RECIPES

Salsa de Molcajete

Salsa de Molcajete refers to a salsa that is ground by hand in a *molcajete,* Mexico's version of the mortar and pestle. Nearly all salsas used to be prepared this way, but now many cooks use blenders and food processors. Because of this, even in Mexico the term evokes nostalgia for the handmade quality of bygone days. A few restaurants in Mexico City prepare *Salsa de Molcajete* table-side in a collaboration between the chef and the customer. Here are some basic ingredient suggestions, most of them available in the United States. They are followed by a sample recipe.

About the recipe

At Mexico City's historic cantina, El Belmont, the chef places a tray on a table beside the customer. On it are a *molcajete* surrounded by a host of colorful, fragrant ingredients: chiles, herbs, spices, garlic, onion, peeled tomatoes, water, limes, and one of the concoctions's secrets: toasted sesame seeds. While they are regularly used in different *moles*, I had never seen them incorporated into so many salsas. In the proper proportion (moderation), they add a crunchy texture and an earthy roasted flavor to the salsa. After an initial consultation with customers, the chef begins to add and grind the ingredients, one by one. As the process continues the *molcajete* slowly fills and emits the intoxicating smell of its diverse ingredients.

Suggested ingredients

Salt

Garlic

Chopped onion

Toasted Sesame seeds (heat them in an ungreased skillet over medium heat, stirring often until they are golden brown)

A selection of dried chiles, such as, anchos, pasillas, pequíns and tepíns. Break the larger chiles into small pieces and cook them over medium heat in just enough oil to film the surface of a skillet. (also see below)

Fresh chiles, such as serranos, jalapeños and poblanos. They should be roasted or boiled as described below, seeds removed, if you wish, and cut into manageable pieces

Canned chipotle chiles and/or their adobo sauce

Tomatoes, roasted or boiled until the tomato skins can be removed and they are reasonably soft

Tomatillos, also roasted or broiled, but they do not need to be skinned

Cilantro

Limes to provide juice

Oregano

Mint

Tips and Directions

Add a little water to thin the salsa, if necessary.

If you cannot find a *molcajete* a rough-surfaced oriental mortar and pestle will work.

Make sure everything to be added to the molcajete can be easily ground. Dried chiles should first be fried in just a little oil until they are crisp enough to grind easily, but care must be taken not to overcook them, which will make them bitter. Smaller ones such as the *chile pequín* or *de árbol* can be added whole, but larger ones like *anchos* and *pasillas* should be broken into small pieces. Fresh chiles should be roasted or broiled to make them soft and to facilitate removing their skins.

Roasting can be done either in an ungreased skilled over moderate heat, or they can be placed under a broiler until soft and slightly blackened.Tomatoes should also be roasted or boiled until fairly soft and the skins removed.

Adding a little salt to the *molcajete* will provide a coarse texture that will make grinding harder items such as garlic and onions much easier.

Sample salsa de molcajete recipe

If you wish, begin by following the recipe below, which approximates the one I recently had at El Belmont.

Ingredients

2 teaspoon salt
2 cloves garlic
2 tablespoons finely chopped white onion
2 teaspoons toasted sesame seeds
1 small, roasted and skinned jalapeño chile
1 *chile de árbol*, toasted on an oil-filmed skillet until crisp but not burned
1 very small *pasilla* chile, toasted on an oil-filmed skillet until crisp but not burned
2/3 of 1 small *ancho* chile, toasted on an oil-filmed skillet until crisp but not burned
2 *chile tepins*, toasted on an oil-filmed skillet until crisp but not burned
1 broiled, skinned tomato
Water as needed
Salt as needed

Directions

Add the initial salt, then add and grind the items, one at a time, grinding each one to the texture you would like before adding the next.