

# SIMPLY MEXICAN

Lourdes Castro



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**To my parents, Alina, Fausto, Georgina, and Alfredo, who always support me, even when they don't understand me.**

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## Introduction

**When people ask me what I do for a living, my response is “I teach people how to cook.”** Reactions vary but most people are intrigued because even if cooking isn’t their “thing,” it is for someone close to them, say, a spouse or a parent. I hear comments like “Oh, I love to cook,” “I can watch cooking shows all day long,” and then there is always the “I wish I could learn.... Do you think you can teach me?” My answer is always the same “Of course I can. It’s simple.”

Although they may not say it, I know they’re thinking “Yeah, right. Cooking is anything but easy.” My own sister can’t walk into a market without feeling a rise in her pulse rate—not because she’s so excited, but because she starts to panic. Overwhelmed and intimidated, she never knows where to begin. But I maintain that cooking is simple. It’s not always quick and it may require some understanding, but at its core it is simple.

I like to joke that I developed an interest in cooking because my mother was such a terrible cook. But my career began when I chose to pursue a degree in nutrition at NYU through a department that was then called Nutrition and Restaurant Management. My mother wanted to know what in the world I was going to do with that degree. That was in the early 90s and the food culture back then was not the dynamic, addictive, and thriving industry we know today. It didn’t matter; I was hooked. I became a student of food. Eventually the student became the teacher, and I built a career around culinary education, teaching at universities and culinary schools. I even established my own recreational cooking school, which I eventually sold.

Throughout my years teaching, I noticed that there are certain cuisines and techniques that students always request. Next to knife skills (which is definitely the most popular), Mexican food—or rather, *authentic* Mexican food—is what I get asked for the most. Reasons vary. Some students have taken recent trips to Mexico that introduced them to the genuine flavors of the cuisine and sparked their interest in learning about it (I have taken many such trips). Others are second- or third-generation Mexican-Americans who want to recreate the authentic dishes of their heritage.

Simple is not a word most would use to describe Mexican food. I’ve heard cheesy, heavy, and even saucy. But never simple. When I started writing this book, I would ask friends and family what came to mind when they thought about Mexican food. Their responses always included baskets of chips and salsa and plates overflowing with rice, refried beans, and sour cream. Definitely not simple. And definitely not Mexican.

Unlike its Tex-Mex cousin, Mexican food is simply built around a few fresh ingredients—primarily tomatoes, chiles, cilantro, and corn—and a small number of basic cooking techniques—mostly roasting, grilling, and stewing.

The flavors are clean and vibrant, not masked and muddled.

What is not so simple is Mexico's rich culinary history that dates back hundreds of years. Traditions and flavors are deeply rooted, and there are many recipes that require multiple ingredients, several of which are often handled individually. I will not be addressing those recipes in this book. Instead I've focused on the popular yet practical recipes that can be prepared as a simple weekday dinner for two or for a large weekend gathering for family and friends. After all, what is better than coming home to a warm bowl of homemade tortilla soup or spending a weekend afternoon with friends sipping margaritas and sharing platters of fish tacos, chile-smothered ribs, and charred corn?

Feel confident in knowing that these recipes have been developed with one eye on authenticity and the other on practicality. As a teacher, I want to encourage my students to cook and make the recipes—not discourage them by putting up roadblocks that make cooking unnecessarily complicated. To that end, each recipe includes a section entitled "Cooking Notes," in which I write about ingredients and techniques, and give tips on preparing items in advance and storing them for future use. These are questions that always come up at my classes, and the notes are my way of coaching you while you are cooking.

Sourcing ingredients is one of the biggest recipe deal-breakers. I have found that home cooks will usually try to find ingredients at two markets before giving up on a recipe or finding a suitable substitute, which could mean just eliminating the ingredient from the recipe altogether. While that may be necessary at times, it also does not do the recipe justice. Achiotte chicken roasted in aluminum foil is just not the same as when properly roasted in banana leaves. I have tried to offer suitable substitutes for those times when you don't have the real ingredient on hand, but I have also made sure to include those "hard-to-find" ingredients in several recipes so you have plenty of options for using them once you've found them. Nothing is more frustrating than buying a hard-to-find spice just to use ½ teaspoon and never open the jar again! So you will see banana leaves, chipotles, dried ancho chiles, and queso fresco used often throughout the book.

One piece of advice: Read a recipe in its entirety before you start to cook! If I had a dollar for each student I have had who just dives into a recipe, well.... Think of a recipe as a map. If you want to get from point A to point B, you need to understand what is required of you along the way. Otherwise, you will get lost. However, once you've successfully gotten to your destination, getting there a second and third time becomes easier and faster. The same is true with a recipe. The first time you make chicken tamales, the process will seem a bit awkward. But after that, it's smooth sailing. To help you along, I have divided the recipe instructions into distinct steps, each with a highlighted brief summary at its start. Think of these steps as future shortcuts.

I hope you enjoy cooking and learning from this book as much as I have enjoyed writing it. And I hope you realize that cooking—at its core—really is

simple!

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## PANTRY ITEMS

### 8 ESSENTIAL PRODUCE ITEMS

(items you should always pick up at the market)

Tomatoes  
Cilantro  
Jalapeños  
Red onions  
Garlic  
Limes  
Corn (fresh or frozen)  
Avocados

### 9 ESSENTIAL MEXICAN PRODUCTS

(items to pick up at a Mexican grocery or order online)

Corn husks  
Dried ancho chiles  
Frozen banana leaves  
Fresh corn tortillas (will keep for 1 month in refrigerator)  
Masa harina (cornmeal for tamales)  
Canned chipotles  
Dulce de leche  
\*Queso fresco  
\*Mexican crema  
\*Perishable, so buy what you know you will use.

### 10 ESSENTIAL MEXICAN PANTRY ITEMS

(items you always want on hand)

Canned chipotles  
Red wine vinegar  
Dried black beans  
Dried ancho chiles  
Corn tortillas  
Dried oregano  
Bay leaves  
Ground cumin  
Annatto seeds

White rice





## Glossary: 25 Ingredients and Terms You Should Know

### ANNATTO SEEDS

Also referred to as achiote seeds, these are the reddish, musky seeds of the annatto tree. The very hard seeds must be ground in a spice grinder or blender because they are difficult to break up by hand. Annato is the main ingredient in *recado*, a spice paste used to flavor and color meats and seafood. Annatto comes in both seed and powder form. Avoid the powder because its flavor is not as intense or fresh as the seeds, and the color seems a bit artificial.

### ADOBO SAUCE

Ground chiles, usually ancho chiles, make up the base for this sauce, which can be made from scratch or purchased in a can. This spicy sauce is used as a marinade or condiment in many recipes. Chipotle chiles are traditionally canned in adobo sauce.

### ANCHO CHILE

This dried brown chile turns a deep red color when rehydrated. It is sweet in flavor and varies in its heat level. The ancho chile gets its name from its broad width (*ancho* means wide in Spanish). It is called poblano when fresh.

### BANANA LEAVES

Usually found frozen in the United States, these very large and pliable leaves are primarily used to wrap food that is to be roasted or steamed, in order to infuse the food with a distinctive smoky flavor. The leaves have a spine that must be cut off in order to make the leaves flexible before they are cut to their desired size. They are best kept frozen and can be defrosted and refrozen many times without much consequence. Banana leaves turn a brown color when cooked and are never eaten.

### CAYENNE PEPPER

A hot powder made up of finely ground dried cayenne chiles (red peppers).

### CEVICHE

Raw fish “cooked” by the acid in citrus fruit, typically lime juice. Although the fish is never heated, its flesh becomes firm and its color becomes opaque. Ceviche is usually served as an appetizer, and the marinade includes chiles, cilantro, and red onion.

### CHIPOTLE

A dried, ripe and smoked jalapeño, this chile combines heat with a sweet smoky flavor. Chipotles are dark brown with wrinkled skins and can be found dried or canned. Canned chipotles are packed in adobo sauce.

#### **CHORIZO**

Mexican chorizo is a fresh sausage highly flavored with chiles. The casing is typically removed, allowing the meat to impart a rich red color along with a deep slightly spicy flavor.

#### **CILANTRO**

The bright green leaves and stems of this fresh herb are ubiquitous in Mexican cooking. Delivering a clean and pungent flavor, the herb is used both raw and cooked. Its tender stems can be used and contribute much flavor. This herb is also known as Chinese parsley.

#### **CORN HUSKS**

These dried corn leaves are primarily used for wrapping tamales. They must be reconstituted by submerging in hot water for about 20 minutes. Reconstituted corn husks take on a slightly deeper color. They should be wrapped in a moist towel to maintain their moistness. They are never eaten.

#### **CREMA**

While often substituted with sour cream, Mexican crema is much thinner in consistency and richer in flavor. Because crema is a full-fat cream, it can be used in hot foods and recipes without breaking (sour cream is partly made with skim milk and will separate when heated). Pay attention to the label when purchasing the crema because there is both a sour and sweet variety. While it's a matter of taste, the sour variety is the one most often used—and the one I use for the recipes in this book. Sweet crema is not widely available, but it does exist. So, check the label just to make sure you are purchasing the correct product.

#### **DULCE DE LECHE**

Similar in taste and appearance to caramel, dulce de leche (sweet milk) is made by slowly heating sweetened milk. Popular throughout Latin America, people in each country have slightly different ways of preparing it. In Mexico, dulce de leche is made solely with cow's milk or with equal proportions of cow and goat milk, in which case it is referred to as *cajeta*.

#### **ENCHILADAS**

Enchiladas are corn tortillas stuffed with meat or cheese and smothered with a red tomato or green tomatillo sauce. The stuffed tortillas are then topped with shredded cheese and are typically baked.

#### **JALAPEÑOS**

Widely used and available in the United States, these smooth green chiles

vary in the heat they give off, which is mostly found in its veins and seeds. Ripened jalapeños are red in color and smoked jalapeños are called chipotles. Canned jalapeños lose their vibrant color and fresh flavor and should be not be used.

#### **JICAMA**

A root vegetable with a cream-colored flesh and very thin but inedible skin. The flesh has a slightly sweet, nutty flavor with a crunchy texture; it is often compared to a water chestnut. Jicama is typically served raw but can be boiled, sautéed, or fried. When purchasing, avoid a jicama with a wrinkled skin, which means it is dehydrated and will not have the desired crunchy texture.

#### **MASA**

Spanish for dough. In Mexican cooking, *masa* (also called fresh masa) is the term given to the dough used to make tamales, tortillas, and other corn-based products. It is made from dried corn kernels that have been cooked and then soaked in limewater. The wet corn is then ground into a dough. Fresh masa is not easily found in the United States.

#### **MASA HARINA**

A commercially manufactured flour made from dried corn kernels that have been treated to make masa, then further ground and dried to make a flour. Maseca is a very popular brand of masa harina sold in the United States.

#### **MEXICAN OREGANO**

This oregano has a stronger flavor than the Mediterranean variety, and is typically found in dried form. When purchasing oregano, assume you're getting the Mediterranean variety unless the label specifies the type. I used Mexican oregano when I developed the recipes in this book, but Mediterranean oregano and Mexican oregano can be used interchangeably in these recipes. The selection depends on personal preference and which type you have on hand.

#### **MOLE**

One of Mexico's most famous sauces, there are hundreds of variations that originate from one of seven master moles. A common characteristic of a mole is the long list of aromatic ingredients that blend to make the sauce. In the United States, chocolate is probably the most infamous ingredient, but, in fact, not all moles contain chocolate.

#### **POBLANO CHILES**

These dark green chiles measure up to 5 inches in length and have an intense flavor with very mild heat. Poblanos are never eaten raw and are usually roasted and peeled. Roasted poblanos sliced into strips are referred to as *rajas*, a term that also applies to other roasted and sliced chiles. Dried poblanos are

called ancho chiles.

#### **PEPITAS**

Pumpkin seeds that have had their white hull removed. They are best roasted with a bit of salt.

#### **QUESO FRESCO**

A fresh cow's milk cheese that is similar in texture to farmer's cheese, queso fresco is slightly salty. It is usually packed in liquid-filled containers to help keep it moist. This is a crumbly cheese that does not melt well.

#### **TAMAL**

A prepared masa (cornmeal dough) that is typically stuffed with meat, cheese, or chiles and wrapped in corn husks or banana leaves. Tamales are steamed and unwrapped before being eaten and are often accompanied by crema. While tamales are usually savory snacks, sweet tamales made with milk, nuts, and dried fruit are also served.

#### **TAMAL DOUGH**

A dough made by combining masa harina and a liquid, such as chicken broth. It is very commonly used as a substitute for fresh masa.

#### **TOMATILLOS**

A fruit enclosed in a papery thin husk, it is often mistakenly called a green tomato. It is not related to the tomato, but rather is part of the gooseberry family and has a fresh tart taste. Tomatillos vary in size, although most are about 2½ inches in diameter. When the papery husk is peeled off, tomatillos tend to have a sticky coating that is easily cleaned off with a rinse of water. Tomatillos can be eaten raw or cooked and are available canned. Try to avoid using the canned tomatillos because the color and flavor are inferior.



Chile, Cheese & Chorizo Melt