

You Give Me Fever: Ode to Chiles

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First printed in the Jackson Free Press Inaugural Food Issue

After traversing the Mississippi Delta on a quest to find the grail of the Hot Tamale world, I worried I'd overextended myself, that so much spice in such a short time may have blown my gustatory circuits. In truth, I came back with a deeper appreciation of barbeque, the blues, and the flavors that inspired the evolution of our state's unique tamales. I decided to follow the dish's fiery chiles back to its origins in Latin America.

Nearly every chili pepper variety in the world—from the innocuous Bell to the incendiary Habanero—once had roots in Central and South America. Food scientists and botanists believe the wellspring of all chile peppers is tucked in a "nuclear area" from South Central Bolivia to the lowlands of Brazil. This means the various species spread from a single origin throughout South America and Mexico, but I prefer to visualize a mushroom cloud of Capsicum tastiness radiating from this unassuming valley to sprawl across the continent. Without migratory birds, indigenous trade and enterprising explorers, the cuisines I love best would be unrecognizable.

I'm very comfortable cooking with chiles in Asian dishes, but all this contemplation of a curry-free world made me want to experiment with chiles with their native flavors and dishes. Authentic Latin American food elevates chili heat to an art form. Using fresh (*fresco*) or dried (*seco*) varieties, ingredients are dressed in dizzying layers of chile complexity: smoky, fruity, meaty and piquant. Roasted Poblano Soup is light, easy and filled with bright flavors and colors; avocado's creaminess mitigates the heat of the roasted and smoked peppers. Molé with Pumpkin Filets is a more labor-intensive dish, suitable for a special occasion. As molés developed around local ingredients, I used Mississippi pecans with dried and fresh chiles in a locally-inspired take on Molé Poblano. Slow caramelization turns pumpkin into a custardy, lit-from-within masterpiece, and they come together on a plate in four-part harmony: creamy, spicy, savory, sweet.

Roasted Poblano Soup with Chicken & Avocado

Servings: 4

2 tablespoons olive oil
1 yellow onion, chopped
2 garlic cloves, minced
1 bay leaf
2 teaspoons cilantro stems, finely chopped
1 large roasted Poblano pepper* finely chopped
1 Chipotle pepper in adobo, whole
6 cups low-sodium chicken or vegetable stock
12 ounces cooked chicken, chopped or shredded
1/2 cup your favorite salsa
2 cups prepared yellow or spanish rice
4 ounces avocado, cubed
lime slices and cilantro leaves, for garnish

Heat oil on medium-high in a large pan, and cook the onions and garlic until soft. Add bay, cilantro stems, and chiles to the pan. Cook for one minute, then add stock, salsa and chicken. Simmer for ten minutes. Fish out the bay leaf and the Chipotle and discard.

Mound 1/2 cup of warm rice in four soup bowls.
Ladle soup into bowls over rice, add avocado.
Serve with lime slices and cilantro.

Roasting Chile Peppers

Please wear gloves when handling chiles. Even multiple hand-washings may not remove capsaicin compounds.

Set oven to broil.

Halve chile peppers and remove seeds and stem.

Oil the cut edge of the pepper, place cut side down on a baking sheet and broil until the skin is blackened and bubbly.

Remove from oven. Transfer to a small bowl, then cover tightly with plastic wrap.

After 15 minutes, steam works its magic, and you can easily peel the charred inedibles from the meat of the pepper.

Pecan Molé

Servings: 8-10

3 dried Guajillo peppers
2 dried Anaheim peppers
1 Chipotle pepper in adobo, chopped finely
3 cups hot water or stock
1 medium onion, chopped finely
2 tablespoons olive oil
4 large cloves garlic
1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon ground nutmeg
1/2 teaspoon dried oregano
1/2 teaspoon ground cumin
1/2 teaspoon ground coriander
1 1/2 cups pecan pieces, lightly toasted
1/2-3/4 tsp hickory salt, to taste
10 ounce can of diced tomatoes and green chiles, with juice
2 roasted red bell peppers* in strips, seeds and stem removed
2 oz bittersweet chocolate, melted

Using kitchen shears, cut the stem end from the dried chiles, and shake out most of the seeds. Cut the pepper bodies into thin rings, and then place in a small bowl.

Add the diced chipotle to the bowl along with water or stock. Let the mixture steep for at least 30 minutes.

Purée the rehydrated pepper mixture, using some of the liquid to help the chiles move more fluidly in the processor. Return the purée to the remaining steeping liquid.

Heat oil in a large saucepan over medium heat. Add onions, and sauté until uniformly golden. Add garlic, pecans and spices to onions, and cook together for one minute, stirring continuously.

The house will fill with a intoxicating aroma: nutty, herbal, earthy and sweet. Restrain yourself from digging in immediately. There's still work to be done.

Add diced tomatoes and chiles, bell peppers and chile purée mixture. Reduce the heat to low, cover the pan and simmer for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Remove from heat. Fold the chocolate into the sauce.

Adjust seasonings.

Use a blender or a food processor to grind the mixture to a thick paste.

Serve over pumpkin fillets.

Carmelized Pumpkin Fillets

Servings: 6-8

2 3-pound pie pumpkins, outsides scrubbed

6 tablespoons canola oil

3 cups sugar

Preheat your oven to 325 degrees.

Cut the top off your pumpkins, and split into quarters or thirds.

Use a large spoon or measuring cup to scrape away pumpkin innards.

Peel the skin off with a vegetable peeler or small knife, and butcher the pieces into index card size fillets.

Coat the pumpkin completely with the oil, and place fillets hollow side up in a deep baking dish or two.

Steady your resolve, and distribute the sugar evenly on top of the fillets.

Cover pans with foil and bake for two hours. Baste the pumpkins with the now-syrupy sugar, and return to the oven for 1-2 hours, basting occasionally until fillets are a deep glossy orange.

You'll find most of the oil and sugar at the bottom of your pans when cooking is complete.

Remove the fillets immediately, or they'll be stuck forever.