

Good Food

Going Mex to the max

by Barbara Ann Rosenberg
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Circle de Mayo dishes (clockwise from top): Chicken achote, guacamole, fish appetizer

I have had an unshakable love affair with Mexico and its tasty food for more years than I care to admit. And there is never a better time to indulge myself in the rich flavors of that country than when Cinco de Mayo rolls around.

The holiday commemorates a May 5, 1862, victory by outnumbered Mexican troops over French troops commanded by a puppet of Napoleon III. Although the French later made their way to Mexico City, Cinco de Mayo honors the bravery of the Mexican soldiers, led by Gen. Ignacio Zaragoza, who

Food in Mexico is not just a hodgepodge of beans and rice, although those are delicious when prepared with care. It is a cuisine of complex flavors, achieved by using herbs and spices that enhance the raw ingredients available in that country.

David Suro, owner of Tequila's, a Center City restaurant that serves a variety of authentic Mexican dishes, is enthusiastic about sharing the foods of his country. He told us that a traditional dish for Cinco de Mayo is chiles in a sauce made with nuts and pomegranate seeds, which has the red, white and green colors of the Mexican flag. However, because of

ingredients, this is a dish best left to the talents of professional chefs or highly experienced native cooks.

An easier recipe shared by Suro and his chef, Carlos Molina, is one for Pork Loin Stuffed with Smoked Chiles and Prunes.

At Zocalo, the Mexican restaurant in West Philadelphia, chefs Lou Sackett and Jackie Pestka are adamant that people not think about Mexican food strictly in terms of meat. With that in mind, they offered the recipe for *Salpicon de Dos Pescados*, an appetizer made with two fish of different flavors and textures.

Michele Leff, a co-owner of

tina stands insisted that no celebration in Mexico is complete without guacamole. She provided her signature version, along with an easy recipe for Chicken Achote, a dish seasoned with achote seeds, which come from the annatto tree.

Last but not least, I am sharing my own recipe for Mamacita Rosenberg's Chicken Soup, a dish with all the magic restorative powers attributed to chicken soup in any country. I invented this one to share with friends who came to visit while I was living in a tiny "casita" in Mexico last winter. Try it and you too can celebrate Cinco de

MEXICO

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Mayo like a Mexican — in grand style.

ZOCALO'S SALPICON DE DOS PESCADOS

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 5 ounces salmon fillet, trimmed and cut in medium dice
- 5 ounces swordfish steak, trimmed and cut in small dice
- 2 teaspoons garlic, minced
- 1/3 cup scallion, chopped
- 3/4 cup tomatoes, peeled, seeded, chopped
- 1 tablespoon nonpareil capers, crushed
- 2 tablespoons pickled jalapeño peppers, chopped, with a small amount of pickling liquid
- Pinch ground allspice
- Kosher salt to taste
- Corn tortillas
- Guacamole

Heat a 12-inch nonstick saute pan until very hot. Add 1 tablespoon of the oil. Add the fish and sear very briefly, stirring lightly. Salmon will break up into shreds, while swordfish will hold their shape.

Add the garlic, half of the scallions, the tomatoes, capers, jalapeños and allspice. Cook over very high heat until tomatoes tighten into a light sauce, about 2 minutes.

Add remaining olive oil and taste for salt. Divide among 4 warmed appetizer plates. Sprinkle with remaining scallions. Serve with warm corn tortillas and guacamole. Serves 4.

12TH STREET CANTINA'S GUACAMOLE

- ripe but firm Haas avocados (see note)
- 1 large ripe tomato, peeled, seeded and chopped
- small onion, finely chopped
- 1/3 cup chopped cilantro
- chopped fresh serrano chile
- Juice of 1 lime
- teaspoon salt

Combine all ingredients and mix until nearly smooth. Serve with fried corn chips as a snack, or as a garnish for other dishes.

Note: Haas avocados are a smallish variety with bumpy, nearly black skin. They have more flavor than the large, shiny green ones.

12TH STREET CANTINA'S CHICKEN ACHIOTE

- 2 pounds whole boneless, skinless chicken breasts

- 1 cup achote paste (see note)
- 1/3 cup vegetable oil, divided use
- 1 teaspoon oregano
- 1 teaspoon chopped cilantro
- 2 cloves chopped garlic
- 1 chopped fresh serrano chile
- 1 red onion
- 2 bell peppers, preferably red and yellow
- 6 or more corn or flour tortillas

Remove 1 tablespoon of the vegetable oil and set aside.

Mix achote paste with the remaining oil, oregano, cilantro, garlic and serrano chile, using the back of a fork to blend. Add chicken and stir to coat. Marinate 1 hour, or cover and refrigerate overnight.

When ready to cook, preheat oven to 325 degrees, then prepare a grill or broiler. Brown chicken on the grill or under the broiler quickly; do not burn. Finish cooking in the preheated oven for 15 minutes.

Meanwhile, slice the red onion and peppers thinly and saute in the reserved tablespoon of vegetable oil. Serve with the chicken, along with flour or corn tortillas. Serves 6.

Note: Achote paste, serrano chiles and other Mexican ingredients may be purchased at 12th Street Cantina stands in the Reading Terminal Market and the Manayunk Farmers Market, or at Latin American groceries.

TEQUILA'S ROAST PORK LOIN WITH CHILES AND PRUNES

- 1 boneless center cut pork loin, about 2 1/4 to 3 pounds
- 6 ounces pitted prunes, halved if large
- 4 pickled chipotle chiles, each cut in 4 pieces (see note)
- 1 clove garlic, crushed
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 2 cups orange juice, preferably fresh-squeezed
- 3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 1 large onion, sliced

With the tip of a small, sharp knife, make regularly spaced slits on top and sides of the pork. Place a piece of prune in one and a chile in the next, continuing until you have used all the prunes and peppers.

Place the pork in a dish and rub with the garlic, salt and pepper. Pour the orange juice over the pork, cover and refrigerate at least 2 hours, but preferably overnight.

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Drain the meat and reserve the marinade. Sprinkle the meat

lightly with flour. Heat the oil in a large skillet until hot. Add the pork and brown lightly on all sides, about 8 minutes.

Arrange a layer of sliced onion on the bottom of a lightly-greased baking dish. Place the pork loin on top. Add the orange juice marinade to the skillet where the pork was browned and scrape the bottom of the pan. Strain the juice over the pork and cover with aluminum foil. Roast 1 hour and serve with pan juice on the side. Serves 6.

Note: Pickled chipotle chiles may be purchased in jars or cans.

MAMACITA ROSENBERG'S CHICKEN SOUP

- 5 pound stewing chicken cut into parts, or 5 pounds wings
- 1 pound cleaned chicken feet (wings may be substituted)
- 4 quarts water
- 1 large onion, peeled and left whole
- 3 large cloves garlic
- 1 carrot, peeled
- 1 tablespoon coarse salt, or to taste
- 3/4 teaspoon ground pepper
- 3 or 4 black peppercorns
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme
- 2 bay leaves
- 2 fresh jalapeño peppers
- 2 chile poquín, or other dried small red chiles
- 1/2 cup small egg pasta
- 1 ripe avocado
- 1 ripe tomato
- 2 limes

Bring water to a boil. Add chicken, chicken feet, onion, garlic and carrot. Bring to a boil again and skim several times. Add salt, pepper, peppercorns, thyme, bay leaves, jalapeño and dried red peppers. Simmer 1 hour, or until chicken is tender.

Remove chicken and vegetables from broth. Cook chicken and remove meat from bones. Discard vegetables, or retain the carrot if you wish to return to the soup later.

Cool chicken broth in refrigerator until fat congeals on top. Remove fat and discard.

When ready to serve, heat broth. Add pasta and cook according to package directions until tender. Add chicken shreds or chunks to the soup and simmer until heated through. If you've saved the carrot, slice it thinly and add to the soup.

When ready to serve, peel and cube the avocado. Peel, seed and cube the tomato. Cut the limes into quarters.

Garnish each serving of soup with 1 avocado chunk and several tomato chunks. Pass the lime quarters at the table. Serves 8 to 10.