

Cream of Chayote (Merliton)

Crema de Chayote

A staple starch of the Aztecs and reportedly one of only two foods Hernán Cortés refused to eat. The other was roasted hedgehog (*erizo*).

This smooth, pear-shaped member of the gourd family is a cheap poor gringo substitute for squash or cucumbers, which reside, culinarily speaking, on the better side of the vine. Strongly seasoned, *chayote* can hold its own with zucchini on a bad day.

Pickerel brought this recipe from Veracruz, the *chayote*-producing capital of Mexico—where pear-shaped women and their pear-shaped breasts have also borrowed this vegetable name.



Ingredientes (three servings)

3 merliton (3 *chayotes*)

1 small garlic clove, peeled (1 *diente chico de ajo, pelado*)

1/2 serrano chili (1/2 *chile serrano*)

1 small onion (1 *cebolla chica*)

3 coriander sprigs (3 *ramitas de cilantro*)

1 tbsp margarine (1 *cucharada de margarina*)

1 tsp salt (1 *cucharadita de sal*)

1/2 tsp ground pepper (1/2 *cucharadita de pimienta molida*)

Equipo

Vegetable peeler (*pelador de verdura*)

Saucepot with cover (*cazuela con tapadera*)

Blender (*licuadora*)

Preparación

Peel *chayotes* with vegetable peeler (careful!—slippery when peeled), trim ends, and cut in half lengthwise. Remove soft pip from center, and slice halves into finger-wide strips. Cut crossways into bite-size pieces. Dice garlic and onion. Mince chili. Finely chop coriander leaves and thinnest stems—enough to fill 2 teaspoons.

Melt margarine in saucepot, and fry without browning (*acitronar*) onion, garlic, and chili until onion softens. Add *chayote* and coriander. Mix well and fry 5 minutes, stirring often. Add 2 cups of water, stir, and simmer under cover over low heat 30 minutes or until *chayote* cooks (tender when probed with a fork).

Remove from heat and cool. Pour saucepot contents into blender. Add salt and pepper. Blend until smooth.

Serve in soup bowls (*tazonas*) with corn tortillas on the side.

Poor Gringo Soup *Caldillo*

Ingredientes (two servings)

- 2 small tomatoes (2 *tomates chicos*)
- 1 potato (1 *papa*)
- 1/2 small onion (1/2 *cebolla chica*)
- 1/2 Anaheim chili, deveined and seedless (1/2 *chile largo-verde sin venas, ni semillas*) (See *Deveining Chili Peppers*, page 30.)
- 2 tbsp cooking oil (2 *cucharadas de aceite para cocinar*)
- 1 cup *machaca* (1 *taza de machaca*) (See *Carne machaca*, pages 21/22.)
- 1/2 tsp salt (1/2 *cucharadita de sal*)
- 1/4 tsp ground pepper (1/4 *cucharadita de pimienta molida*)
- 2 eggs (2 *huevos*)

Equipo

- Saucepan (*cazo*)
- Saucepot with cover (*cazuela con tapadera*)

Preparación

Peel potato and cut into dice-size cubes. Chop tomatoes, onion, and chili finely. In saucepan, heat 1 liter of water. In saucepot, heat oil.

Add veggies (except potatoes) to hot oil. Stir. When onion cooks, sprinkle in *machaca*. Mix well. *Machaca* sucks up the hot veggie juice. Add potatoes and stir.

When water boils in saucepan, add to saucepot with veggies and *machaca*. Add salt and pepper. Stir and cover. Cook over high heat for 10 minutes.

Crack eggs and drop each into boiling broth. Cover and cook until the eggs poach, their yolks turning hard.

Serve with warm tortillas.

Green Tomato Sauce

Salsa Verde or Salsa de Tomatillo

Not to be confused with green tomatoes (or unripe cape gooseberries), tomatillos are poor cousins of the ground cherry. Aztecs dined upon them long before the genes of Cortez swam down White River.



As for tomatillo stories, Pickerel has only one.

Once upon a time, India Robles, a wide-bottomed field forager and Pickerel's would-be mistress-of-mayhem-with-a-machete, delivered tomatillos—freshly picked from dew-laden vines in the predawn darkness—to his doorstep for ten pesos a pail. A Pickerelian price. Then one morning, when the tropical sun was high, Pickerel made the mistake of trying to be his hospitable self. He said to India Robles, this tomatillo thief, “Come in out of the heat, India. Have a seat on the sofa, and let me get you something cool to drink.” The invitation was innocent enough, but India mistook Pickerel's lecherous smile and the bulge in his pants (his pockets were full of limes) as preliminaries to a sofa seduction. What Pickerel saw next was the flash of sharpened steel, and then, as if the Force be with her, India Robles waved a bright-bladed machete at him—more precisely, at his crotch. Where this instrument of phallic downfall came from, Pickerel dared not ask, though there was only one place on wide-bottomed India where an 18-inch blade could hide without glinting in the sunlight.

Sadly, that was the last time Pickerel benefited from the low price of stolen tomatillos. He now buys them at his local market, and he suggests you do the same.

Ingredientes (makes 2 cups)

- 12 green tomatoes (12 *tomatillos*)
- 1 serrano chili (1 *chile serrano*)
- 1 garlic clove, peeled (1 *diente de ajo, pelado*)
- 1 tsp salt (1 *cucharadita de sal*)
- 1/2 tsp chicken bouillon powder (1/2 *cucharadita de consomé de pollo en polvo*)

Equipo

Saucepan (*cazo*) and colander (*escurridor*)

Small plastic bag (a bread bag will work) for sweating charred chilies (*una bolsa de plástico chica para hacer sudar los chiles tatemados*)

Blender (*licuadora*)

Preparación

After removing papery husks, wash tomatillos. Place in a saucepan with 3 cups of cold water. Boil tomatillos for 10 minutes or until they are soft. Drain in colander. Char serrano chili and peel skin. (See *Charring Chili Peppers*, page 30.) Sever stem and cut chili lengthwise to remove seeds and veins. (See *Deveining Chili Peppers*, page 30.) Place chili in blender with garlic, salt, bouillon powder, and boiled tomatillos. Do *not* add water. Blend until smooth. Your tomatillo sauce is ready for enchiladas, *chilaquiles*, and eggs. You may also refrigerate for later use.



Naked Fish

Cebiche

Cebiche, ceviche, seviche, sebiche. This cool and refreshing lime marination of chopped fish with diced chili and veggies has as many spellings as Pickerel has *comadres*. Pickerel's favorite spelling is *sebiche*, derived from when English sailors—new to the Peruvian coast—tasted naked fish mixed with fiery ají chili and started screaming, “Sonofabitch! Sonofabitch!” The natives took this incomprehensible expression as the English name for a spicy fish dish, and soon they began imitating its sound, unsuccessfully—sonofabitch ... sonabitch ... sebitch ... sebiche ...

Four hundred years later and four thousand miles up the coast, every Mexican seaside dweller has a recipe for naked fish. Some *cebiche* makers add pickled jalapeños to their marination. Others add fresh serrano chilies. Some like it with finely diced coriander, while a few prefer a pinch of oregano. There are those who add tomato puree, tomato juice, canned V-8, Clamato cocktail, a trickle of beer, or a dash of red wine. Others add none of the above, preferring instead to condiment with their favorite bottled sauce.

Pickerel's recipe comes from the kitchen of Maria Delgado Viuda Del Mar (widow of Del Mar), who Pickerel continues to console whenever he visits Playa Colorado, a fishing village west of Guasave, Sinaloa.

Ingredientes (four servings)

1/2 kg filleted fish (1/2 *kilo pescado fileteado*) Pickerel prefers surfperch (*mojarra*) or triggerfish (*cochito*) for this recipe.

1 tsp salt (1 *cucharadita de sal*)

1 tsp ground pepper (1 *cucharadita de pimienta molida*)

10 limes (10 *limones*) For extra tanginess, use green limes (i.e., not yellowed).

1 cucumber (1 *pepino*)

1/2 white onion (1/2 *cebolla blanca*)

1 medium tomato (1 *tomate mediano*)

1 serrano chili (1 *chile serrano*)

3 sprigs coriander (3 *ramitas de cilantro*)

1 cup Clamato juice (1 *taza de jugo Clamato*) V-8 juice may be substituted.

1 tbsps Salsa Huichol (1 *cucharada de Salsa Huichol*) (See *Bottled Sauces*, page 29.)

12 tostadas (12 *tostadas*) (See *Dangerously Crisp Tortillas with Toppings*, page 56.)

Equipo

Lime squeezer (*exprimidor de limón*)

Mixing bowl (*tazón para mezclar*)

Colander (*escurridor*)

Preparación

Cut fish into dice-size cubes. Remove errant bones. Place fish in bowl and mix with salt and pepper. Squeeze lime juice into a cup. Ten limes = about 1 cup of juice. Pour juice onto fish and mix well. Lime juice should cover fish. Squeeze more limes if necessary. Cover bowl, and allow fish to marinate. Go drink beer, lie on the beach, or spy on female neighbors. When marinated fish turns white—about 20 minutes—it is “cooked.” Instead of drinking beer, lying on the beach, or spying on neighbors, you should have been dicing those veggies.

Peel cucumber, remove seeds, and slice. Dice the same size as fish. Next, dice onion, tomato, and chili (remove seeds first). Cut these smaller than cucumber. Remove stems from coriander; mince leaves finely.

Using colander, drain lime juice from fish. Add veggies. Mix well. Add Clamato. Mix again. Add Salsa Huichol. Mix once more. Cover and chill 20 minutes. Your naked fish is ready.

Spoon *cebiche* onto whole tostadas, or break tostada into chips and use to spoon *cebiche*. Either way, enjoy the taste of marinated fish and crunchy cucumber with coriander in the background. Watch for lime juice dribbling down your chin.