

COOKING WITH WALNUTS

RECIPES BY DEVANY VICKERY-DAVIDSON

CHILES EN NOGADA

In this recipe, walnuts are hidden in the luscious sauce. I first learned how to make Chiles en Nogada while in cooking school in Cuernavaca Mexico. This is a signature dish of the Morelos region and it is traditionally made for the Christmas holidays. It represents the flag of Mexico, with the red, green and white colors.

This recipe serves 8 people and takes many hours to prepare, but it is well worth the effort. The chiles may be prepared and the stuffing made a couple of days in advance; store them separately, covered and refrigerated. Complete the sauce shortly before serving, since it will discolor if prepared too far ahead.

Advance preparation—walnuts:

2 cups (7 ounces) walnut halves and pieces, you'll need 50 about 1½ pounds) very fresh walnuts in their shells

If using mature-green walnuts, allow 1½ to 2 hours to prepare. Break away the soft, green, outer layer with your hands. Working with 5 or 6 at a time, crack open the nuts, remove the meats in the largest pieces possible. Drop the walnut pieces into a small pan of boiling water, immediately remove with a slotted spoon to a paper towel, then peel. The thin, brown skin that covers each piece will peel off in fairly large pieces if the nuts are very fresh; use a small pick or pointed trussing needle to help lift the skin out of the crevices. Continue until all are peeled. Store the nuts in a covered bowl of milk in the refrigerator.

Advance preparation—chiles:

16 very large (about 2 pounds) fresh poblano chiles, choose good-looking chiles with their stems intact if possible

To roast the chiles by the open flame method: Place chiles directly over the gas flame or on a medium hot charcoal or gas grill. Roast, turning occasionally, until blistered and blackened on all sides but not soft, about 5 minutes. The broiler method: Lay chiles on a baking sheet set about 4 inches below a preheated broiler. Roast, turning occasionally until blistered and blackened on all sides but not soft, about 10 minutes. Peel the charred skin off the chiles and rinse them if necessary. Make a long slit in the side of each chile and carefully remove

the seeds and veins. (Since the flavors in this dish are delicate, it is best to devein the chiles to insure they won't be too hot. If you suspect that they are hot, soak them in salted water overnight.)

Advance preparation—stuffing:

Before you start cooking, complete all the initial peeling, coring and chopping of the stuffing ingredients. Sprinkle the fruit with a little lemon juice to prevent browning, though a little oxidizing of the apples and pears won't spoil the appearance of the dish.

3 tablespoons lard or oil

2 large garlic cloves, peeled and finely chopped

1 small white onion, diced

1½ pounds ground pork shoulder with 2 ounces of chopped ham (or equal parts of veal, beef and pork with 2 ounces of chopped ham)

1 ripe, medium-small tomato, seeded and roughly chopped

2 cups of chicken broth

½ cup raisins rehydrated in hot water and drained

2 generous tablespoons dried mango, candied biznaga cactus or citron, cut into ¼-inch dice

1 small pear, peeled, cored and cut into ¼-inch dice

1 small Jonathan or McIntosh apple, peeled, cored and cut into ¼-inch dice

2 medium fresh peaches (or extra pears or apples), peeled, pitted and cut into ¼-inch dice

1 teaspoon dried marjoram or Mexican oregano

A pinch of saffron

A pinch of ground cloves

A pinch of ground cumin

2 teaspoons dried thyme

½ teaspoon cinnamon, preferably freshly ground Mexican canela

Salt, about 1 generous teaspoon

2 tablespoons vegetable oil

⅓ cup (about 1¾ ounces) silvered blanched almonds.

1 ripe, medium-size plantain, peeled and cut into ¼-inch dice



Illustration: Helen Krzyenboff

Heat the onions and garlic in the oil until the onions are translucent. Add the meats and then the tomatoes. Add the chicken broth and cook till most of the broth has evaporated and the meat has become tender.

Into the meat, stir in the raisins, candied fruit, pear, apple, peach, herbs and cinnamon. Mix well, reduce the heat to medium-low, cover the skillet and simmer until the apple and pear are tender (but not mushy) and the flavors are blended, about 10 minutes. Season with salt, usually a generous teaspoon.

While the meat mixture is simmering, heat 2 tablespoons of oil in a medium-small skillet over medium heat. Add the almonds and fry, stirring nearly constantly, until they are a deep golden color, about 3 minutes; remove with a slotted spoon and cool. Add the diced plantain to the skillet and stir it frequently until nicely browned and sweet, 3 or 4 minutes. Add to the meat mixture along with the almonds. Remove the filling from the heat and let cool uncovered. (There will be about 6 cups).

Stuff the chiles with cooled filling, packing it in well and reforming them in their original shape. Place on a baking sheet and cover with foil.

2 cups (7 ounces) walnut halves and pieces, peeled (see advance preparation above)

1 to 1½ cups milk

1 slice firm white bread, crusts removed

1 tablespoon sugar

Salt, about ½ generous teaspoon

1 cup of dry brandy

¼ teaspoon cinnamon, preferable freshly ground Mexican canela

½ cup heavy (whipping) cream or Mexican crema or crema fresca

Prepare the sauce a couple of hours before serving. Put the peeled walnuts into a blender jar along with 1 cup of milk (from soaking the walnuts), the bread, sugar, salt, brandy, and spices. Blend until a drop of the puree no longer feels gritty when rubbed between your fingers (this will be more successful with the mature-green walnuts); if the mixture should clog in the machine or if only the mixture at the bottom is moving through the blades, add more milk a little at a time, until all the mixture is moving through the blades again. Finally add the cream and blend for just a few seconds; add additional milk if necessary to achieve a medium consistency. Taste for salt and sugar; the sauce should have a slightly sweet edge with just enough salt to bring up the flavor of the walnuts. Set aside at room temperature.

1 pomegranate

8 sprigs flat-leaf parsley

Half an hour before serving, place the chiles in a 250-degree oven to heat through. Break the pomegranate apart under water, pick out all the seeds and place them in a small dish.

When you are ready to serve, add a little cream to the sauce if it is thicker than a medium-consistency custard sauce. Place 1 or 2 chiles (depending on how you have chosen to serve them) on each warm dinner plate. Spoon the room-temperature sauce over the warm chiles, generously covering them half away from the stem. Sprinkle the sauce generously with the pomegranate seeds, garnish with the parsley, and serve at once. Or, you can serve them traditionally on a round plate with the chiles in a circle.

Devany Vickery-Davidson started her culinary career with a catering company in Atlanta before moving to Chicago, where she worked in non-profit PR and created the Dinner Party Cooking School, www.dinnerpartycookingschool.com. On returning to her native state of California she has devoted herself to cooking, glass and ceramic arts, gardening, and doing what she can in support of sustainable farming. Her food and travel blog can be seen at www.travelingfork.blogspot.com



ROASTED BRUSSELS SPROUTS WITH WALNUTS AND GRAPES

I created this recipe for a dinner with my friend and editor of Edible East Bay, Cheryl Koehler.

1 pound of fresh Brussels sprouts cut in half
½ pound of large red globe grapes
⅔ cup of walnut halves
¼ cup of maple sugar
Drizzle of olive oil
Sea salt, chile flakes and black pepper to taste.

Pre-heat oven to 400 degrees.

In a bowl, combine Brussels sprouts with olive oil, salt, pepper, and chile flakes. Stir till mixed. Pour onto a baking sheet and roast in the oven for 20 minutes. Add grapes and walnuts, drizzle with more olive oil, then sprinkle with the maple sugar and bake another 15 minutes or until the grapes have softened and the Brussels sprouts have browned.

PERSIAN CHICKEN WITH POMEGRANATE AND WALNUT SAUCE

4 tablespoons olive oil
3 lbs. chicken thighs and breasts
2 large red onions, finely chopped
2 cloves of garlic finely chopped
2 tablespoons tomato sauce
2 cups walnuts, chopped
3 cups pomegranate juice
1 teaspoon sea salt
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
½ teaspoon ground cardamom
½ teaspoon pepper
2 tablespoons fresh lemon zest
2-3 tablespoons pomegranate syrup*
Arils from 1 pomegranate (remove them under water in a bowl)
Fresh cilantro, chopped

Heat olive oil in a large skillet. Sauté chicken pieces until brown on all sides. Remove chicken to a dish and keep warm in a low oven as you sauté the onion in the skillet. As onion starts to turn golden, add garlic and sauté for a minute or two. Add tomato sauce and sauté for a few more minutes, then add walnuts, pomegranate juice, seasonings, lemon zest, and pomegranate syrup. Cover and simmer for about 35 minutes.

Arrange sautéed chicken over sauce and simmer for an additional 20 minutes.

Serve over basmati rice and garnish with pomegranate arils and cilantro. Serves 6.

*Once available only at Middle Eastern markets, pomegranate syrup (or molasses) is now offered in many grocery stores.