

VENADO EN PIPIÁN ROJO

VENISON IN RED SQUASH SEED SAUCE

The *monte* – the woodland wilderness where the Maya have gone for centuries to hunt and gather – provides a bounty of animal and plant foods for the regional table. But none is as savored and revered as the tiny Yucatecan *venado*, or deer. A white-tailed variety, the *Odocoileus virginianus yucatanensis* is unique to the peninsula. In ancient times, after slaying an animal weighing as much as 155-175 pounds (70-80 kilos), like the *venado*, the hunters would generally cook the meat on the spot, avoiding spoilage during what may be a long trip home. The cooking methodology would likely have been a *pib*, or earthen pit, which gives the meat a smoky character. Later, the meat would have been refreshed by cooking it again in one of a variety of sauces. Many of these sauces included *chiles*, tomatoes and seeds or nuts. Both *mole* and *pipián* are variants of such sauces. In Yucatán, *pipián* is often tinted red with *achiote*, and thickened with *masa*. Doña Guadalupe Aké of Peto, in southern Yucatán state – where men on rickety bicycles on their way to the *monte* to hunt can be seen at every turn – shared her *pipián rojo* recipe with me. Her husband had acquired from a neighbor a tiny saddle of *venado*, which had already been cooked in a *pib*. While her recipe was comprised of many steps, it had surprisingly few ingredients – just 10 – and no spices other than the *achiote*. In other regions of Mexico, *pipián* is often prepared more like a *mole*, with a complex list of ingredients and a variety of dried *chiles*. For this recipe I have taken the middle road, adding a few more spices that are typical of the region such as *pimienta gorda de Tabasco* (allspice) and *orégano* (Mexican oregano), and also a couple of smoky *chiles chipotles*, while still striving for the simplicity of Doña Guadalupe's original. One thing that was important to Doña Guadalupe was to add some sourness to the *pipián*. She told me that customarily Yucatecan cooks add *ciruela* (*Spondias purpurea*, also known as Spanish plum or purple mombin – a fruit indigenous to a broad swath of the New World tropics from southern Mexico through northern South America.) It is a seasonal fruit available late March through April – and during our lesson there were none to be found. Her substitute was the tart *tomate verde* (*tomatillo*), which is the recommended substitute in this recipe.

10 - 12 SERVINGS

☞ PREPARE THE STOCK ☞

- 4 cups (710ml) beef bouillon
- 1 whole head garlic, charred over an open flame
- 1 onion, charred on a griddle or over an open flame, then cut in quarters

STEP 1 IN A SMALL SAUCEPAN, place stock along with the whole garlic and onion. (It is not necessary to peel the vegetables, but remove some of the burned paper from the garlic by rubbing gently between your palms). Bring to a simmer, and cook for 15 minutes or until onion is tender and falling apart. Strain liquid through a fine sieve placed over a large stock pot; use a spoon or spatula to mash vegetables and extract as much cooking liquid as possible. Discard any vegetable pulp that remains.

☞ PREPARE THE RECADO ☞

- 5 *chiles de país* (*chile seco*) or 3 *chiles de árbol*, stems and seeds removed (Substitute, 1 tsp./5ml red pepper flakes)
- 1 Tbs. (15ml) *orégano yucateco*, toasted (Also known as Mexican oregano)
- 5 whole allspice

STEP 2 PLACE CHILES and spices in a spice grinder or coffee mill and grind until very fine. Strain through a fine sieve into a blender jar, discarding any solids that remain. Set aside.

- 8 cloves garlic, peeled and charred
- 3 Tbs. (45ml) *recado rojo* (Also known as *achiote paste*)
- 2 *chiles chipotles en adobo*, drained
- 1 cup (235ml) water

STEP 3 PLACE INGREDIENTS at left in the blender containing the spices, and liquefy. Strain the liquid through a fine sieve over the stock pot containing the bouillon. With a spatula, press as much residue as possible through the sieve; discard any that remains.

VENADO EN PIPIÁN ROJO (CONTINUED)

- **4 cups (1 liter) hulled green pepitas (squash seeds), toasted**
- **4 cups (1 liter) water**

- **1 recipe Pibil de Venado (or Beef), cubed**
- **3 large or 4 small Roma tomatoes, charred, peeled, seeded and chopped**
- **3 medium or 4 small tomatillos (tomate verde), chopped**
- **1/2 cup (120ml) chopped chives**
- **2 sprigs epazote (Substitute: 1 sprig parsley and 1 small sprig fresh mint)**

- **1 cup (350g) masa**
- **1 cup (235ml) beef bouillon**
- **Salt to taste**

- **Reserved cup of toasted pepitas (squash seeds)**
- **1 Tbs. (15ml) olive oil**
- **2 tsps. (10ml) red pepper flakes**
- **1/4 cup (60ml) chopped chives**
- **Kosher salt to taste**

- **1 recipe K'uut bi Ik**
- **1 cup (235ml) Mexican crema (Substitute: crème fraîche, sour cream or plain yogurt) for serving**

✧ FINISH THE PIPIÁN ✧

STEP 4 IN A FOOD PROCESSOR, grind 3 cups (710ml) of the toasted seeds; reserve the rest whole for a garnish. Add half of the water to the ground seeds in the processor and process. Pour through a fine sieve into the stock pot. Working with a rubber spatula, press as much of the liquid through as possible. Repeat with half of the remaining water; press through again; repeat with the rest of the water. Discard any solids that remain in the sieve. Stir to incorporate and simmer over low heat as the stock gradually thickens. Allow to cool, then proceed with remaining steps.

STEP 5 ADD INGREDIENTS to the stock pot, return to a simmer and cook 30 minutes, stirring frequently to avoid scorching.

STEP 6 MIX MASA WITH BOUILLON until thoroughly dissolved. Strain through a fine sieve into the stock pot; use a rubber spatula to press mixture through. Simmer 15-20 minutes until thickened, stirring frequently to avoid sticking. As stew thickens, frequently skim any of the bright red oil that rises to the surface, and reserve for a garnish. Check seasonings.

✧ SERVE ✧

STEP 7 FOR AN UPDATED GARNISH, lightly retoast the remaining cup of toasted seeds in the olive oil; add red pepper flakes, chives and salt and transfer to a serving bowl.

STEP 8 LADLE PIPIÁN into plates with a rim or shallow serving bowls as you would for any stew. *Pipían de Venado* is usually accompanied by the fiery red salsa of dried *chiles*, *K'uut bi Ik*. Allow diners to add Mexican *crema* or sour cream, the toasted *pepitas*, the hot *salsa* and dribbles of the reserved red oil, as desired.