

CAPIROTADA AND CINNAMON

One of my favorite desserts, especially during these cold winter nights, is a Mexican bread and apple pudding called *cajirotada*. Unlike ordinary bread pudding, it contains no eggs and no milk. Here's how you make it.

Preheat your oven to 350 degrees. Rub a 13 by 9 inch glass casserole or lasagna pan with some unsalted butter. Take a half a loaf of French bread or baguette, with the crust, and cut it into small cubes, about the size of the first joint of your index finger. Melt 1 stick (that's 8 tablespoons) of unsalted butter in a medium saucepan over low heat and when the butter is melted, add the bread cubes and stir well to coat the bread thoroughly. Spread the cubes onto a baking sheet and bake until the cubes are lightly brown and crisp, about 15 minutes or so. Take the bread out of the oven and set it aside. Turn up the oven to 400 degrees.

Meanwhile, while the bread is baking, peel, core and chop two large Granny Smith apples, into pieces about the same size as the bread cubes. In the same saucepan that you used to melt the butter, put a pound of brown sugar, either light or dark, and 1 ½ cups of cold water. Bring the sugar and water to a boil, remove from the heat, and stir in 1 ½ teaspoons ground cinnamon. Pull out ½ pound of chilled cream cheese from your refrigerator and cut it into cubes the same size as the bread and apples.

In a large mixing bowl, combine 1 cup of chopped walnuts, the chopped apples, the cream cheese pieces, and the toasted bread cubes. Pour the brown sugar syrup over it all and mix well. Transfer the mixture to your buttered casserole dish.

Bake, uncovered, stirring occasionally, for 15 minutes. Then bake for another 5 minutes or so without stirring, until the top is golden brown and crusty. Serve warm. This serves 8 to 10 people. Traditionally, the Mexicans accompany this with *crema*, a thick clotted cream that you can find at our local supermarkets. Or use some heavy cream. I've also served it with vanilla yogurt or with vanilla ice cream.

If you can't find *crema*, you can make your own by whisking together 2 cups of heavy cream with a quarter cup of buttermilk. Cover it, and set it in a warm place, like a gas oven with just the heat from the pilot light, for around 8 hours. Then you have *crema*, which is the same thing that the French call *crème fraiche*. It will keep in the refrigerator for about a week.

Cinnamon is one of the most common spices in Mexican desserts and baking. True cinnamon is native to Sri Lanka, and is quite mild in flavor. It was thought to have medicinal or even aphrodisiac properties, and at one point was worth 15 times its weight in silver. The spice was first brought to the west by Arab traders, who went to great lengths to hide their source of supply.

Most ground cinnamon today is a mixture of true cinnamon and cassia bark, which has a similar taste but is much stronger in flavor. Cinnamon and cassia both come from the bark of a species of laurel tree. The bark is peeled off during the rainy season and left to dry and ferment for 24 hours, after which the outer layer of bark is scraped off, leaving the light-colored inner layer, which curls into quills as it dries.

Cinnamon is helpful in digestive problems, as it has an agent that helps break up intestinal gas. Also, recent studies have shown that it may aid insulin in metabolizing glucose, helping to control blood sugar levels. Not only is cinnamon used in many sweets and desserts, it's also a common ingredient in marinades, dry rubs, dressings, meat, poultry and fish. And try some in your cup of hot chocolate, or even in a cup of coffee. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.