

POLLO ASADO

CHARCOAL BROILED CHICKEN IN *ACHIOTE* MARINADE

Achiote, or *Bixa orellana*, is a spice that grows prolifically in the tropical lowlands of Mexico's Yucatán peninsula. The early Spanish conquerors noticed the Maya's use of the bright red seed to stain their skin, their clothes, their food – not to mention to provide a pungent taste to their meals. Post-conquest interpretations include sour orange (*naranja agria*) to dilute the crushed seeds into a thick marinade. *Orégano Yucateco*, garlic and Old World peppercorns intensify the mixture. Once the chicken is marinated and grilled, it is typically shredded finely for a variety of uses such as in *tacos* and *tamales* although it is delicious served as is. The brining process is a more modern spin that greatly enhances the flavor and tenderness of the bird. Conversations with a dear friend, ardent cook and willing guinea pig in New York led us to add some optional vegetable oil to our recipe. It seems that Stateside chickens don't have as much fat as Mexican birds!

10 SERVINGS

- 4 quarts (4 liters) cold water
- 1/2 cup (130g) salt
- 1/2 cup (130g) sugar
- 5 whole allspice berries
- 1 tsp. (5ml) black peppercorns
- 1 medium chicken, about 3 lbs (1.5 k), halved

- 8 Tbs. (120ml) *recado rojo* (Also known as *achiote paste*)*
- 8 Tbs. (120ml) juice of *naranja agria* (Also known as sour orange or Seville orange. Substitute: 2 parts fresh lime juice, 1 part each fresh orange juice and grapefruit juice)
- 2 Tbs. (30ml) vegetable oil (Optional)

- 1 Tbs. (15ml) dried Mexican oregano leaves (or 1 tsp/5 ml ground), toasted
- 1 tsp. (5ml) cumin, toasted
- 3 large cloves garlic, peeled and charred
- 1 tsp. (5ml) black peppercorns
- 1 tsp. (5ml) sea salt

🌀 BRINE THE CHICKEN 🌀

STEP 1 DISSOLVE THE SALT AND SUGAR in the water. Crush allspice and peppercorns in a mortar and pestle and add with chicken to the brine; refrigerate 4-5 hours. After the brining process, drain and rinse chicken under cold water and pat dry. Discard the brining solution.

🌀 PREPARE THE MARINADE 🌀

STEP 2 DISSOLVE THE *ACHIOTE* PASTE in the juice. Use a fork to mash and mix the paste thoroughly with the juice. Add more juice if necessary to achieve the consistency of thick cream. For moister meat, add the optional oil and stir to combine.

STEP 3 IN A *MOLCAJETE* or mortar and pestle, coarsely grind the oregano, cumin, garlic, peppercorns and salt. Add to the *recado* mixture and stir thoroughly to incorporate. Pour over chicken and allow to marinate until time to grill. (NOTE: If using homemade *recado rojo*, you may omit this step.)

🌀 GRILL THE CHICKEN 🌀

STEP 4 LIGHT A CHARCOAL GRILL or wood fire. Grill chicken for 20-30 minutes on each side or until a meat thermometer registers 170°F (77°C). Remove from grill and allow to cool. Remove meat from bones and shred; alternatively you may cut into individual serving pieces.

*Available in Mexican grocers or the ethnic sections of supermarkets