



Poblano *Chili Here We Come!*

Patricia Quintana*

When most people think of Mexican food, the first thing that comes to mind may be chili peppers and fiery hot dishes that threaten their taste buds!

This, thankfully, is just not so! Although chilies are essential in Mexican cuisine throughout the country, they are not necessarily added for spiciness. More often than not they are used to enhance flavor. Many kinds of chilies give zest to a dish, and each type has its own flavor, aroma and texture.

As a matter of fact, cookery in colorful Mexico has been classified into hundreds of regional varieties, and each uses chili in its own special way dating back to the country's pre-Hispanic roots.

When Columbus arrived in the New World, he took the name "chilli" from the Nahuatl language, but called this peculiar vegetable "chili peppers" since he mistook them for the native Asian peppercorn. Eventually, both the word and the ingredient spread as far as Africa, India and across the seas to China, where varieties of chili are used to this day.

Historians today consider chili one of the most important finds that Columbus stumbled on in New Spain, along with vanilla, chocolate and allspice.

Chilies are definitely native to Mesoamerica, and there are records of their being cultivated as early as 7000 B.C.

They played an important role in pre-Hispanic times, used not only as food, but also as one of the main forms of tribute paid by the natives to their masters, particularly among the Aztecs, and later to their European conquerors.

Friar Bartolomé de las Casas documented the fact that Mexicans did not consider that they had eaten if their meal did not include chili and, although Mexican cuisine has become quite sophisticated over the years, this is still the case.

Chili is important not only in cooking, but also in broader aspects of Mexico's culture. It is an integral part of local sayings, songs, folk medicine, puns and the like. It continues to be cultivated throughout Mexico, although the largest crops are grown in eight states, with Sinaloa, Chihuahua and Nayarit heading up national production.

There are dozens of varieties, and since each has a local name, they can be very confusing to discuss.

Among the most popular is the delicious, bright green *poblano* chili pepper. It grows from between two to eight inches long and is shaped like a triangle or a child's toy top, with a narrow, pointed tip. Its mild taste makes it particularly popular among foreigners.

It is versatile enough to be prepared in a wide variety of ways. When stuffed with cheese, beans, chicken, fish, shredded pork, mushrooms, or the more elegant crab or lobster, this simple vegetable becomes a meal by itself. It is commonly stuffed in the Mexican tradition, dredged in

* Gastronomy expert and chef.
Photos by Ignacio Urquiza.



Stuffed *poblano* chili peppers, a Mexican traditional dish.

flour, coated in a light egg batter, fried until golden brown and served in a tomato-chili sauce.

Around Independence Day in September, *poblano* chilies take on a festive air. They are dressed up in the colors of the Mexican flag — red, white and green— to make *chiles en nogada*, filled with a sweet, ground beef stuffing, drenched in an off-white, creamy walnut sauce and garnished with deep red pomegranate seeds.

Poblano chilies are often eaten raw, sliced into strips or rounds, diced or chopped to top a salad, soup or main course. When sliced into thin strips, cooked with onions and cream, they become the perfect taco filling. They are also the basis for a staple in the Mexican diet, green rice.

There are other varieties of this same chili, such as a deep orange-red one with a more intense flavor. When dried, the light green *poblano* chili is known as *ancho* chili and the dark green one, the *mulato* chili. They both have a rich, smoky flavor, relatively mild yet zesty.

Both the fresh and dried *poblanos* are readily available in U.S. supermarkets and grocery stores, due to their



Chiles en nogada dressed up in the colors of the Mexican flag.

mildness and popularity. However, it is confusing to shop for the *poblano* chili, since its name varies in different regions. For example, they are referred to as *pasilla* chilies in California, whether dried or fresh.

To prepare the *poblano* chili pepper and bring out its unique flavor, roast it over the direct flame of a gas range. If you have an electric stove, use a *comal*, griddle or heavy skillet. The traditional procedure is to place the roasted chili in a plastic bag to “sweat” which makes it easier to peel the thin skin. After removing the charred skin, rinse it in running water.

Next comes “deveining.” This means removing the thin, light colored veins inside the chili by slitting it carefully on the side. These veins give chilies their potency. The aroma will fill the air, generally giving you an idea of its piquancy. If you want to tone down the spiciness, soak the chili in salt water, or a mixture of salt water and vinegar for 15 or 20 minutes. This will remove some of the bite without affecting the flavor. If you cannot find *poblano* chili, safe substitutes are fresh Anaheim or mild New Mexican chilies, mild banana peppers or canned mild green chilies.

Chili peppers are rich in vitamins A and C, enhancing even the poor man's diet with valuable nutrients.

They stimulate the appetite, and, by increasing salivation, actually aid digestion.

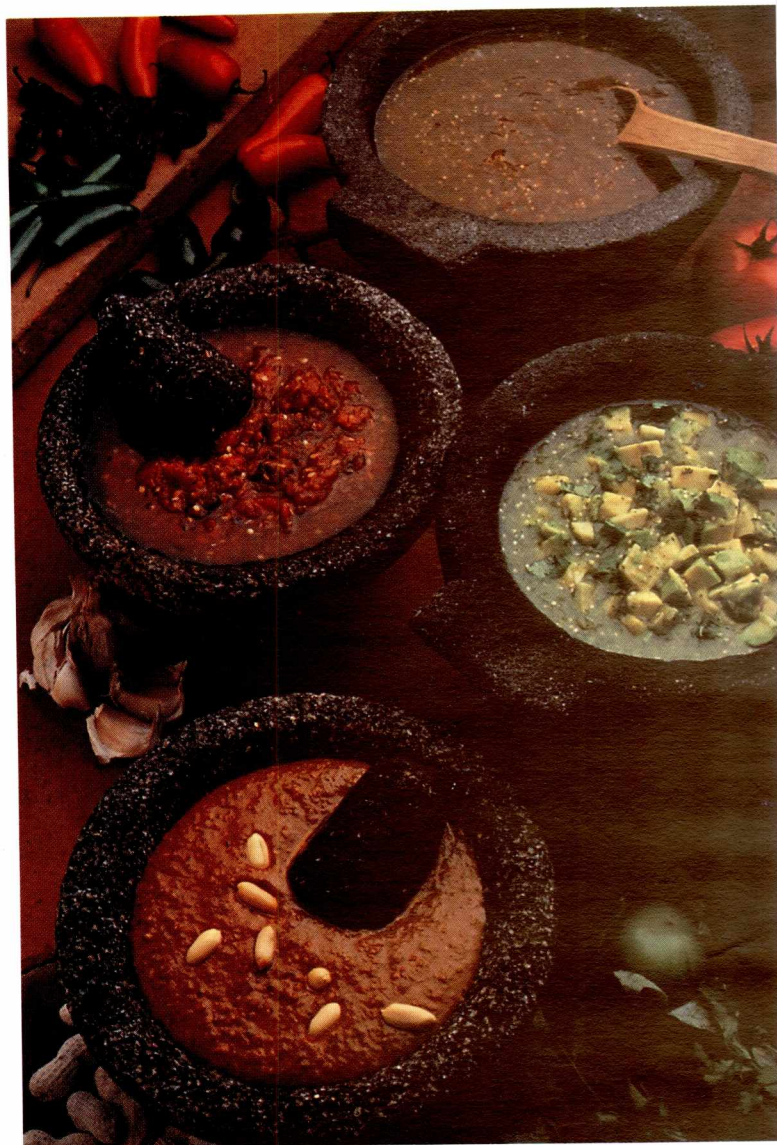
Also common is the *jalapeño*, a smaller chili often used as a condiment, either pickled as a garnish, or in thin strips added to a stew or main course to give the recipe zing.

Smaller than the *jalapeño* and often hotter is the *serrano* chili, often referred to as "green chili" (*chile verde*). These long thin triangular chilies are firm, green, full of seeds and piquant. A favorite among fire eaters! Be careful when handling them. And remember that the chili's spiciness is usually most concentrated in the veins on the inside and the seeds, so be sure to remove them thoroughly if you want to tone down the chili. They can also be soaked in salted water or a water and vinegar mixture for a milder taste.

Chilaca chilies are long, thin and deep green and can grow up to 12 inches in length. Other fresh chilies common to Mexico are *manzano* and *habanero*.

Ancho, *mulato*, *pasilla*, *guajillo*, *cascabel* and *catarina* are all dried chilies produced in central Mexico. Although it is recommended you remove the skin by roasting, many fresh chilies such as the *poblano*, or dried chilies like the *ancho* and *mulato* are toasted or stir-fried before being added to sauces and stews, skins intact.

All dried chilies must be washed and patted dry before use, since they are often dehydrated in unprotected, outdoor environments. Seeds are often removed and saved to temper piquancy of sauces and dishes, since it is always easy to add spiciness and almost impossible to tone it down.



Sauces are used to condiment most Mexican dishes.

To roast, preheat a *comal* or heavy skillet without any oil. Once the *comal* is medium hot, lightly roast the chili, turning regularly with tongs to ensure evenness. Once roasted, the chili gives off an aroma and is somewhat more pliable. Be careful not to over-roast, or you will wind up with a toasted, burned chili. Only when preparing chilies for a *mole* sauce can they be roasted longer.

You can add the whole roasted or stir-fried chili directly to your dish, or you can crumble it. Many recipes call for pureeing it with other ingredients in a blender or food processor. Of course, the traditional, authentic way is to grind it by hand in a volcanic stone mortar called a



Mexico produces a great variety of dried chili peppers, often used to make *adobo* sauces.

molcajete or a flat volcanic stone called a *metate* in Nahuatl.

Ancho and *mulato* chilies are basic ingredients in most Mexican cuisine. They are the basis for Mexican sauces, like *adobo*—a common chili sauce prepared with onion, garlic, oregano and vinegar—, used to marinate meats, poultry or seafood. They can be combined with *chipotle* or *guajillo* chili for a special flavor.

Ancho chili peppers are traditionally prepared very much like *poblano* chilies, stuffed with cheese or avocado, and drenched with a vinaigrette sauce; or combined with onion, garlic, cumin, oregano, cinnamon, cloves, peppercorns and olive oil to be pickled or as a superb enchilada sauce.

They are also the basic ingredient for *mole* sauces, soups (like tortilla soup), and for flavoring corn tortilla dough. *Coloradito* or “little red *mole*” is one of the famous seven *mole* sauces from the Oaxacan region, made from the dried *ancho* chili.

Mulato chili can be used like *ancho*, but its taste, quite different from the *ancho*, gives most dishes a distinctive

flavor. A combination of chilies, plus sesame seeds, almonds, plantains and chocolate make the sauce for Oaxaca’s famous black *mole* sauce.

Ancho and *mulato* chilies can be used interchangeably in recipes. Substitute dried red California chilies or dried red New Mexican chilies if you can’t find the authentic Mexican variety. These are often referred to as pod, ristra or *chimayo* chilies.

Chili peppers are rich in vitamins A and C, enhancing even the poor man’s diet with valuable nutrients. They stimulate the appetite, and, by increasing salivation, actually aid digestion. Corn, beans and chili, the staple of Mexico’s ancient and modern diet, complement one another. The interdependence of these components balance the overall nutritional value of the Mexican diet.

So, not only are they a delicious way to spice up an otherwise boring recipe and offer variety in menu planning, they are nutritious as well! ❧

Traditional Recipes with Chili Peppers as a Basic Ingredient

Green Rice with Crayfish (Serves 8-12)

For the rice

- 2 1/2 cups long-grain white rice
- 2 cups vegetable oil
- 12 garlic cloves, whole
- 1 medium white onion, cut in half
- 1 1/2 medium white onions, chopped
- 4 *poblano* chili peppers, cleaned, seeded, deveined and chopped
- 3 small green peppers
- 3 1/2 cups hot water
- salt to taste
- 8 red snapper, grouper or sea bass fillets, about 3 1/2 inches wide and 1/2 inch thick
- 2 pounds clams, soaked and cleaned
- 8 large crayfish, cleaned

For the Garnish

- 4 green or red bell peppers, roasted, peeled and sliced.

Prepare the green rice with crayfish: Soak the rice in hot water for 15 minutes; rinse in a mesh sieve until the water runs clear; drain well.

Heat the oil in a deep skillet. Add 6 garlic cloves and the halved onion. Fry until golden brown. Add rice and fry until brown, stirring frequently. Strain rice and return to skillet. In a blender or food processor, puree 6 garlic cloves, chopped onion, chilies and green peppers. Add to rice in skillet, and cook until the fat begins to rise to the surface. Add water and salt to taste.

Add fish, clams and crayfish. Add water. Correct seasoning. Cover skillet and cook over low heat for 45 minutes. Remove from heat and let stand covered for 25 minutes. To serve, place rice on a large platter with crayfish on top. Garnish with sliced bell peppers.

Note: Add water according to the kind of rice used. Too much water will result in the wrong consistency.

Poblano Chili Soup (Serves 8)

- 1/2 stick butter
- 1/4 cup olive oil
- 1 medium white onion, peeled and grated or pureed in blender
- 3 garlic cloves, peeled and pureed
- 5 *poblano* chili peppers, roasted, seeded and deveined, soaked in salted water to remove piquancy, then sliced into strips
- 1 pound fresh or frozen green peas, cooked in salted water until tender
- 1 1/2 quarts chicken broth
- 1 1/2 cups heavy cream
- 3 potatoes, cooked, peeled and diced
- 3 *chayotes* (water pears), cooked, peeled and diced
- 1 tablespoon powdered chicken bouillon
- 1 1/2 cups gruyere cheese or other milk cheese, cut into chunks

Prepare the soup:

In a large saucepan, heat the butter together with olive oil. Lightly brown the onion and garlic, then add the prepared chili strips. Place in a blender or food processor, with cooked peas and 1 tablespoon of chicken broth. Blend well. Return mixture to a saucepan and heat for about 10 minutes.

Warm the cream separately and add it to the soup base along with the remaining broth, diced potatoes and *chayotes*. Cook for about 25 minutes over medium heat. If necessary, season with bouillon. Immediately before serving, stir in cheese, heating soup thoroughly without bringing to a boil. Serve hot.

Stewed Pork with Apricot Sauce (Serves 8)

For the pork

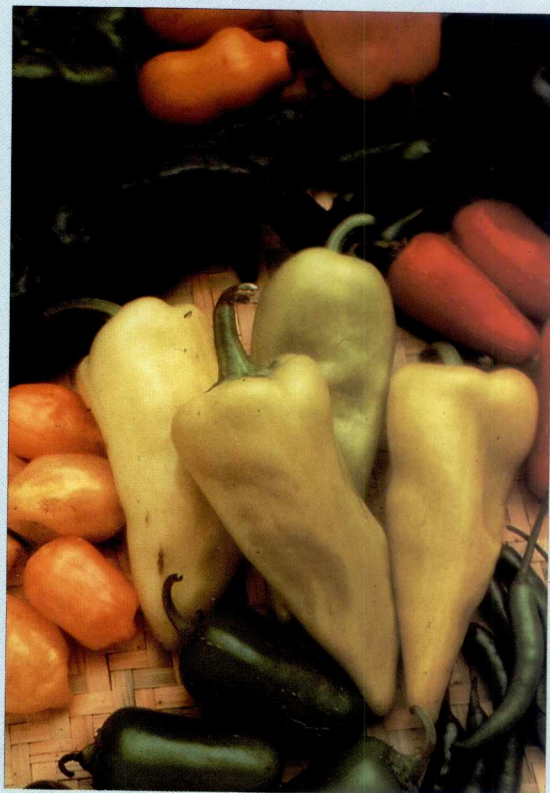
- 1/2 cup vegetable oil
- 3 1/3 pounds pork leg or pork loin,
cut into chunks
- 6 springs thyme
- 8 whole bay leaves
- 1 medium white onion,
spiked with 8 whole cloves
- 20 whole black peppercorns
- 1/2 head of garlic,
cut in half across the grain
- 8 cups water
- salt to taste

For the Apricot Sauce

- 10 *mulato* chili peppers, washed, seeded and
deveined, roasted, and soaked in salted water
- 6 *pasilla* chili peppers, washed, seeded and deveined,
roasted and soaked in salted water (substitute
dried red California chili peppers or other dried
red chilies for all dried chilies called for, if neces-
sary)
- 1 1/2 cups dried apricots or 1 cup prunes,
pitted
- 1 1/2 medium white onions,
peeled and roasted
- 12 garlic cloves,
peeled and roasted
- 20 whole black peppercorns
- 8 whole cloves
- 1 4-inch cinnamon stick
- 1 tablespoon oregano
- 1/2 cup vegetable oil or lard
- sugar to taste
- salt to taste

Prepare the pork: Heat the oil in a pressure cooker or heavy pot and brown the pork with thyme, bay leaves, onion, peppercorns, garlic and salt to taste. Then add water and cover. Cook for about 45 minutes to 1 hour (or more if not using a pressure cooker). Remove from heat and cool. Remove pork from broth. Strain broth and retain for another use if desired.

Prepare the sauce: Puree the chilies, apricots, onion, garlic, peppercorns, cloves, cinnamon, oregano and a little water in a blender or food processor. In a medium saucepan, heat the oil. Add the blended sauce and season to taste with sugar and salt. Simmer until the mixture releases its fat, approximately 45 minutes. Then add pork. Continue cooking about 30 minutes or until the mixture has thickened somewhat.

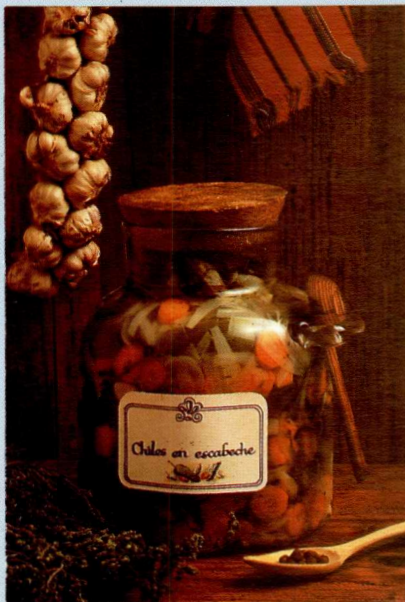


A variety of fresh chili peppers.

Chili Sauce with Orange Juice

- 1/4 cup olive oil or vegetable oil
- 6 ancho chili peppers or dried red California or mild New Mexican chilies, washed, seeded and deveined
- 2 medium garlic cloves, peeled
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 3/4 cup orange juice

Heat the oil in a heavy skillet. Add chilies and stir-fry. Place fried chilies, garlic, salt and orange juice in a processor and blend. If the sauce is too thick, add more orange juice. Season to taste with salt.



Chili peppers are made into many different kinds of preserves.