

Pati's
MEXICAN
TABLE

THE SECRETS OF REAL MEXICAN HOME COOKING



PATI JINICH

Photography by Penny De Los Santos

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FOR DANIEL AND OUR BOYS,
ALAN, SAMI, AND JUJU,
CON TODO MI AMOR

CONTENTS

[Introduction](#)

[Salsas, Pickles, and Guacamole](#)

[Salads](#)

[Soups](#)

[Anytime Vegetarian](#)

[Seafood](#)

[Poultry](#)

[Meat](#)

[Sides](#)

[Desserts](#)

[Drinks](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Index](#)





SHOW UP IN MY KITCHEN ANY DAY OF THE YEAR, AND YOU'LL FIND SOFT CORN TORTILLAS, refried beans, at least two

different salsas, the fresh Mexican cheese called queso fresco, ripe avocados, and fresh fruit—essential ingredients for countless spur-of-the-moment meals. You are always welcome to join me, because I always cook more than we can manage to eat at one sitting—not out of carelessness, but because that is the practical way of Mexican kitchens.

Salsas are the maracas of my kitchen: They shake things up whenever I need an extra kick of flavor. They can be the base of a dish or the final stroke of genius, a condiment with *mucho potencial*: not always hot, but often fruity, salty, tangy, vinegary, or crunchy. Avocados are almost equally versatile. They can be pounded into chunky guacamole, of course, but also whizzed into a silky soup; tucked into thick, crusty rolls with potatoes and chorizo for a hearty *torta*, a Mexican sandwich; or buzzed together with milk, cream, and lime juice for an incomparably creamy salad dressing. Soft, mild, and teasingly salty, queso fresco can be sliced into sticks, or diced, or crumbled on top of soups, salads, tostadas, tacos, and enchiladas. The beans are waiting to be slathered on a roll when my voracious boys come home from school or play. And as for tortillas, they are the building blocks for so many dishes from breakfast to dinner every day of the week: wrapped around eggs, enfolding steak for tacos, holding together a casserole. Crisp them, and they become the sturdy base for ceviche, tostadas or perfect scoops for salsas. Cut them smaller, and they are a crisp garnish for soups. And with fruits of all kinds—watermelon, mango, pineapple, and more—I make some of the most refreshing drinks ever, with and without alcohol.

I'm not sure that many Americans really understand Mexican home cooking. For me, it's the everyday food I feed my family: the dishes I hanker for, the ones that make me feel at home and that, ironically, I mostly learned how to make while living away from the country where I grew up eating them. That food isn't taco salads, nachos slathered with cheese, or overstuffed burritos. Nor, for the most part, is it the complex mole sauces that take days to prepare. There are, however, other traditional dishes that I serve over and over again, because they are fabulous, as well as new dishes with creative spins that keep Mexican cooking evolving.

Mexican home cooking is beautiful in its simplicity, tremendously convenient, and

wholesome. Out of our kitchens come some of the tastiest salads, soups, and cookies that you will ever find. Our food also includes a boatload of vegetarian options: casseroles of black beans and tortillas in chile sauce, plantain quesadillas stuffed with refried beans, eggs poached in delicious salsas. Not every dish has chile in it, nor is a dish necessarily spicy when it does. The best part is that this cooking fits our American lifestyle like a glove.

I didn't set out to be an obsessed food professional, but I'm a Jewish-Mexican mother, so the obsessive part comes naturally. Originally I trained as an academic and got a job in Washington, D.C., at a policy think tank, where I focused on Mexican politics and history. Eventually, though, I listened to my husband, who kept asking why I persisted in working there when all I talked about were the foods of Mexico, and all I did in my spare time was cook.

It wasn't an easy decision to switch careers. I can still hear my dad's jokes about how I wasted so many years: *quemándome las pestañas como rata de biblioteca*, which, loosely translated, means "burning the midnight oil as a bookworm" or, more literally, "burning my eyelashes as a library mouse." Yet I have no regrets. Those were not wasted years—they gave me great research skills and a deeper understanding of Mexico.

Today I'm a chef, food writer, and cooking teacher with a TV show, *Pati's Mexican Table*, on National Public Television. But most of the time, I'm an overloaded soccer mom with three kids and a powerful blender. I continually travel between the Mexican, American, and Spanglish worlds. When I say, "We are Mexican," my boys always correct me, "*Mami*, you are Mexican, we are American." So we compromise: We are Mexican-American, we speak English, and we try to hold on to the Spanish, but truthfully most of what we do is embrace a Spanglish life. Food is the natural meeting point of our cultures.

On the weekends, we start our days late so we have time for a full breakfast with one or another version of eggs, like Scrambled Egg Packets with Black Bean Sauce. *Sobre mesa*, "after table," we linger, sipping coffee and nibbling on crumbs of pound cake or cookies or slices of fruit.

We want our kids to have opinions about what they eat, and we urge them to choose their favorites. My boys always insist that their classic breaded fried chicken cutlets, *Milanesas*, be dressed with salty crumbled cheese and ground dried chile. They love green beans sprinkled with toasted pistachios and seasoned with orange. On cold days, they devour bowls of

Mexican Alphabet Soup. On holidays, our table truly shows our dual cultures. Our Thanksgiving turkey gets rubbed with a pungent spicy paste from the Yucatán and roasted in fragrant banana leaves, then served with a stuffing of chorizo, pecans, apples, and corn bread.

In this book, you will find recipes and ideas that have come to my table from many paths. Many have been welcomed into homes and kitchens all across Mexico over the years, and a number of the recipes you will find here have been deeply influenced by those home cooks. My go-to Passover brisket recipe, for example, is my take on Berenice Flores's *carne enchilada* from the Purépecha region in Michoacán. I grew up in Mexico City, a place that hums with food opportunities. Many of the dishes we now eat weekly, like Ancho Chile Burgers and Mexican-Style Pasta, are foods I enjoyed there at home, in restaurants, or on the street. I searched out other recipes to satisfy requests from viewers of my television show and students. I worked for months to nail down the best version of Pickled Jalapeños and Carrots, and I perfected Piggy Cookies after getting dozens of requests for this traditional recipe. Now my family can't live without them.

Thankfully, today the ingredients I use the most are widely available at the grocery store or with just a click online. Many, like tomatillos, chipotle chiles in adobo sauce, and queso fresco are used in a number of recipes, making it worthwhile to stock up. That said, I always offer substitutes for specialty ingredients when possible.

In this book, I also share Mexican cooks' tricks—simple lessons that were passed down from my grandmother to my mother and then to me. Many of the dishes in this book are even tastier when made ahead, adding to their convenience. All are magnets for bringing people to the table.

There is a saying that holds true for every meal in a Mexican home: "*Tiramos la casa por la ventana*" ("We throw the house through the window"), sparing no amount of money, time, or effort to supply a table full of soulful food. People may literally sell their furniture so they can feed an entire town for a wedding or a *quinceañera*, a daughter's fifteenth birthday party. Our food is abundant, accommodating, and much simpler than you might think. Sharing it with my new country has become my mission.

Serrano



Guajillo



Jalapeno



Pasilla



Ancho



Poblano



Habanero





SALSAS, PICKLES,
AND GUACAMOLE

RECIPES

[Charred Tomato Salsa \(*Salsa Roja*\)](#)

[Cooked Green Salsa \(*Salsa Verde*\)](#)

[Fresh Tomatillo and Chipotle Salsa](#)

[Chunky Poblano and Tomato Salsa](#)

[Traditional Tomato Pico de Gallo](#)

[Mango Pico](#)

[Crunchy Radish Pico](#)

[Pickled Ancho Chile Salsa](#)

[Pickled Jalapeños and Carrots \(*Jalapeños y Zanahorias en Escabeche*\)](#)

[Yucatán-Style Pickled Red Onions \(*Cebollas Encurtidas a la Yucateca*\)](#)

[Chunky Guacamole](#)



IT WAS A SALSA THAT SAVED THE FIRST MEAL I COOKED FOR MY HUSBAND. I'd followed step-by-step instructions from my sister Alisa for a menu I presumably couldn't mess up: grilled meat, rice, beans, and a *salsa verde*. Well, I messed up all but the salsa since it is practically impossible to ruin, and Daniel proceeded to use it to drown the entire disaster.

Daniel, like any Mexican, is wild about salsas. They flow through our veins. We've even managed to turn the word *salsa* into a verb, *salsear*, meaning "to soak, drench, drizzle, bathe, or pour," or essentially, to add salsa in any possible way to whatever you are about to eat.

There is a world of salsas that people outside of Mexico have yet to taste and understand. Workhorses in the kitchen, salsas are simple to make and come charred, fried, pureed, mashed, chopped, or raw, and with endless variations. Their common thread is the chile, since all have at least one kind, be it fresh or dried, yet they are not all spicy. Homemade salsas are also so easy, economical, and fresh tasting that after you make one or two, you will wonder why you ever bothered with jarred ones.

Take a peek in the refrigerator of any Mexican and you will find at least one of the two basic salsas: green tomatillo salsa (*salsa verde*) and a red tomato salsa (*salsa roja*). Like two arm-wrestling prizefighters battling for supremacy, green and red salsas are in an endless competition for most-favored status. Neither has managed to win, and there are even dishes that demand both, such as [Divorced Eggs](#), where half are served with green and half with red because, really, who can make up their mind?

In this chapter, I give you the salsas you will find most often in my refrigerator: my classic charred red and two greens—one cooked and one raw. But I also want to introduce you to several other salsas that are likely to grow on you: the raw and chunky *pico de gallo* salsas—*pico* refers to a coarsely chopped uncooked salsa—with a Traditional Tomato Pico, a fresh Mango Pico, and an unusual Crunchy Radish Pico. Then there are the exotic pickles that serve as salsas too, like Pickled Jalapeños and Carrots, Yucatán-Style Pickled Red Onions, and Pickled Ancho Chile Salsa, all of which keep for months in the refrigerator. And, of course, no salsa chapter is complete without a guacamole. I give you my preferred version, which can be dressed up or down.

Salsas are accommodating and versatile. They can go on top, on the side, below, in

between, or all over just about any dish. They can be the foundation that sets the tone of a dish, or they can be that last stroke of genius that turns it from delicious to sublime.

CHARRED TOMATO SALSA

≈ SALSA ROJA ≈

✿ MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS ✿ PREPARATION TIME: 5 MINUTES ✿ COOKING TIME: 10 TO 12 MINUTES ✿
CAN BE MADE UP TO 5 DAYS AHEAD, COVERED, AND REFRIGERATED ✿

This is my classic red salsa, rustic and deep, with a **hint** of smoke that comes from charring the ingredients (see the [sidebar](#)). Infinitely accommodating and delicious on everything it touches, it is excellent served as a dip for chips; drizzled on tacos, quesadillas, and all sorts of appetizers; or used as a base for meat and vegetable dishes. Depending on how the salsa is used, it can end up tasting quite different.

1 pound ripe tomatoes

1 garlic clove, unpeeled

1 ¼-inch-thick slice large white onion (about **1 ounce**)

1 jalapeño or serrano chile, or to taste

½ teaspoon kosher or coarse sea salt, or to taste

1. Preheat the broiler.
2. Place the tomatoes, garlic, onion, and chile on a baking sheet or in a broilerproof skillet. Broil 10 to 12 minutes, turning halfway through. Remove the tomatoes when they are mushy, their skin is charred and wrinkled, and the juices begin to run. The chile and onion should be softened and nicely charred, and the papery skin of the garlic should be burned and the clove softened. Alternatively, you can char the vegetables on a preheated *comal* or in a cast-iron or heavy nonslick skillet on top of the stove over medium heat.
3. Remove the skin from the garlic clove and discard. Place the garlic in a blender or food processor, along with the tomatoes, onion, half of the chile, the salt, and any juices. Puree until smooth. Taste for heat, and add more chile if necessary until you have the desired amount of heat.

✿ MEXICAN COOK'S TRICK: Once the tomatoes and chile are charred, you can remove the skins or leave them on. Like many cooks, I keep them for more intricate flavor and a more rustic texture.

Charring One of the signature cooking techniques in Mexico is charring, which contributes an essential flavor to a dish, concentrating and deepening it, while at the same time bringing out a subtle sweetness and a rough, out-in-the-country personality.

Traditionally ingredients like chiles, onion, garlic, spices, herbs, tomatillos, and tomatoes are charred or toasted on a *comal* (see the [sidebar](#)) or directly over an open flame. They can also be charred on a grill, in a skillet on the stovetop, or under the broiler, which I find the easiest and fastest way. Place the ingredients on a large baking sheet with plenty of space between them so they will not steam, and broil until they are nicely browned on one side; turn and repeat on the other side. Charring is like roasting marshmallows—you want the outside almost black and the inside cooked and transformed but not burnt.



COOKED GREEN SALSA

~ SALSA VERDE ~

- MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS • PREPARATION TIME: 5 MINUTES • COOKING TIME: 10 MINUTES • CAN BE MADE UP TO 5 DAYS AHEAD, COVERED, AND REFRIGERATED •

This is my house green salsa, a piquant blend of simmered tomatillos, chiles, garlic, white onion, and cilantro. The ingredients are pureed and then given a quick cook-down to thicken and deepen the flavors. Bright and smooth, the salsa goes with nearly everything: tacos, quesadillas, sunny-side-up eggs in the morning. And just like [Charred Tomato Salsa](#), salsa verde can be used as a cooking sauce for fish, chicken, shredded meat, or the vegetables of your choice.

- 1 pound tomatillos**, husks removed, rinsed
- 1 garlic clove**
- 2 jalapeño or serrano chiles**, or to taste
- 1/3 cup coarsely chopped white onion**
- 1 cup cilantro leaves and top part of stems**
- 1 teaspoon kosher or coarse sea salt**, or to taste
- 3 tablespoons vegetable oil**

1. Place the tomatillos, garlic, and chiles in a medium saucepan and cover with water. Bring to a simmer and cook until the tomatillos change from bright to pale green and are soft but not falling apart, about 10 minutes.
2. With a slotted spoon, transfer the tomatillos, garlic, and 1 of the chiles to a blender or food processor. Add the onion, cilantro, and salt and puree until smooth. Taste for heat and add more chile if necessary until you have the desired amount of heat.
3. Heat the oil in a medium saucepan over medium heat until hot but not smoking. Pour the salsa into the saucepan and cook, stirring occasionally, until thickened slightly, 6 to 8 minutes. Serve hot or warm.

• MEXICAN COOK'S TRICK: Once the tomatoes and chile are charred, you can remove the skins or leave them on. Like many cooks, I keep them for more intricate flavor and a more rustic texture.

Cilantro Although it was born in the Mediterranean, not Mexico, cilantro has put down such strong roots in our cuisine (five centuries' worth!) that it's hard to imagine cooking without it. Also known as culantro, coriander, or Chinese parsley, cilantro is sometimes confused with Italian flat-leaf parsley, which it resembles. But cilantro leaves are lacier, thinner, and more delicate, and their flavor and smell are a world apart from those of parsley: distinctive, strong, and pungent. Mexican cooks use the leaves and the thin upper part of the stems, which have a lot of flavor and a nice texture.

People have strong feelings about cilantro—they tend to love it or hate it. Those who hate it think it tastes soapy, and research shows that there may be a genetic predisposition behind that opinion. I'm in the group that loves cilantro, but I use it sparingly. A couple of sprigs are usually all that is needed.

Cilantro is a key ingredient in many salsas and guacamoles. It is also used to flavor beans, salads, stews, and rice, and the leaves are often placed in a bowl on the table as an optional garnish.



FRESH TOMATILLO AND CHIPOTLE SALSA

✳️ MAKES ABOUT 4 CUPS ✳️ PREPARATION TIME: 10 MINUTES ✳️ CAN BE MADE UP TO 5 DAYS AHEAD WITHOUT THE OPTIONAL CHEESE AND AVOCADO, COVERED, AND REFRIGERATED ✳️

Talk about a magical ingredient! When used raw, tomatillos lend a considerably different character to a dish than when cooked: they're crisper, of course, but they're also more tart, with a punchy, clean flavor.

In this recipe, the smoky-sweet heat from the chipotles in adobo can be adjusted to your taste. Use just the sauce from the chipotles for a hint; for a bit more heat, add the chile without the seeds; and to really ramp it up, drop in the entire chile, including the seeds.

This salsa makes a great accent for grilled meats, fish, or chicken. Add diced avocado and cubes of cheese and you'll have a to-die-for appetizer along with a bowl of [Tortilla Chips](#).

1 pound tomatillos, husks removed, rinsed, and halved

1 garlic clove

2 tablespoons coarsely chopped white onion

¼ cup coarsely chopped cilantro leaves and top part of stems

1 canned chipotle chile in adobo sauce (optional), seeded if desired, plus **2 tablespoons adobo sauce**

¾ teaspoon kosher or coarse sea salt, or to taste

1 large ripe Hass avocado, halved, pitted, meat scooped out, and diced (optional)

2 cups diced queso fresco, Cotija, farmer cheese, or mild feta (about 8 ounces; optional)

1. Combine the tomatillos, garlic, onion, cilantro, chipotle chile (if using), adobo sauce, and salt in a blender or food processor. Puree until smooth; it will be soupy.
2. Transfer the salsa to a serving bowl. Stir in the avocado and cheese, if desired. Taste, adjust the salt if needed, and serve.

Tomatillos are underappreciated. I don't think I have met

more than a handful of people in the Washington, D.C., area who have cooked with them. People love *salsa verde*, but they don't realize that the base of that addictive salsa is this shiny green cousin of the tomato. A bit less juicy and firmer than tomatoes, with a unique tart taste, tomatillos go beautifully with the spicy, sweet, and layered flavors of Mexican cooking. They are readily available in grocery stores all across the United States.

Tomatillos are covered with papery husks, which must be removed. The fruit is a bit waxy and sticky and can have a musty smell from the moisture trapped between the fruit and the husk. Don't judge a book by its cover: Just remove the husks and give the fruit a quick rinse, and you will have shiny green gems.

When you buy tomatillos, peek inside the husks to confirm that the fruit is firm and bright green, not wrinkled or discolored. The husks should be papery and dry, not wet, but don't worry if they stick to the fruit a bit. Tomatillos will keep in the refrigerator for up to 10 days if they are fresh.



CHUNKY POBLANO AND TOMATO SALSA

✳ MAKES ABOUT 4 CUPS ✳ PREPARATION TIME: 5 MINUTES ✳ COOKING TIME: 30 MINUTES ✳ CAN BE MADE UP TO 4 DAYS AHEAD, COVERED, AND REFRIGERATED ✳

A chunky base of gently browned onions and meaty strips of poblano peppers are cooked in a nicely seasoned tomato sauce. Once finished, this thick salsa is delicious with chips or as a garnish for anything from tacos or tostadas to grilled meats or chicken. I think it shines brightest as a sauce for cooking eggs—see [Poached Eggs in Chunky Poblano-Tomato Salsa](#). It also makes a lovely poaching sauce for fish fillets.

2 pounds ripe tomatoes

1 garlic clove

2 bay leaves

3 tablespoons vegetable oil

½ cup thinly sliced white onion

2 large poblano chiles (about 11 ounces), charred, sweated, peeled, stemmed, seeded, and cut into 2-inch strips (see the [sidebar](#))

¼ teaspoon dried marjoram

1 teaspoon kosher or coarse sea salt, or to taste

½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper, or to taste

1. Place the tomatoes, garlic, and bay leaves in a medium saucepan, cover with water, and bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Reduce the heat and simmer until the tomatoes are soft, about 10 minutes. Let cool slightly. Discard the bay leaves.
2. Transfer the tomatoes and garlic to a blender or food processor and puree until smooth.
3. Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat until hot but not smoking. Add the onion and cook, stirring now and then, until soft and translucent, 4 to 5 minutes. Stir in the poblanos and cook for 1 to 2 minutes more. Add the tomato puree, marjoram, salt, and pepper and bring to a simmer. Reduce the heat to medium and cook until the salsa has thickened and the flavors have deepened, 10 to 12 minutes. Serve hot or warm.

Poblano Chiles (see the [sidebar](#)) are rarely used raw in

Mexican cooking. They are usually charred and peeled to bring out their best qualities. The process is simple, and you can make more than you need and freeze them for up to 6 months.

CHAR OR BROIL THEM

Place the chiles under the broiler, on a hot [comal](#), in a dry skillet set over medium heat, on an outdoor grill, or directly over an open flame, which is how they are typically done in Mexico. I prefer to broil them because you can do several at a time.

Whatever method you choose, roast, turning them every 2 to 3 minutes, for 6 to 9 minutes. They should be charred and blistered on the outside, and the flesh should be cooked, not burnt—much like roasting marshmallows over a fire.

MAKE THEM SWEAT

Place the chiles in a plastic bag or a bowl. Seal the bag or cover the bowl tightly with plastic wrap and allow the chiles to sweat for 10 to 20 minutes. When I was growing up, my mom always wrapped the plastic bag in a kitchen towel; I do the same.

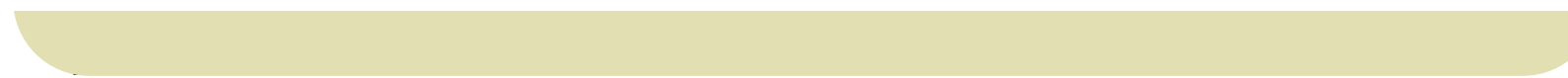
PEEL AND RINSE

Holding each chile under a thin stream of cold running water, remove the charred skin with your fingers. Then make a slit down one side of the pepper and remove the cluster of seeds and veins.

If you are using the peppers for stuffing, leave the stems intact. If using them in other dishes, remove the stems and slice the chiles.

Note: Poblano chiles vary a great deal in their level of heat. If you don't want to take any chances, you can tame them. Once the chiles are charred, peeled, and cleaned, soak them in warm water mixed with a tablespoon of brown sugar for 10 to 30 minutes, then drain.





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