

RECIPES

Picadillo-ground beef

This recipe shows how to make everything from a quick basic picadillo (ground beef filling) to one that is more elaborate, a version rarely seen on this side of the border!

About the recipe

One of the major differences between the Mexican cooking on this side of the border and in Mexico's interior is that, instead of using the shredded meat fillings that are so common in Mexico, cooks in the U.S. often use ground meat fillings. That is because immigrants from Mexico adapted the least expensive ingredients in their new homes to their recipes.

In Spanish the word *picadillo* is used to describe these ground beef fillings. Unfortunately, they are usually pretty basic, normally made by frying ground beef with a little chile powder, garlic, cumin, oregano, and salt for a few minutes. In Mexico, tacos and other antojitos are usually filled with shredded beef, but when a *picadillo* is used they are typically more elaborate, such as the fillings for the classic *chiles en nogada* and those often used in *empanadas*. In addition to chile powder, garlic, cumin, oregano and salt, they will often include aromatics such as cinnamon, cloves, and allspice, as well as nuts, raisins, other dried fruits, and olives. They also often add water and simmer until it evaporates. This makes the flavors more subtle and the meat's texture smoother and more tender. Remember, most ground beef is made from tough cuts like the chuck and the round, and even though they are finely ground they can still be a bit chewy, so they benefit from a long simmering just as the stews made with larger pieces do.

Interior Mexican cooks and some in the U.S. often include finely chopped potato. The starch helps bind the filling, and during the cooking process the bits of potato melt into the other ingredients, creating an even smoother texture and additional flavor. While these more elaborate *picadillos* have found their way into some Mexican-American homes, they rarely end up in restaurants because they require more time and ingredients, and because most of their customers do not know the difference.

The following recipe is designed so that it can be used to prepare a simple *picadillo* in about ten minutes, or a much more complex and delicious one in about an hour and a quarter. The latter is similar to *picadillos* that I have enjoyed in the border towns of Piedras Negras and Tijuana. I suggest that you try the recipe with all the options then modify it to suit your own taste and available time. I think you will agree that the more elaborate version is the best and worth the extra time and effort!

Quick picadillo ingredients

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 pound 85% lean ground beef
- 2 cloves garlic, peeled and finely chopped
- 3/4 teaspoon pure *ancho* or New Mexico chile powder
- 1 teaspoon dried, leaf oregano
- 1/4 teaspoon ground cumin

Additional ingredients for more elaborate picadillos

1/4 teaspoon ground cloves
1/4 teaspoon ground allspice
1/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon
3 cups water
1 cup russet potato, peeled and cut to 1/4 inch dice

Instructions

1. Prepare the quick picadillo. Heat the oil in a medium saucepan over medium heat. Add the ground beef and fry, stirring constantly, until it is cooked through. Add the garlic, chile powder, oregano, and cumin. At this time you have a very simple picadillo that only needs a few more minutes of cooking to be completed.

2. Continue to make a more elaborate picadillo. If desired, add the optional cloves, allspice and cinnamon, and continue cooking, stirring constantly, for about two minutes. You now have a very simple version of a more complex filling.

3. Continue to make the ultimate picadillo. For the ultimate version, add the water and stir in the potatoes. Bring to a bare simmer and cook, adjusting the heat as necessary, until the liquid has evaporated and the filling is thick, tender and smooth, about 1 hour and 15 minutes. Please note that you can add less water and cook for a shorter period of time. In this regard it is worthwhile to note the changes in the filling as it cooks, and determine the time you think is optimal.