

YUCATÁN: A CULINARY EXPEDITION

INGREDIENTS



ACHIOTE

Botanical name

Bixa orellana

Mayan name

Kiwi'

Common English names

Annatto, lipstick tree

Etymology

- *Achiote* derives from *axiōtl*, in the Nahuatl language spoken by the Aztecs of central Mexico.
- *Bixa* is an adaptation of the word *bija* or *biché* – the name for the plant used by the Carib Indians. *Orellana* is the surname of the Spanish explorer in the 16th century who discovered the Amazon River.
- *Annatto* is another Carib name for the tree. *Lipstick tree* refers to the cosmetic uses of the seeds of the plant.

History and heritage

Bixa orellana evolved as a species – like so many other ingredients we take for granted – in the immensely fertile and diverse rainforests of southern Brazil and the Amazon basin. Brazil remains the main producer and exporter. By the time humans reached the Americas, the plant had spread northward into Central America and southern Mexico. The tree produces a prickly pod inside of which are bright red seeds that have many uses. If the Maya cannot be said to be the peoples most strongly identified with the use of *achiote*, at least it is true that through the centuries it came to define many aspects of their existence and is still a hallmark of their culture. When left to macerate in water, the seeds deteriorate into a vivid red paste that the Maya employed as a paint for their bodies, for their buildings and manuscripts and as a dye for fabrics. Most famously they mixed achiote with their chocolate beverage for its symbolism of blood and all things sacred. Nowadays its principal use is as an ingredient in many typical Yucatecan dishes. Commercially, *annatto* is still used as a natural dye for cloth, and it is occasionally employed in the paint, varnish, lacquer and soap industries. It has long been used in the beauty industry to add texture and color to a variety of creams and cosmetics. More recently it has been marketed as a powerful antioxidant, and pharmacological and ethnobotanical studies of the plant in traditional medicine have attracted the attention of specialists. The presence of steroids in the leaves indeed suggests a link to annatto's antirheumatic and anti-inflammatory properties that popular medicine attributes in the treatment of rheumatism and prostate inflammation. It is also said to have diuretic and many other health properties. The annatto plant is a profusely fruiting shrub or small tree that grows 16 1/2 - 33 feet (5-10 m) in height. The tree produces a delicate pink flower that eventually morphs into a heart-shaped prickly pod. Approximately 50 seeds grow inside each pod. One small annatto tree can produce up to 595 pounds (270 k) of seeds.

Culinary uses

The primary use of achiote in pre-conquest times was as a colorant for the sacred chocolate beverage – a technique later borrowed by the Aztecs, and in turn by the conquering Spanish who took both back with them to the Old World where the use of annatto to deepen the color of chocolate remained common until the 17th century. In Yucatán, achiote is fried in lard or oil to stain the fat a bright yellow-orange, which is then added to corn dough to make a colorful local *tamal*, or to rice imparting a color not unlike saffron. The primary use for centuries to the present day is in the creation of *recado rojo* – a seasoning blend made of achiote, oregano, salt, pepper, allspice and cumin. This heady paste is then diluted with the juice of *naranja agria* to create a marinade for meats and poultry. These are then wrapped in banana leaves and baked in an underground oven, or *pib*. Dishes prepared in this manner are known as *pibil*. On a global commercial basis, annatto seed paste produced in South America is exported to North America and Europe, where it is used as a food coloring for margarine, cheese, microwave popcorn, and other yellow or orange foodstuffs.