

POLLO PIBIL

PIT-SMOKED CHICKEN IN ACHIOTE MARINADE

True *pibil* dishes (as the name suggests) are cooked in a *pib* – a hand-dug pit in the ground lined with fiery coals and hot stones. *Pibes* also employ a roof that seals up the hole, which is then covered with earth. Meats cooked in a *pib* are wrapped in banana leaves, which seals in juices and flavor. The secret of the *pib* is that its roof locks in heat, steam and smoke, which makes *pibil* meats so tender and succulent, and gives them their smoky flavor. For this dish, we have created a stovetop method for achieving a similar result. We have also modernized the recipe somewhat by brining the chicken for a few hours, and by using bone-in chicken breasts instead of a whole bird. You may also use a whole chicken cut into parts.

10 SERVINGS

☞ BRINE THE CHICKEN ☞

- 4 quarts (4 liters) cold water
- 1/2 cup (130g) salt
- 1/2 cup (130g) sugar
- 5 whole allspice berries
- 1 tsp. (5ml) black peppercorns
- 10 chicken breast halves (including skin and bones)

- 8 Tbs. (120ml) *recado rojo* (achiote paste)*
- 8 Tbs. (120ml) juice of *naranja agria* (Also known as sour orange or Seville orange. Substitute: 2 parts fresh lime juice, 1 part each fresh orange juice and grapefruit juice)

- 1 Tbs. (15ml) dried Mexican oregano leaves (or 1 tsp/5 ml ground), toasted
- 1 tsp. (5ml) cumin, toasted
- 3 large cloves garlic, peeled and charred
- 1 tsp. (5ml) black peppercorns
- 1 tsp. (5ml) sea salt

- Banana leaves, cut into rectangles approximately 12 x 18 inches
- 2 green bell peppers, thinly sliced
- 1 large white onion, thinly sliced
- 2 large Roma tomatoes, sliced
- 1 bunch epazote, separated into leaves

- 2 Tbs. (10g) wood smoking chips, preferably mesquite

*Available in Mexican grocers or the ethnic sections of supermarkets

STEP 1 DISSOLVE THE SALT AND SUGAR in the water. Crush allspice and peppercorns in a mortar and pestle and add with chicken to the brine; refrigerate 4-5 hours. After the brining process, drain and rinse chicken under cold water and pat dry. Discard the brining solution.

☞ PREPARE THE MARINADE ☞

STEP 2 DISSOLVE THE ACHIOTE PASTE in the juice. Use a fork to mash and mix the paste thoroughly with the juice. Add more juice if necessary to achieve the consistency of thick cream.

STEP 3 IN A MOLCAJETE or mortar and pestle, coarsely grind the oregano, cumin, garlic, peppercorns and salt. Add to the *recado* mixture and stir thoroughly to incorporate. Pour over chicken and coat each piece thoroughly. (NOTE: If using homemade *recado rojo*, you may omit this step.)

☞ WRAP THE CHICKEN ☞

STEP 4 PLACE ONE BREAST in the center of one banana leaf rectangle. Garnish with slices of the vegetables and the epazote leaves. Wrap the chicken with the banana leaf as you would a package, and tie with banana leaf spines or kitchen twine to secure. You may cook immediately or refrigerate overnight. Allow to come to room temperature before proceeding.

☞ SMOKE THE CHICKEN ☞

STEP 5 FOLLOW INSTRUCTIONS for stovetop smoking. Smoke 45 minutes, or until a meat thermometer registers 170° Fahrenheit (76° Celsius). Off heat, remove cover and let stand for 10-15 minutes before serving. Serve with *Cebollas Encurtidas* and *Chile Tamulado*.

STOVETOP “PIB” SMOKING INSTRUCTIONS

- **Large cast-iron Dutch oven or roasting pan with lid** (*NOTE: Because of the intense heat required for this dish, enameled iron cookware is not recommended.*)

- **Heavy-duty aluminum foil**

- **10-12 inch cake rack** (*must fit snugly in bottom of pot*)

❧ PREPARE THE POT ❧

STEP 1 WORKING WITH THE DUTCH OVEN OR ROASTING PAN, line sides and bottom with foil, using two or three pieces if necessary. Leave at least 6 inches of foil extending beyond the edge of the pot. Using a fork or sharp object, cut and tear away a small hole in the foil at the center of the bottom about 3 inches in diameter to expose the pot’s surface underneath. Line underside of lid with aluminum foil and crimp tightly around edges. Create “feet” for the cake rack with balls of foil. The rack should rest about 1^{1/2} inches off the inside bottom surface of the pot.

❧ PREHEAT THE POT ❧

STEP 2 PLACE THE POT without cover or cakerack over highest heat on stovetop. Heat for 10 minutes. Have banana-wrapped meat at hand. When pan is pre-heated, place smoking chips called for in recipe on the pan’s surface where you cut away the foil. Immediately place rack at bottom of pot. Place meat packets onto rack, spacing evenly and allowing some space around packets so that steam and smoke can circulate. Put lid in place, and crimp edges of foil all around to create a tight seal. Cook according to recipe instructions.