

[MILK STREET On the Road]

True tacos are defined by **char, chilies and corn**

Story by J.M. HIRSCH



Fresh corn tortillas are delivered by bicycle.

THE CACOPHONY of grinding stone, churning blades and clacking steel conveyor belt is intense, echoing in the mostly windowless concrete room of green walls dusted yellow-white with corn flour. But not nearly so intense as the heat, rolling off Salvador Ledezma's máquina tortilladora in waves so intense my iPhone shuts down.

Waves so intense, bone-in chicken parts, sopped with spice and oil, sizzle directly on the metal hull of the 12-foot-long tortilla maker, no pan needed. The room fills with the aroma of roasting meat mingling with the warm sweetness of fresh corn tortillas rolling off that belt, puffed, tender and barely browned in spots.

It's Tortilleria Nelly, a tiny tortilla shop started almost 100 years ago by Ledezma's grandfather in Plaza de Romita, a quiet Mexico City square where centuries ago sinners begged for an easy death at the 16th-century church before being hanged from the cypress trees just outside. Today, Ledezma and his sister sell tortillas for 16 pesos (8 cents) a kilogram.

Ledezma grabs massive lumps of putty-like white masa, dumping the dough into a whirring hopper attached to the tortilla machine. It's a 60-year-old, deviously hot rectangular device that kneads the masa, then rolls it flat between stones before cutting from it thin 6-inch rounds that drop to the conveyor.

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Searching for Mexico City's Best Tacos



Overflowing with meat, the tacos suadero at Tacos Ruben's call for a double layer of tortillas.

[MILK STREET At Home]

Cochinita Pibil Tacos for the Instant Pot

*Start to finish: 2½ hours (1 hour active)
Servings: 6 to 8*

FROM THE MEXICAN STATE of Yucatán, cochinita pibil, in its most traditional form, is suckling pig (cochinita) marinated in sour orange juice and achiote paste, then slow-roasted in an underground pit (pib). The meat is shredded and served with pickled red onions. There are simplified takes on the dish, including the pressure-cooked version Jorge Fritz and Beto Estúa, of Casa Jacaranda cooking school in Mexico City, showed us. (Dutch oven instructions follow.) Achiote paste is typically sold in small blocks. If not available, a substitute can be made by stirring together ¼ cup sweet paprika, 1½ teaspoons ground cumin, ½ teaspoon granulated garlic, ½ teaspoon dried oregano, ¼ teaspoon kosher salt and 3 tablespoons white vinegar to form a stiff paste. Use in place of the paste called for in the recipe.

Don't discard the fat that you skim off the cooking liquid. You will need 3 tablespoons of it to sauté the onion and brown the

shredded pork to finish the dish.

4-pound boneless pork shoulder, trimmed and cut into 1½- to 2-inch chunks
Kosher salt and ground black pepper
2 habanero chilies, stemmed and seeded, divided
2 medium red onions, halved and thinly sliced
6 medium garlic cloves, smashed and peeled
1 tablespoon fennel seeds
2 teaspoons dried oregano, preferably Mexican oregano
1½ cups orange juice
1¼ ounces achiote paste (½ cup grated on the small holes of a box grater; see headnote)
¼ cup finely chopped fresh cilantro
2 tablespoons lime juice
Pickled red onions (recipe below), to serve
24 (6-inch) corn tortillas, warmed

▪ **In a 6-quart Instant Pot**, stir together the pork, 1 teaspoon salt, 1 habanero, half the onion, the

Pickled Red Onions

Start to finish: 10 minutes, plus refrigeration | Makes about 2 cups

1 cup white vinegar
2 teaspoons white sugar
1 teaspoon dried oregano, preferably Mexican oregano
¼ teaspoon ground allspice
Kosher salt
2 medium red onions, halved and thinly sliced

▪ **In a medium nonreactive bowl** or pint-size jar, combine the vinegar, sugar, oregano, allspice and 1 teaspoon salt; stir until the salt and sugar dissolve. Add the onions, pressing to submerge them in the vinegar mixture. Cover and refrigerate for at least 2 hours or up to 2 days. ♦



Bright with citrus and achiote, this pork taco filling is fall-apart tender.

garlic, fennel seeds, oregano and ½ cup water. Lock the lid in place and move the pressure valve to **Sealing**. Select **Pressure Cook** or **Manual**; set the pressure level to **High**. Set the cooking time for 50 minutes.

▪ **While the pork cooks**, in a blender, combine the orange juice, the remaining habanero and achiote paste. Blend until smooth, about 1 minute; set aside.

▪ **When pressure cooking** is complete, allow the pressure to reduce naturally for 15 minutes, then release the remaining steam by moving the pressure valve to **Venting**. Press **Cancel**, then open the pot. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the meat to a large bowl. Tilt the pot to pool the cooking liquid to one side and use a wide spoon to skim off as much fat as possible from the surface; reserve the fat.

▪ **Select More/High Sauté** and bring the liquid to a boil. Cook, stirring occasionally, until slightly

thickened and reduced to about ½ cup, 25 to 30 minutes. Pour the orange juice-achiote paste mixture into the pot, bring to a simmer and cook, stirring often, until the mixture thickens enough that a spatula drawn through it leaves a trail, about 5 minutes. Press **Cancel** to turn off the pot. Using potholders, carefully remove the insert from the housing; set aside.

▪ **While the cooking liquid** reduces, shred the meat, discarding any fat and gristle; set aside.

▪ **In a 12-inch nonstick skillet** over medium-high, heat 2 tablespoons of the reserved pork fat until barely smoking. Add the remaining onion and cook, stirring occasionally, until lightly browned, 5 to 7 minutes; transfer to a small bowl and set aside. Add another 1 tablespoon of the reserved pork fat to the skillet and heat over medium-high until shimmering. Add the shredded pork and

Photo: Connie Miller of CB Creatives; Styling: Wes Martin

cook without stirring until browned and crisped on the bottom, 5 to 7 minutes. Stir and continue to cook, until well browned, another 5 to 7 minutes.

• **Stir the contents** of the Instant Pot insert into the pork and cook over medium, stirring, until heated through, about 5 minutes. Off heat, stir in the cilantro and lime juice. Taste and season with salt and pepper. Transfer the pork to a serving bowl, then serve with the tortillas and the pickled red onions for making tacos.

Dutch Oven Cochinita Pibil Tacos

IN A LARGE DUTCH OVEN, stir together the pork, 1 teaspoon salt, 1 habanero, half the onion, the garlic, fennel seeds, oregano and 2 cups water. Cover and cook in a 350°F oven until a skewer inserted into the pork meets no resistance, about 3 hours. Meanwhile, in a blender, puree the orange juice, 1 habanero and achiote paste until smooth; refrigerate. When the pork is done, transfer the meat to a large bowl. Skim off and reserve the fat from the surface of the cooking liquid in the pot. Simmer the liquid over medium, stirring, until reduced to about ¼ cup, 5 to 7 minutes. Shred the meat, discarding any fat and gristle. Sauté the remaining onion and brown the pork as above. To the reduced cooking liquid in the pot, add the orange juice-achiote paste mixture. Simmer, stirring, until thickened, about 5 minutes. Stir in the sautéed onion and pork; cook, stirring, until heated, 2 to 3 minutes. Off heat, stir in the cilantro and lime juice. Season with salt and pepper. Serve as above. ♦

Photo: Todd Coleman

“You can make a taco with anything,” says María Ítaka. “If you have a tortilla and a filling, you have a taco. The moment you fold it up, that’s a taco.”



The simplest taco is nothing more than a warm tortilla and salt—Mexico City’s answer to England’s beans on toast.

From there, it’s a ponderous journey over concealed but intense flames that toast first one side, then the other as the tortillas flip and return to the far end of the machine. When man and machine are in sync, they can produce as many as 7,500 tortillas per hour, most to be sold from the doorway or delivered by bicycle to nearby street vendors and homes.

I’d come to Mexico City to learn about its tacos, a food ubiquitous to Mexico but revered in the capital, where street vendors ply innumerable varieties from dawn well into dark. And Ledezma quickly illustrates how little I know. Pulling a fresh tortilla from a stack, he sprinkles it with salt, folds it in half, tilts his head to the side and devours it in two quick, satisfying bites.

That’s a taco, he explains. Wait... What? Isn’t that just a... soft tortilla chip?

So is this, he adds, grabbing another tortilla and using it to pull hunks of meat from the chicken that was cooked on the tortilla maker. He spoons a thick, deeply charred, almost black salsa over it, then repeats the fold-tilt-eat maneuver. “It tastes of Mexico,” he says. “The corn, the soil, the families and memories.”

I follow his lead, repeating both of his tacos. The first is sublime in its simplicity, the essence of corn—warm, sweet and lingering—though it hardly seems a taco. The second is ridiculously satisfying, savory and spicy. Both are a long way from the crunchy taco “shells” stuffed with vaguely spiced ground beef,

lettuce and watery tomato salsa I disliked as a child.

There were many lessons hidden in this exchange. The balance of flavors and textures. The importance of the tortilla itself. The interplay of fire and smoke. The role of dried chilies. Even the method of eating. But they’d only reveal themselves slowly as I spent the week scouring the city for great tacos. Clearly, I had much to learn.

The Corn

SOME PARTS of the U.S. are lucky enough to have a true taco culture. Many are not, the only viable explanation for the sad state of the tacos many of us know. So an explanation is in order. The exact origins of *Continued on page 15*

parked on a sidewalk across from a gas station, a soccer match playing on a television hanging from the rafters of his canopy, a dozen people lined up waiting. The family works in unison to produce tacos suadero—citrus-marinated beef cooked with tripe in chorizo fat on a sombrero-shaped comal, or chorizera, finely chopped and slid onto double layered tortillas.

Onions, cilantro, lime. Four salsas of varying heats and complexions are holstered along the side of the stand for diners to help themselves. All of it, just a few pesos apiece. Handed one, I fold it and bring it to my mouth. Rich and meaty, bright, fruity and fresh. Wildly flavorful. Or at least the parts of it that don't land on my shirt and shoes are.

That's my next lesson. The contents of the taco may be flexible, but the art of eating it is more rigid. Orozco shakes his head at me. The taco does not come to you, he says. You go to the taco.

He grabs a taco suadero, pinching the tender corn tortilla closed with thumb and forefinger, pinkie extended. He tilts his head to the left, his open mouth now mimicking the shape of the taco, then—without moving his hand—brings his mouth to it, eating it in two generous bites. When he smiles, the crowd nods along. *This* is how you eat a taco, they agree.

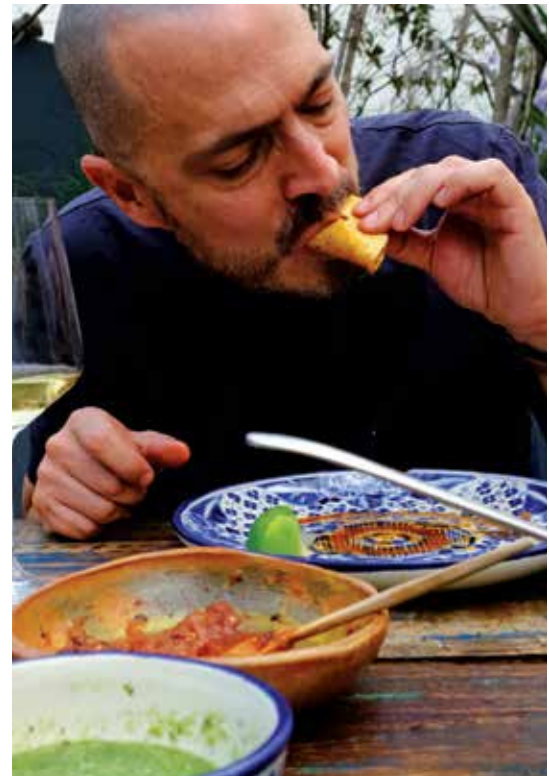
"All the tacos I make, I make as though I am going to eat them. When I make a taco, I'm already craving them," Orozco says, patting his stomach.

The Flavors

CLEAR ON WHAT a taco is and how to eat it, I'm ready to cook one. My lessons begin in the sprawling, sunny kitchen of Jorge Fritz and Beto Estúa—charming husbands, designers and cooking instructors in the artsy Roma Norte



Simple fish tacos taste anything but thanks to a pineapple salsa that is caramelized, syrupy and brightly tangy.



"Corn is at the center of our culture and heritage," says cooking instructor Jorge Fritz. *"It shaped us and who we are. Oh, and chilies!"*

neighborhood. The evening ends with enough mezcal to render my later notes less helpful than I'd like.

In between, there are tacos. So many tacos. We buy the tortillas from a vendor at the nearby market, allowing us to focus on the fillings. And here, no matter the protein, it is a lesson of contrasts. The backbone of nearly every taco I eat in Mexico City is a delicious flavor tug-of-war between bright citrus and earthy-fruity dried chilies.

We start with cochinita pibil, a pulled pork from the Yucatán—a mix of loin, shoulder and rib—cooked in a smooth sauce of sour orange juice, habanero chilies, red onion, earthy-peppery achiote paste (a blend of bold red achiote

seeds and chilies), allspice and avocado leaves.

Traditional versions cook many hours, but Fritz and Estúa opt for the pressure cooker, readying the pork in under an hour. The meat then is fried in a skillet with more red onion. It's a wonderful technique that allows the meat to first become fall-apart tender without drying out, then creating richness and texture from a speedy char.

Spooned onto warm corn tortillas—"Corn is at the center of our culture and heritage. It shaped us and who we are," says Fritz. "Oh, and chilies!"—and topped with pickled red onions and a salsa of deeply charred chilies, garlic and onion, the tacos are bright, tangy

and porky, at once warm and citrusy. So many layers.

Next, fish tacos, too often a fried mess in the U.S. In Fritz and Estúa's hands, they contain tender, brightly seasoned mounds of red snapper chunks marinated in a puree of orange juice, white onion, leathery guajillo chillies, oregano, cumin and achiote paste. The fish cooks in minutes, staying tender and juicy.

But the magic is in the toppings. This is where we so often get it wrong. Great tacos are about balancing taste and texture.

So to balance all the richness, we make a quick pickle of diced carrots, celery, onion and pineapple that is cooked *Continued on page 18*

until the liquid is pulled out, then evaporates, the sugars left behind caramelizing and thickening. It is tangy and sweet and a little chewy. Paired with a salsa fresca of pureed tomatillos, white onion and serrano chilies, the result is a riot of fresh citrus balancing chili-savory snapper, all tucked in a warm, pillowy soft-sweet tortilla.

With both tacos, there is so much happening, so many flavors and textures to tease out, you hope there never is a last bite. And in each case, it's that same signature push-pull of bright citrus balancing fruity-earthly dried chilies.

The Char

“WE CALL IT salsa tatemada, or charred salsa. Mexican cooking is all about smoke and fire,” Josefina López Méndez, executive chef at the airy-modern Chapulín restaurant—where traditional Mexican cooking is given a modern nod—says as she blackens chilies and onions far beyond the stage I’d consider edible.

All the lessons I’ve amassed—the centrality of the corn tortilla, the flexible notion of taco, the importance of balancing contrasting flavors and textures, even the method of eating them—assemble

here, but Méndez has another. Understanding tacos—in fact, understanding Mexican cooking broadly—requires embracing char.

Today, she cooks outside in the courtyard kitchen of a friend, a tiny stovetop in a terra-cotta

It all lands in a molcajete, the rough lava stone mortar and pestle used to make Mexican salsas and dips. She grinds it all with lime juice and salt, quickly rendering it a loose paste. I’m not a fan of burnt, so I expect to not appreciate it.

Quite the contrary. The flavor is amazing and not nearly as spiced as you’d think. The flame and citrus tamed the chillies. The char is rich.

With the salsa set, Méndez—who learned her recipes from her mother and grandmother—assembles tacos gobernador, shrimp tacos supposedly created 30 or so years ago by a restaurant hoping to impress a Mexican governor. It’s an unusual combination of shrimp, tomatoes and mozzarella-like quesillo cheese. It’s as delicious as it is simple.

Tomatoes and onions cook in a skillet until they char just a bit, then break down. Plump raw shrimp are tossed in, cooking mostly in the residual heat of the vegetables. Meanwhile, Méndez sprinkles shredded cheese onto the top of a tortilla, then quickly flips it cheese side down into a hot skillet, rubbing it around until the cheese melts and browns in spots.

With a quick flip, she overturns the tortilla, the cheese now a delicious sticky mess, then spoons the shrimp mixture onto it. Little to no

seasoning is needed—that comes from the salsa. The finished taco is amazing. Spicy and jammy, briny with plump shrimp, creamy and rich with toasted cheese. And it all took roughly 20 minutes.

The Chillies

IT TAKES JUST A LITTLE prodding and only slightly more tequila to persuade Fernando Gonzalez to sing “Contigo Aprendí” for us, his voice lilting and reverberating off the stone walls around us. It’s the song—with lyrics of learning how deep and sweet a kiss can be—with which he wooed his girlfriend, Aidee Gonzalez, of almost 20 years.

She won him with her cooking. And as the table fills with tortillas, mounds of avocado, salsas, carne en su jugo (literally “meat in its juice”), beers, tequila, addictive fried chilies called chili chicharones (named for the fried pork rinds often crumbled over tacos), and birria, a beefy taco filling jammed with chilies, it’s easy to see and taste the love.

We are cooking at her sister’s home—fitting, since it was she who introduced the two—and Gonzalez’ goal is to teach me the power of chilies in tacos. I assume, of course, that it’s all about heat. I, of course, am wrong. The lesson comes with the birria, a slow-cooked, low-liquid beef braise from Jalisco, on Mexico’s Pacific coast.

Gonzalez starts by seeding and lightly toasting first guajillo chilies, then cascabel chilies, then an ancho chili, then morita chilies, all of them dried, leathery and a dark amber. Once toasted, they go into a blender along with garlic, allspice, cumin, bay leaves, thyme, cardamom and ginger. A bit of salt and water, then pureed until slightly thinner than tomato paste.

With all those chilies, I expect searing heat. But *Continued on page 20*



Josefina López Méndez shows off the power of char.

alcove surrounded by a purple explosion of jacaranda flowers. We begin with salsa de habanero tatemado. A copious handful of habaneros, a hunk of white onion, garlic cloves, all toasting in a dry skillet until they crackle, potato chip-crisp, the air filling with spice.

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Tortilla Tasting

Can Supermarket Tortillas Stand Up to the Real Deal?

After tasting fresh corn tortillas in Mexico City, we doubted we’d be happy with store-bought. So we tried eight widely available brands. Tortillas with the fewest ingredients generally tasted better (the others had numerous preservatives and off flavors). Our favorite was La Banderita, which had a sweet corn flavor and tender texture. That said, we still prefer homemade. For our recipe for fresh corn tortillas, go to 177milkstreet.com/tortillas ♦

Photos: Todd Coleman (top); Connie Miller of CB Creatives (bottom); Styling: Wes Martin