

Red Blend • Holay Molay Pork

Blends of different red wine varietal wines have been around as long as there has been more than one red grape. Most red wines, though they may be labeled with a varietal name like “Cabernet sauvignon,” have at least a little bit of something else. For example, the typical Lodi old vine Zinfandel has about 25% Petite sirah to boost the color and tannin structure. **Red blends** are exploding in Lodi as seasoned wine tasters and consumers look for something beyond the traditional varietal wines. If there is not at least 75% of a grape varietal in the wine, the winery can't put a varietal name on the label. The upside is that wineries can then label the wine with just about any name they want, as long as it's not a recognized grape varietal. Lodi red blends go by names like Coup de Grâce, Tievoli (“I love it” spelled backward), Mystico, Stem Theory, Vin Rouge, 1850, Zinjo, and Speakeasy Red, just to name a few. For a winemaker, a red blend is like Twitter—it's a window into his or her palate. Tasting a red blend gives you the sense of what the winemaker would do, if only he or she had the freedom to do it. Luckily, they do.

Origin: Red blends have been around since the earliest days of wine production. Over time, certain red blends established themselves as standards, like Bordeaux (Cabernet sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet franc, Malbec, and Petit verdot), Rhone (Grenache, Syrah, and Mourvèdre), and Rioja (Tempranillo, Graciano, and Grenache). Notice that the names of these blends are the same as the geographical regions that they made famous. Blending grapes allows a winemaker to “design” a wine. A little Merlot can help soften Cabernet's tannins. A touch of Syrah can bolster a weak Pinot noir. While blending wines is traditional in certain regions, most new red blends are formulated solely to appeal to a wider range of consumers who prefer ripe, dark fruit and low acidity. It's interesting that the original Lodi wines were red blends like Tavola Red table wine and Gallo Hearty Burgundy. Varietal wines in Lodi only came into vogue in the late 1970's. I guess we have come full circle.

Tasting and Serving: There are as many colors, aromas, flavors, and mid palate sensations as there are red blends. Each one is designed to the specific preferences of the winemaker, who usually has a superior sense of taste. When you taste a red blend, forget about trying to describe it. Simply enjoy it. Serve a red blend at 55 to 60 degrees (15 to 20 minutes in a refrigerator).

Pairing: Because of the huge diversity of red blends, they go with just about any kind of meat, most cheeses, starches, and crab and lobster. You may have to experiment with your particular favorite red blend to see what goes best with it. However, generally avoid foods that are very spicy, sweet, or vinegary. I choose Omega Cellars non-vintage “Mélange” to pair with my Holay Molay Pork. Being mostly Syrah, it has the typical Syrah color and dark berry flavors, but the spices are tempered by the addition of Mourvèdre and Petite sirah. Omega's Petite sirah is much more mellow and fruity than most of the harsher Lodi Petite sirahs. The Mourvèdre adds tannins, but not to the point where they overwhelm the other varietals.

In French, "mélange" (pronounced mee-LAHNGE) means a mixture or medley, which aptly describes the extremely complex but subtle aromas and flavors of molé sauce. This pairing is doubly fitting, because "molé" is the ancient Spanish word for a mix. The tannins in the wine are sturdy enough to stand up to the spiciness of the chipotle in the molé, but the subtle flavors of the molé allow the fruit in the wine to come through. Frank Natsis emigrated from Artemision, Greece to Canada in 1960 then later to Lodi. He became a successful chef and restaurateur, owning and operating one of my mother's favorite Lodi restaurants, Omega. Longing to return to his farming roots, in 1990, Frank bought a Chardonnay vineyard down the street from Uncle Lester's house on Locust Tree Road and built Omega Cellars in 2002 after selling the restaurant. Though Frank is still a fixture in the tasting room, his son, Jim, runs the day-to-day winery operation. One day, me and my cousins took my Uncle Vern wine tasting. There was no tasting fee listed on Omega Cellars' menu, so my cousin made the mistake of asking Frank what his tasting fee was. Frank became indignant and said in his Greek accent, "Tasting fee? You know what our tasting fee is? Zero! That is our tasting fee." A tasting fee is irrelevant at Omega anyway, because you will almost certainly taste a wine that you want to buy a bottle of.

Holay Molay Pork

Over the past 500 years, Mexican cooks have perfected the use of chile peppers to flavor food. Molé (pronounced moh-LAY) is the result of their quest for the perfect sauce. Today, molé (which means "mixture") is probably the most representative dish of Mexico. More than 99% of Mexicans have tasted at least one molé. No book on Lodi food (or wine) would be complete without a great Mexican-inspired dish. Lodi is blessed with a large, vibrant Hispanic community that makes up a third of our population. Over several generations, Mexicans emigrated to the San Joaquin Valley to work in our agricultural industry. Today, these immigrants and their descendants are key to the prosperity of the Lodi winegrape industry. The vast majority of people who work in Lodi vineyards and wineries are of Hispanic descent.

Most people who visit Lodi wine country enjoy its beauty and drink our great wines aren't familiar enough with the grape growing and winemaking processes to understand the scale of labor that these endeavors require. The Lodi AVA has about 100,000 acres of grapes currently planted with an average of 620 vines per acre, so we have over 60 million vines to tend. Someone's hands need to touch every vine at some point. We have a lot of machine harvesting and even some machine pruning, but a lot of grape production is still done by hand. Many vineyards, especially the ones with old vines, are tended completely by hand. Then there's the matter of taking 700,000 tons of grapes and turning them into 85 million gallons of wine--every year. It's a monumental job that our local workforce does extremely well. You've probably heard that molé is a lot of work as well. It's true that some chefs and competition cooks take up to three days, working 24/7. Not so with this one. It only takes about an hour of prep work, followed by eight hours of smelling wonderful aromas coming from your crock pot.

Ingredients

3 cups chicken broth
2 dried guajillo chiles, stems and seeds removed
2 dried ancho chiles, stems and seeds removed
3 dried chipotle chiles, stems and seeds removed
1 dinner roll, torn into pieces
2 tortillas (street taco size), cut into 1-inch strips
2 tomatoes, cut in half crosswise
5 tomatillos, husks removed and cut in half
1 TBS vegetable shortening
1 small yellow onion, halved and sliced thin
8 cloves garlic, peeled and sliced thin
1/3 cup peanuts, chopped fine brunoise
1/4 cup raisins (two 1-ounce boxes)
2 TBS cumin seeds
1 TBS dried thyme
3 cinnamon sticks
1/2 tsp whole cloves
1/2 tsp whole allspice berries
6 ounces dark chocolate, coarsely chopped
3 TBS brown cane sugar
1 tsp salt
3 pounds boneless pork shoulder



Preparing the Flavors

Using kitchen shears (scissors that can be sanitized) on the dried peppers makes destemming and seed removal a snap. Just clip the stems off, then cut a slit along the length of the pepper and unfold it. The seeds fall right out, though some need a little help.



Most seeds in a dried pepper fall right out when you cut it open. You may have to scrape a few.



Peppers de-stemmed, cut open, and the seeds removed.



Mise en place for the molé sauce. Note the dinner roll is torn into little pieces and the peanuts are chopped to a fine brunoise (about 1/16-inch).

Making the Sauce

Heat 2 cups of chicken broth in a saucepan until it begins to simmer (about 5 minutes). Pour the warm broth into a blender. Heat a 4-quart sauté pan to medium heat. Toast the guajillo chiles, ancho chiles, and chipotle chiles in the pan, stirring and turning continuously, until the peppers get warm and aromatic (about 3 minutes). Put the peppers in the blender with the warm chicken broth. Toast the pieces of dinner roll and tortilla strips in the sauté pan, stirring frequently, until all pieces are lightly browned (about 3 minutes). Put bread and tortilla pieces in the blender with chicken broth and chiles. Push down to get all the solids submerged in the liquid. Allow the chiles, bread, and tortillas to soak in the chicken broth about 10 minutes. Blend the mixture until smooth (puree). Put the sauté pan back on medium heat. Cook the tomatoes and tomatillos until they are soft and slightly blackened (about 3 minutes on each side). Add the tomatoes and tomatillos to the blender with the chile puree and blend. Wash the sauté pan.



Bread pieces and tortilla strips toasted



Tomatoes and tomatillos browned and slightly blackened

Put the sauté pan back on medium heat. When hot, melt the vegetable shortening to coat the bottom of the pan. Stir in the onion, garlic, peanuts, raisins, cumin seeds, thyme, cinnamon sticks, whole cloves, and allspice berries. Cook and stir continuously until the onions are soft and golden (about 5 minutes). Remove the cinnamon sticks, whole cloves, and allspice berries and discard them. Transfer the onion mixture from the pot to the blender with the chile/tomato/tomatillo mixture and blend everything until smooth (puree).



Pour the chile puree from the blender into a 4-quart saucepan. Bring heat to medium or medium-low. Stir in the chocolate, sugar, salt, and the remaining 1 cup of chicken broth. Bring the mixture to a simmer, stirring continuously. With a thick sauce like this, you don't want the surface bubbling, or it will spew drops all over the stove like a volcano. You should see steam rising from the surface, and the surface should undulate but not erupt. Stirring continuously will keep large bubbles from popping. Stir until the chocolate is melted and sauce becomes thicker and slightly reduced (about 20 minutes). The sauce should coat a wooden spoon. When you run your spoon through the sauce, the sauce should stop moving in 2 to 3 seconds. Remove the sauce pot from the heat. Continue stirring for about 5 minutes until the sauce cools.



Cooking the Pork

Cut any strings off the pork shoulder and discard them. Place the pork in a crock pot. Transfer the warm molé sauce to the crock pot using a ladle, covering the meat and leaving about 1-inch between the sauce surface and the top of the crock pot. Put the extra sauce in an airtight container in the refrigerator. You can use it for another dish. Set the crock pot on low heat and cook for 8 hours. Using tongs, turn the pork about every hour. After 7-1/2 hours of cooking, use a small ladle to carefully remove the clear red fat on top of the sauce. Gently press the ladle into the sauce and allow the clear liquid to seep in, minimizing the amount of brown sauce that flows in. Discard the fat into a bowl. Continue until the surface is all brown sauce. There should be about 1 cup of fat.

"Pulling" the Pork

After removing the liquid fat, using two sets of tongs, tear the pork apart into small pieces and drop them back into the sauce. It will be incredibly tender. Continue pulling up larger pieces of pork and tearing them apart until all the meat is shredded. Continue to cook on the low setting for another half hour, then unplug the crock pot. If it will be more than an hour before serving, keep the crock pot plugged in and switch to its "warm" setting.



Presentation

You can serve this any way you want. I serve it directly from the crock pot. It's great as a main dish with my Easy Rice Pilaf-Mexican Style (page 204) and Shortcut Refried Beans (page 219) as side dishes. You can use the meat as a filling for burritos or tacos. Just put the pork on a street taco flour tortilla and sprinkle some cotija cheese and cilantro on top. Serves 6 to 8 people.

The California Ingredient

California leads the nation in chile pepper production with about 6,000 acres producing over 100,000 tons. Though these chile pepper varieties originated in Mexico, California now exports about 1,000 tons a year to Mexico. Most California chiles are grown in the Central Valley around Fresno and along the Central Coast from May to November. Early pepper plantings are done in Imperial and Riverside Counties for harvest in April through June.

Tips and Tricks

This recipe calls for chicken broth, not chicken stock. Broth and stock are made essentially the same way, but broth is made from meat, while stock is made mostly from bones. Broth is lighter with more subtle flavors, which is what we want in our molé.

You may not find dried chile peppers labeled straight "ancho." An ancho is actually a dried poblano pepper ("ancho" means "wide," describing wide flat dried poblano pepper). Pepper producers in the United States mistakenly call a poblano a "pasilla," so you may have to purchase a "pasilla-ancho" pepper, which is normally a dried poblano. You can tell it's a dried poblano rather than a pasilla if it is round and has a dark red and brown skin. True pasilla peppers come from chilaca peppers, which are long, slim, and black. Dried chipotle peppers don't keep as well as ancho and guajillo chiles, so you should buy fresh dried chipotle peppers each time you make this dish.

It's important to use whole cloves and whole allspice berries rather than ground versions of these spices. You want to pull *all of them* out before putting the onion mix in the blender to avoid strong baking spice flavors in the finished molé and having hard bitter particles in your otherwise smooth sauce. *Be sure to count the number of whole cloves and whole allspice berries that you put into the onion mix.* This will speed up the process of removing them, because you will know when they are all gone and won't have to keep looking for pieces that aren't there.

The peanuts in this recipe can be Planter's Classic Roasted and Salted, which you can find in any store. The small amount of salt on the peanuts will not affect the final flavor of the molé.

If the sauce is too hot (spicy hot) for you, next time, reduce the number of dried chipotle peppers to two. Or, if you want the sauce a little spicier, add a fourth dried chipotle pepper.

As a variation, you can make molé chicken rather than pork. Put 3 pounds of boneless, skinless chicken thighs in the crock pot and pour the sauce over them. Simmer with the crock pot on the low setting for about **4 hours**. If you want shredded chicken, shred after 3-1/2 hours. After filling the crock pot with meat and sauce, you should have enough sauce left over to make about 1 pound of chicken thigh filets or pork tenderloin the next day. However, with a smaller amount of sauce and pork, you only want to simmer the pork for about 4 hours.

This dish takes a long time to make, but you will thoroughly enjoy the process. It was probably the most fun dish in this whole book. There's not much prep work or chopping. At every step, you experience unbelievable aromas. During the entire day, while the pork and sauce are slow-cooking in the crock pot, an amazing aroma permeates every room in the house.