Sauces / Mexico

Red Enchilada Sauce

The earthy, brick-red soul of the Mexican kitchen — dried ancho and guajillo chiles toasted until fragrant, then simmered with garlic, cumin, and chicken stock into a smooth, deeply flavored sauce that tastes of dried fruit, wood smoke, and the slow patience of a cast-iron comal.

Time 45 min **Servings** 4

What you'll need.

- ☐ 60 parts Ancho chiles (dried, stemmed, seeded)
- ☐ 40 parts Guajillo chiles (dried, stemmed, seeded)
- ☐ 8 parts Garlic cloves (unpeeled)
- ☐ 3 parts Ground cumin
- ☐ 2 parts Dried oregano (Mexican, preferably)
- ☐ 200 parts Chicken stock (or vegetable stock)
- ☐ 10 parts Lard or neutral oil
- ☐ 2 parts Fine sea salt & black pepper
- ☐ 5 parts Apple cider vinegar (a splash, to finish)

Let's make it.

01 Heat a dry cast-iron or heavy skillet over medium-high heat until very hot. Working with one or two chiles at a time, press each opened, flat chile onto the dry surface with a spatula and hold it down for 15 to 20 seconds until it blisters, puffs slightly, and throws off a wisp of smoke smelling of dried fruit and chocolate. Flip and press the other side for 10 seconds. The chile should have darkened, turned pliable, and smell toasty, never acrid. As you finish each one, transfer to a bowl and cover with just-boiled water. Soak 20 to 25 minutes until completely soft. Drain, reserving the soaking liquid.

02 Dry-roast the unpeeled garlic cloves directly on the hot skillet until the skins are charred black on the outside and the cloves are soft within, 6 to 8 minutes, turning occasionally. Peel off the charred skins. Add the soaked chiles, roasted garlic, cumin, oregano, and half the stock to a blender. Blend on high for 60 to 90 seconds until completely smooth. Start with a low speed and gradually increase to avoid a blowout of hot liquid. Add more stock through the lid hole as needed to keep the blender running smoothly. The sauce will look almost purple-red at this stage.

03 Heat the lard or oil in a medium saucepan over medium-high heat until shimmering. Carefully pour the strained sauce into the hot fat — it will splatter dramatically, so stand back and use a long-handled spoon or lid as a shield. Stir immediately and cook the sauce in the hot fat for 3 to 5 minutes, stirring constantly. This frying step — called 'frying the sauce' in traditional Mexican cooking — concentrates it, transforms the raw blended taste into something deeper and roasted, and gives the sauce a glossy body. It is not optional.

04 Add the remaining stock to the pot, stir to combine, and bring to a gentle simmer. Cook 10 to 15 minutes until the sauce is smooth, slightly thickened — it should coat the back of a spoon and pour in a slow, even stream. Season with salt and pepper. Add the apple cider vinegar, taste, and adjust: it should be earthy and deep with a mild, building heat, slightly sweet from the ancho, and brightened by a whisper of acid. Thin with more stock for a pourable sauce; leave it thicker for a more intensely flavored enchilada blanket.

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Servings are an estimate; check quantities in the source recipe.
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