serve. (May be made up to 2 days ahead.)