

Real Carne Adovada

Restraint is the key to the purest, most robust chile flavor in this classic New Mexican pork braise. It's also what makes it dead simple to prepare.

BY ANNIE PETITO

Before I take you on a deep dive into *carne adovada*, one of New Mexico's most celebrated dishes and quite possibly the easiest braise you will ever make, I need to back up and explain how hugely significant chiles are in New Mexican cuisine.

For one thing, the state claims its own unique chile cultivars. The relatively mild peppers, which are sold both fresh—either unripe and green or ripe and red—and dried were first released by New Mexico State University in 1913 and have since become one of the defining ingredients in the local cuisine—not to mention the state's most lucrative cash crop. New Mexico even passed a law declaring that only chiles grown in the state may be labeled as such. Dishes that feature the peppers typically contain few other seasonings so that the chile flavor can shine.

Carne adovada is a perfect example. To make it, cooks simmer chunks of pork in a thick sauce made from dried red New Mexican chiles; garlic; dried oregano; spices such as cumin, coriander, or cloves; vinegar; and a touch of sugar or honey. (*Adobada*, the Mexican preparation on which the dish is based, refers to meat cooked in an adobo sauce of chiles, aromatics, and vinegar.) When the meat is fall-apart tender, the rich, robust, brick-red braise is served with tortillas or rice and beans.

That's the purist's version, anyway. But there are also plenty of recipes for *carne adovada* that complicate the flavors by adding superfluous ingredients such as raisins, coffee, and/or a mix of other kinds of chiles so that the final result is reminiscent of a mole sauce. Many of these recipes, I found, are also plagued by typical braise problems, such as dry meat and over- or underseasoned sauce that is either too scant or too soupy.

I got to work on a minimalist braise—one that would feature moist, tender pork in a simple, potent sauce that tasted first and foremost of chiles.



What makes our *adovada* so simple? The chiles aren't toasted, the pork isn't seared, and the braising happens in the oven.

Seeing Red

Most of the recipes I found called for boneless butt roast, which is affordable, streaked with flavorful fat, and loaded with collagen that breaks down during cooking, rendering the meat tender. I cut the roast into 1½-inch chunks, which would be equally easy to eat wrapped in a tortilla or from a fork, and tossed the pieces with kosher salt so that the meat would be

deeply seasoned. I didn't sear it since the meat above the surface of the liquid would brown in the oven.

Most of the simpler sauce formulas went something like this: Toast whole dried New Mexican chiles—as much as 8 ounces—and then steep them in boiling water until their stems soften, which takes about 30 minutes. Then, puree the chiles with enough water to form a thick paste and season it with garlic, spices, vinegar, and a sweetener.

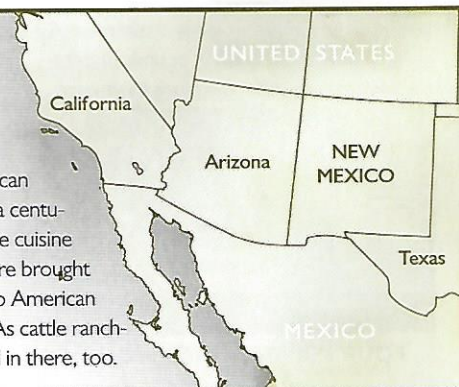
Eight ounces of chiles was a massive pile that I wouldn't be able to toast or puree in a single batch, so I scaled down to a more manageable (but still generous) 4 ounces. After toasting and steeping them, I processed the chiles with 4 cups of the water they had soaked in, plus a couple of garlic cloves, Mexican oregano (less sweet than the Mediterranean kind), cumin, cloves, white vinegar, and sugar until it formed a loose puree. I poured the sauce over the meat in a Dutch oven, brought it to a boil on the stove, covered it, and (as we typically do with a braise) transferred it to the oven, where it would simmer gently and evenly with no stirring.

After about 2 hours of braising, the meat was fork-tender. But the sauce was way off—so loose and thin that it didn't cling to the meat. And despite the load of chiles it contained, the flavor was washed-out.

Reducing the water by half thickened the puree and made its flavor more concentrated, albeit one-dimensional. I'd have to think about tweaking the flavors. The bigger problem was that the chile seeds and skins hadn't broken down completely in

America's Oldest Cuisine

Often confused with Mexican and Tex-Mex cuisine, New Mexican cuisine is an amalgam of many influences that has evolved over hundreds of years and long predates the state's founding in 1912. Its earliest roots date back to Native American tribes (Pueblo, Apache, and Navajo), which settled in the area centuries before the pilgrims arrived at Plymouth Rock in 1620. The cuisine further evolved as new cooking traditions and ingredients were brought by Spanish settlers in the late 16th century, as well as by Anglo American and French newcomers who came to the area in the 1800s. As cattle ranching gained prominence in the 1800s, some cowboy got mixed in there, too.



See: It's All About the Chiles
A step-by-step video is available at CookIllustrated.com/oct18

TECHNIQUE

BLENDING CHILES INTO A SMOOTH PUREE



To ensure that the tough skins on dried New Mexican chiles break down as thoroughly as possible in the blender, start by adding 1 cup of liquid—just enough to create a vortex while leaving enough friction to grind down the solids. Once the chiles are finely ground and the puree is smooth, blend in the remaining liquid.

the blender (New Mexican chile skins are particularly tough), and their texture was more noticeable now that there was less liquid.

Going forward, I made sure to seed the chiles before toasting them. As for the bits of skin, I tried straining them out to make the puree ultrasMOOTH, but it was a fussy step and the sauce suffered. Not only did it lack vibrancy in both color and flavor—chile skins contain high concentrations of flavor and aroma compounds that give them much of their astringent, floral, and fruity notes—but I found that the tiny insoluble particles of pureed skin and pulp were also responsible for making the sauce viscous enough to cling to the meat.

The trick to smoothing out the puree was refining my processing method. Instead of adding all of the water at the start, which left the skins swimming in liquid, I started with just enough liquid to keep the blender running before adding the rest. That way there was more friction to grind the solids.

The Toasting Is Toast

Back to refining the flavor of the sauce. Bumping up the amounts of garlic and vinegar, switching from sugar to the more nuanced sweetness of honey, and introducing a dash of cayenne pepper for subtle heat were all good moves. But the sauce still lacked the fruity brightness I was hoping for.

Toasting chiles is standard practice when you want to deepen their flavor; it can also add hints of char. But if I was after a sweeter, slightly acidic profile—which dried red New Mexican chiles naturally offer—maybe toasting them was the wrong move.

To find out, I held a side-by-side tasting of my adovada made with toasted and untoasted chiles. Sure enough, the untoasted batch boasted rounder flavor that was fruity, a touch sweet, and slightly astringent. Best of all, skipping the toasting step

made the dish even easier to prepare.

The result was bright, rich, just a little spicy, and deeply satisfying—precisely the pure and simple adovada I'd had in mind. It's what I'll be making for dinner when I want a bold, hearty braise. And since those flavors also pair brilliantly with eggs and potatoes, I'll be sure to save the leftovers for breakfast.

BRAISED NEW MEXICO-STYLE PORK IN RED CHILE SAUCE (CARNE ADOVADA)

SERVES 6

Pork butt roast is often labeled Boston butt; to learn how to identify it, see page 28. For tips on trimming it, see page 30. For an accurate measurement of boiling water, bring a full kettle of water to a boil and then measure out the desired amount. If you can't find New Mexican chiles, substitute dried California chiles. Dried chiles should be pliable and smell slightly fruity. Kitchen shears can be used to cut them. If you can't find Mexican oregano, substitute Mediterranean oregano. Letting the stew rest for 10 minutes before serving allows the sauce to thicken and better coat the meat. Serve with rice and beans, crispy potatoes, or flour tortillas with shredded lettuce and chopped tomato, or shred the pork as a filling for tacos and burritos.

- 1 (3½- to 4-pound) boneless pork butt roast, trimmed and cut into 1½-inch pieces
Kosher salt
- 4 ounces dried New Mexican chiles, wiped clean, stemmed, seeded, and torn into 1-inch pieces
- 4 cups boiling water
- 2 tablespoons honey
- 2 tablespoons distilled white vinegar
- 5 garlic cloves, peeled
- 2 teaspoons dried Mexican oregano
- 2 teaspoons ground cumin
- ½ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- ⅛ teaspoon ground cloves
- Lime wedges

1. Toss pork and 1 tablespoon salt together in bowl; refrigerate for 1 hour.

2. Place chiles in medium bowl. Pour boiling water over chiles, making sure they are completely submerged, and let stand until softened, 30 minutes. Adjust oven rack to lower-middle position and heat oven to 325 degrees.

3. Drain chiles and reserve 2 cups soaking liquid (discard remaining liquid). Process chiles, honey, vinegar, garlic, oregano, cumin, cayenne, cloves, and 1 teaspoon salt in blender until chiles are finely ground and thick paste forms, about 30 seconds. With blender running, add 1 cup reserved liquid and process until smooth, 1½ to 2 minutes, adding up to ¼ cup additional reserved liquid to maintain vortex. Add remaining reserved liquid and continue to blend sauce at high speed, 1 minute longer.

4. Combine pork and chile sauce in Dutch oven, stirring to make sure pork is evenly coated. Bring to



Carne adovada for breakfast? You bet. The bright, robust chile sauce goes great with eggs, potatoes, and warmed tortillas.

boil over high heat. Cover pot, transfer to oven, and cook until pork is tender and fork inserted into pork meets little to no resistance, 2 to 2½ hours.

5. Using wooden spoon, scrape any browned bits from sides of pot and stir until pork and sauce are recombined and sauce is smooth and homogeneous. Let stand, uncovered, for 10 minutes. Season with salt to taste. Serve with lime wedges. (Leftover pork can be refrigerated for up to 3 days.)

INGREDIENT SPOTLIGHT New Mexican Chiles

Chiles are as fundamental to New Mexican cuisine as soy is to Japanese cooking or potatoes are to Irish food. In fact, the state breeds and grows its own unique cultivars, which are sold both fresh and dried. Fresh chiles appear in everything from casseroles to burgers to rice; dried chiles appear in sauces for braised meats such as *carne adovada* or for enchiladas. Here's a rundown on the flavor and heat profile of the dried kind and how to substitute for them. (For information on shopping for, cleaning, and storing dried chiles, see page 29.)

Flavor: Fruity, sweet, slightly acidic

Heat: Relatively mild; Scoville rating: 0 to 7,000 (For reference: Bell peppers rate from 0 to 1,000; jalapeños rate from 1,000 to 50,000; and habaneros rate from 100,000 to 500,000.)

Appearance: Wrinkly; dark red; particularly shiny, tough skins

Substitute: Dried California chiles

