

RECADO ROJO

ACHIOTE SEASONING BLEND

Achiote, or *Bixa orellana*, is forever linked to the Maya people. They used it as an intense red pigment for painting their buildings, their codices and even their bodies; they mixed it with chocolate beverage to imbue it with the sacred color of blood; and it has long been used as a flavoring and coloring agent in the region's many pit-roasted dishes. *Recados* – or ground spice blends used for seasoning many foods, parallel in concept to curries – are the ancient precursors to *mole* and are used prolifically throughout Yucatán. Each *recado* is defined by its principal ingredient, and that of *recado rojo* is *achiote*. So popular is *recado rojo* that it is packaged and sold commercially. However, it is quite easy to make your own *recado rojo*, and commercial brands cannot compare in terms of taste. Another advantage to making your own *recado* is that it is so flavorful there is no need to add the herb-and-garlic enhancements called for in our recipes. Just add the specified amount of sour orange juice to dilute.

YIELD: APPROXIMATELY 2 CUPS OR ENOUGH FOR 4 PIBIL-TYPE RECIPES

☞ PREPARE THE *RECADO* ☞

- **1 cup (235ml) *achiote* seeds**
(Available through many online vendors of Mexican products and spices)

- **1 cup (235ml) juice of *naranja agria*** (Also known as Seville orange. Substitute: 2 parts lime juice, 1 part each orange juice and grapefruit juice)

- **12 whole allspice berries**
- **4 Tbs. (60ml) whole *orégano yucateco*** (Substitute: whole Mexican oregano or 2 Tbs. ground)
- **1 tsp. (5ml) cumin seed**

- **1 Tbs. (15ml) whole black peppercorns**

- **20 cloves garlic, peeled and roasted over an open flame**
- **2 Tbs. (30ml) coarse sea salt**
- **1/2 cup (118ml) juice of *naranja agria***

STEP 1 IN A SPICE MILL or coffee grinder dedicated to the purpose, grind the *achiote* seeds in batches until fine. Transfer to a fine sieve held over a plate or bowl; tap and shake the sieve until all that remains at the bottom is coarse residue that looks like sand. Return the residue to the grinder and repeat the process one more time. Continue until all of the *achiote* has been ground. Discard any residue that will not pass through the sieve.

STEP 2 COVER THE GROUND *ACHIOTE* SEEDS with the sour orange juice, and stir to mix thoroughly. Allow to stand at room temperature as you continue with the remaining steps.

STEP 3 IN A CAST IRON SKILLET over high heat, quickly and lightly toast the spices until fragrant and just beginning to smoke. Immediately remove them from the skillet and allow to cool 2-3 minutes.

STEP 4 PLACE PEPPERCORNS and the toasted spices in the spice grinder, and process until it becomes a fine powder. Strain powder through a sieve held over a plate as you did for the *achiote* seeds; repeat and discard any residue that remains.

STEP 5 IN A BLENDER, process garlic, salt and juice until puréed. Add the *achiote* paste and the ground spices and process until you achieve the consistency of a very smooth thick paste, about 3-4 minutes.

STEP 6 DIVIDE PASTE IN QUARTERS; wrap each portion well with plastic wrap or place in resealable plastic bags. Refrigerate until ready to use, up to 3 weeks. *Recado Rojo* may also be frozen indefinitely.