

COCHINITA PIBIL

Achiote paste is a seasoning paste from the Yucatan peninsula in southern Mexico that is an essential part of one of the Yucatan's signature dishes. It's made of ground annatto seeds, (a natural dye), plus garlic, vinegar, spices and salt. You don't need to make it yourself; you can find it at any Mexican grocery store. I've used the El Yucateco brand with great success. This next recipe is for the Yucatan dish of *cochinita pibil*, a slow-cooked roast of pork. I've adapted the recipe from Rick Bayless' new book, *Mexican Everyday*, which should be on your shelf if you like Mexican food.

To make *cochinita pibil*, which, by the way, is NOT hot and spicy, you need to get out your old crock pot slow cooker and buy a 3 pound bone-in pork shoulder roast. The achiote paste comes in little 3.5 packages. Take about half of the contents of a 3.5 ounce package of achiote paste and put it into a bowl. (The remainder will keep for months in a little jar in the refrigerator.) Squeeze the juice from three or four limes to make 1 and ½ cups of fresh lime juice.

Peel and very finely slice a red onion, put it in a bowl and sprinkle it with some salt and ½ cup of the lime juice. Stir to blend and let it sit. Pour the other cup of lime juice into the bowl with your achiote paste, and work it with a fork until the chunk of paste dissolves in the lime juice to make a marinade. Both these steps can be done the night before—just cover the onions and the marinade with some plastic wrap and put them in the refrigerator until morning.

The following morning, line your crock pot with banana leaves—don't laugh, you can get packages of frozen or even fresh banana leaves at the same Mexican grocery where you got the achiote paste. Don't worry if you don't have the banana leaves—this step is optional, but it does seal in the meat for better flavor, I think. Put your 3-pound (more or less) bone-in shoulder pork roast in the crock pot. Cover it with the achiote/lime marinade. Pour in about ½ cup of water around the meat. Peel, trim and slice a large white onion into quarter-inch rounds. Scatter the white onion slices over the meat. Fold the banana leaves over the meat, put the lid on your slow cooker, turn it on low, and go away for 10-12 hours.

When you get back, turn off the crock pot, open the lid, and unfold the banana leaves. Put the roast pork on a platter, (it's so moist and tender that it will come out in pieces), cover it with the cooked onions and pour the juice over the top. If the juice is very thin, you may want to pour some into a small saucepan and boil it down to thicken it to a consistency you prefer.

Serve the *cochinita pibil* with some corn tortillas and the marinated pickled onions as a garnish, and some habanero salsa or bottled habanero hot sauce on the side for those who want their dinner really spicy. I eat it by putting some pork and marinated pickled onions in a corn tortilla, splashing on a little extra sauce and some hot sauce, and munching it down.

If you don't have a crock pot you can cook this dish in a large Dutch oven or covered casserole, assembling it the same way, in a 300 degree oven for 2 ½ to 3 hours. Add a little extra water if the dish gets too dry.

Some Yucatecos like to layer some sliced yellow hot chiles over the meat when they cook it, but that is certainly not required. Sometimes I like to put some chunks of Yukon Gold potatoes or some chunks of peeled sweet potato around the meat to soak up the delicious juices. If you don't want pork, you can use the same amount of chicken thighs instead. Just pull the skin off them before putting them into the crock pot with the onions and achiote/lime marinade.

I served this with a salad made of thin peeled orange slices, a little mild sliced onion, some peeled and sliced jicama, (about the same amount of jicama as orange), and a can of drained whole black olives. I dressed it with a little extra-virgin olive oil and some salt and pepper.

The flatlands have some excellent Mexican groceries—even Mexican supermarkets now. In Lodi, on Cherokee, is the San Miquel market which is a huge modern supermarket with a wonderful butcher counter and produce section, plus a great hot-foods counter that makes some of the best Mexican food I've had in ages.