

¡VIVA MÉXICO!

¡VIVAN LOS CHILES EN NOGADA!



The true origins of this seasonal 'patriotic' dish are unknown, but each year Mexicans associate their independence with this green, white and red delicacy that is served in the month of September in celebration of the country's Fiestas Patrias

BY NICHOLAS GILMAN
Special to The News

Each September Mexico celebrates its independence from Spain and its national pride during "las Fiestas Patrias," with lots of fireworks, mariachis, tequila, and, of course, chiles en nogada, Mexico's most "patriotic" dish. A true mestizo food, the origins of this rich concoction are enshrouded in legend. The story goes that Agustín de Iturbide, emperor of Mexico, arrived in Puebla on Aug. 28, 1821, having signed the Treaty of Córdoba affirming Mexico's independence from Spain. He was offered an elaborate comida in honor of his saint's day, prepared by the nuns of the Convent of Santa Mónica. Don Agustín refused all the tempting platters offered him, fearful of being poisoned (either by the Spanish who considered him a traitor, or the insurgents who suspected him of planning yet another monarchy — they were right)

If you don't have the time or energy to make your own, many restaurants are offering chiles en nogada this month. Each has their own recipe, but the basic ingredients are the same: chili poblano stuffed with ground meat/pork in a creamy walnut sauce, dotted with pomegranate seeds and a sprig of parsley. Some fry them in batter, others leave them natural to reduce the amount of oil and calories. The best we sampled were carefully and lovingly prepared, with attention paid to the creaminess of the sauce, the contrasting texture of the filling, and a delicate balance of sugar, spice and salt. So here are some of my favorite places in Mexico City to enjoy that rare combination of pleasure and patriotism, chiles en nogada.

He feigned stomach trouble, but when the exquisite chiles en nogada was served, he couldn't resist. Records show that versions of this dish existed long before these events, but it's a good story, and the dish has been associated with Mexico's independence ever since (August and September also happen to be the months when the ingredients are in season). Chef, culinary historian and restaurateur Ricardo Muñoz Zurita admonishes that nogada made with dried, packaged nuts, is "vastly inferior" and "should not be taken seriously." Restaurants offering the dish year-round are automatically suspect.

Chiles en nogada is a green poblano chili, filled with ground meat, bathed in cream and walnut sauce, then sprinkled with pomegranate seeds and parsley. The green, white and red of the dish are the colors of the Mexican flag, symbolizing "las Tres Garantías" ("the Three Guarantees") of the Constitution of that time: independence (green), religion (white) and union (red). There are as many recipes for chiles en nogada as there are cooks, and most Mexican families have a jealously guarded one from "la abuela." The controversy of whether to "capear" ("fry in batter"), or leave it natural is a perennial dilemma. For me, that extra turn in oil is gilding an already fattening lily, so all of the chiles en nogada mentioned in this article are "sin capear." I've sampled many chiles en nogada over the years, at the tables of Mexican friends, in humble market fondas, and at high-end gastronomic temples, both here and abroad, and I've come to a conclusion: This classic dish should not be tampered with. A "deconstructed" version

I once had at a trendy New York eatery posed a naked chili on top of its sauce instead of under, deeply offending my visiting Mexican friend Eduardo. It seems that all the best recipes come from somebody's grandmother, but getting someone to share that carefully guarded secret is another matter. Regina Gómez Dantés, language teacher and native "capitalina" hosts an annual chiles en nogada party, continuing a tradition started by her mother in the 1950s. She reluctantly agreed to share her mother's recipe — only because I have known her for 20 years!

Nicholas Gilman is author of "Good Food in Mexico City: A Guide to Food, Drink, Parks and Fine Dining" (Abraxas). Visit his Web site at www.mexicocityfood.net.



Chiles en nogada
ingredientes

SERVES EIGHT

For the picadillo:
1 kg. tomatoes
1 medium onion
4 cloves garlic
4 slices bacon
4 slices serrano ham
1/4 kg. each ground beef and loin of pork
1 plantain
2 slices pineapple in syrup
1 slice biznaga (cucullid fruit)
100 gr. each chopped almond and pecan
50 gr. chopped black olives
30 gr. chopped capers
4 tart apples, peeled and chopped
2 pears, peeled and chopped
2 peaches, chopped
Olive oil
8 medium poblano chiles
Pomegranate seeds
Chopped parsley
Salt and pepper to taste

For the nogada:
1 package Philadelphia Cream Cheese
1 cup whipping cream
1/2 kg. fresh sauce de castilla (walnuts)

Prepare the chiles: Roast over an open flame or under the broiler until the skin blackens, turning frequently, place in a paper bag for 20 minutes. Remove blackened skin by rubbing, but do not run under water; it doesn't matter if a little bit of skin is left. **Make the picadillo:** sauté the ingredients up to the meat in a little oil until well seasoned; add nuts and biznaga and lastly the fresh fruit, diced to 1/4-inch cubes. Season with salt and pepper. **Prepare the nogada:** put all ingredients in the blender; add sugar to taste. Stuff prepared chiles with meat filling, pour sauce over chiles and dot with pomegranate seeds and parsley. Serve with white rice and nothing else.

RECIPE BY DOÑA MARÍA ESTHER DANTÉS ALCÁZAR

WHERE TO EAT

Fonda Mi Lupita

Buen Toro 22, at Delicias, near the San Juan market, Centro Histórico
Tel. 5521-1962
Open Monday-Saturday 1 p.m.-6 p.m.

texture. The nogada, thick and creamy (and not sparing of the expensive walnuts), is fragrant with cinnamon. The waitress explained that the recipe came from the grandmother of the owner, Don Rosendo. Four Stars.

La Fonda de Don José

Fernando Montes de Oca 42, corner of Azteco, Col. Condesa
Tel. 5211-9564
Open Sunday-Tuesday 9 a.m.-6 p.m., Wednesday-Saturday 9 a.m.-11 p.m.
This pleasant, unpretentious Condesa eatery features

a sidewalk terrace and an extensive menu of Mexican and international dishes. Chef Federico Ramírez, son of the original owner, explained that his recipe for chiles en nogada comes from his maternal grandmother, Doña Simona Cantú — no surprise. The meat here is shredded, flavorful, and a bit picante; the nogada is only slightly sweet — a blue ribbon example.

Izote

Mazaryk 513, Polanco
Tel. 5280-1671
Open Monday-Saturday 1 p.m.-

1 a.m., Sunday 1 p.m.-6 p.m.
A friend's mother thinks Patricia Quintana's version is the best in town, so we had to check it out — I always listen to mothers about food. Izote is one of the best-known restaurants in Mexico, and chef Quintana has a high reputation for her refined classic Mexican dishes. She does not disappoint with her chiles en nogada. The flavors are well balanced (if a bit milder than those mentioned above) and beautifully presented, but at \$350 pesos

("is that for one or two?") seemed rather overpriced. **Sanborn's (La Casa de los Azulejos)** Calle Madero 4 corner of Eje Central, Centro Histórico
Tel. 5512-1331
www.sanborns.com.mx
Open daily 7 a.m.-1 a.m. Everybody in Mexico knows this venerable institution with its branches all over the country. It's the old standby for a late-night bowl of soup or the "clean" breakfast for your visiting relatives, but not generally

recognized as a culinary mecca. I thought I'd see how a chain, the oldest in the country, might do this classic dish. I went to the source, the original 18th-century Casa de los Azulejos, in the Centro, to sample the fare. Sanborn's version is less carefully fashioned. The chili was undercooked, the filling bland and the sauce runny. But, not bad for corporate cooking, and for 115 pesos you also get a soup, salad, dessert and drink, all traditional Mexican recipes and all very good.