

Experiments and observations on different types of salsa for Austin Larkin

-or-

Chilaquiles rojos o verdes

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(December 11th 2020)

Chilaquiles is typically a breakfast dish. Concerts typically have live audiences. If you love rules, you're in the wrong place at the wrong time!

Serves around two to three hungry people. Multiply by five to feed the whole EI kitchen. Measurements are rough estimates – good luck!
(This recipe is way more simple than it looks.)

Ingredients

1 cup (150g) dry beans (I like black, tiny red, vaquita... anything works but just don't buy Goya)

¼ cup fresh epazote leaves if you can find it. Or a few pinches of dry.

¼ cup fresh cilantro, coarsely chopped

1 lb corn tortillas – [quality](#) tortillas make a difference, but whatever you can get is fine as long as they're corn and not flour. Better if they are a couple days old and/or left out to dry overnight

Oil for frying (something neutral with a low smoke point)

¼ white or red onion, sliced in thin rings or half-circles for garnish

One avocado, halved and sliced lengthwise (don't do this too far in advance or it'll turn brown)

½ cup Mexican crema or crème fraîche (which is closer to crema than American sour cream)

A few tablespoons of cheese for garnish: something crumbly like queso fresco or mild feta or hard and grateable like cotija, ricotta salata, etc.

Sea salt

Optional: eggs to fry and add on top, or any other meat you have lying around

Also optional: a sprig of thyme or a pinch of oregano if you can't find epazote for the beans. If you can find avocado leaf or hierba de conejo, those are the best of all.

*For the salsa – choose one color (or both if you're feeling *experimental*)*

Green: two or three serranos or large jalapeños, seeds and veins removed (unless you want it extra spicy, in which case keep the seeds and veins and add more chiles). If you want less spicy, use one jalapeño with seeds and veins removed.

1 lb tomatillos

2 cloves fresh garlic

Red: mix and match dried chilies depending on what you have and want. I usually go with one chipotle (for smoky heat) and two puya or guajillos. Three pasillas or a couple chiles de arbol could work, too. You can use just the kind of guajillos that aren't spicy if you want it extra mild.

1 lb tomatillos (or roma tomatoes if you can't find them)

2 cloves fresh garlic

It's also okay to use fresh green chilies and red tomatoes together – that would also turn out red.

Beans (can be done the day or morning before)

No need to soak them. Just make sure they're clean. Simmer the beans on very low heat in a slow cooker or dutch oven or other favorite device with a lid until tender, usually at least four hours (I usually use a slow cooker set on low overnight). Use one part dry beans to four parts unsalted water. If you don't have epazote and want to use other herbs, add them at the beginning. When the beans are tender (but before they're falling apart), add about five whole leaves of epazote and a few teaspoons of salt per quart of water. Taste for salt and adjust accordingly. Make sure they don't sit out at room temperature for too long or you and your guests will fart uncontrollably.

Salsa (can be done in advance, but preferably the same day)

Option 1 (raw green - easiest): put fresh chilies, tomatillos, and garlic, all raw, into the blender.

Option 2 (toasted or roasted – red or green): roast the tomatoes or tomatillos in an oven or toast/char them on a comal/griddle/grill until mostly soft.

Option 3 (boil): boil the tomatillos or tomatoes until mostly soft.

For any of these options, the garlic can be roasted, toasted, or raw.

You can experiment as much as you please, but I would not recommend boiling the chilies or garlic.

For dried chiles, remove stems and most of the veins and seeds (except for chipotle which gets toasted whole, but remove the hard stem unless you like eating pepper stems). If anyone else is in the kitchen, warn them that this is about to make them cough. Or if you want to be an asshole, don't.

Prepare a small bowl or cup of hot water. Toast the chiles on a comal/griddle/dry skillet on medium-low heat for a few minutes, flipping to toast on each side. Be careful that they don't start to smoke (that's too much heat). They're done once the skin is blistered or changed in color in several spots and they soften and release their aromas. Submerge the chilies in hot water for five to ten minutes to soften.

When chilies, tomatillos or tomatoes, and garlic are ready, combine them in a blender with a few teaspoons of salt and a few pinches of cilantro if you're going for green. Blend the salsa to the consistency you like. Or use a molcajete or large mortar and pestle if you have the time. Add salt if it tastes too acidic, water if it's too intense or thick, or the chile soaking water if you want a bit more kick-- just keep in mind that this will be used to smother a pile of fried, unseasoned chips.

Chips (can be done in advance, but preferably the same day)

Cut the tortillas into roughly triangular pieces. Scissors are useful. I find it awkward to bite into an oversized chip that doesn't fit in my mouth, but maybe you have a perverse desire to struggle or see others struggle with large chips. Layer a big dish, board a rack nearby the stove with paper towels for drying the fried chips. Put on a shirt, an apron, glasses... whatever you need to feel protected from hot oil. (Maybe it's a good time to make use of that face shield that your mom sent you.) In a large skillet, heat about a quarter inch of oil on medium-high heat. The oil is ready if it bubbles when you dip a tortilla triangle into it.

Add some tortilla pieces to the oil, being careful not to overcrowd the skillet. You'll need to do many batches and possibly add more oil if it gets absorbed. Agitate the oil and tortilla bits in the pan to ensure even cooking. Flip the chips with your utensil of choice (slotted spoon, spider, tongs, long chopsticks, etc.). Remove the chips when they change color and start to feel a bit more firm. They'll continue to crisp up after you remove them, so do not keep them cooking until they're fully hard – they will begin to taste burnt. If the oil sputters too much, you can turn the heat down; if it's relatively inactive when you add tortilla bits, turn the heat up. As you remove the chips let the excess oil drip back into the skillet. Spread finished chips on the paper towels, using multiple layers of towel if necessary to absorb the oil. When they're all finished, toss and dab the chips one last time in the paper towels to absorb excess oil.

Finishing up (immediately before serving)

Normally by the time I'm finished frying chips, almost all the oil is absorbed; if you still have a lot of oil and/or chip fragments in your skillet, empty it out. Heat it up again on medium-low and add your salsa (depending on how many servings you make, you might need to do this in batches). Let the salsa heat up for a couple minutes. (the point is to heat the salsa, not to cook it – with the exception of the raw green salsa, which can be cooked a little to mellow out the garlic). Turn the heat off and toss the chips in the salsa for a few seconds – just until they're fully coated, otherwise you'll have soggy chips. Dump a nice little mountain of salsa-smothered chips onto each plate (use large bowls or pasta plates if you have them). Spoon some beans on the side. (If you choose to add a fried egg or any meat, do it now.) Top the chips with a dollop or two of crema, a generous pinch or two of chopped cilantro and/or chopped epazote leaves, onion slices, and finely crumbled or grated cheese. If you manage to slice the avocado halves nicely, fan out the slices neatly on top; otherwise drop them on the pile in resignation. Serve immediately while the chips are still somewhat crispy.

