

As the drums turn over propane burners, fresh green chiles tumble around inside, their skins blackening, flaking off, and falling like snow through the open metal mesh of the drum. The chiles are then gathered up, bagged, and sold.

At the market, you can find northern chile varieties like Chimayo and Española, both named after the areas where they're grown. But how, exactly, are these chiles different from ones raised in the south? Northern farmers are known for their "landrace" chiles (a term for plants that evolve to fit their environment). Descended from specimens brought to New Mexico by Spanish explorers in the 16th century, northern chiles tend to be smaller, skinnier, and more twisted than the southern type, and they have square shoulders at the stem end. The flavor is intense, with flowery aromas and varying heat levels. Meanwhile, southern chiles such as Sandia and NuMex Big Jim are bred for greater yield and consistent flavor, and they're fleshier, smoother, and easier to peel.

"The difference between a Hatch chile and a Chimayo chile is like the difference between a bell pepper and a poblano," says Margaret Campos, who, with mother Eremita, runs Algo Nativo farm on a sliver of land along the Rio Grande near Embudo. "Native New Mexico chiles grow a little crooked. They don't have as much meat, and they don't hold up to commercial peeling. But the flavor!"

Like all green New Mexico chiles, these northern breeds turn bright red when allowed to fully ripen. Since red chiles are usually sold whole, ground into powder, or woven into decorative *ristras*, they don't need to be peeled, which eliminates the main challenge of cooking with them. When green, the chiles have a sharp freshness; as they ripen, they mellow and deepen in flavor, inspiring even Hatch enthusiasts to head north for red chile.

Eremita Campos and daughter Margaret preach the gospel of northern chiles at their farmstead cooking school, Comida de Campos. You can take classes there on how to make New Mexico foods like tamales. Or you can stock up on their produce at the Pojoaque Valley Farmers' Market.

But even in Chimayo, not everyone is as impassioned. "I think the difference is up here," town native Leona Medina-Tiede says, tapping her head. She's standing at the counter of her eponymous restaurant in a rambling shack next to Chimayo's renowned shrine, El Santuario de Chimayo. Medina-Tiede serves some of the state's best food, but she doesn't seek out local chiles for her stews and sauces. "The chile in the south is bigger and meatier, and the skin slides right off," she says. "My mom used to grow Chimayo chile. There were 11 kids, and we'd run out [of it] in the winter. Then she switched to Hatch chile, and it was just as good."

Back at the Santa Fe Farmers Market, Matt Romero, an affable former chef, touts his solution to the great chile debate: breeding northern chiles with southern. At Romero Farms, in Dixon, he grows a variety called Alcalde Improved—landrace chiles from the Española Valley crossed with southern Sandias. "My chiles have nice, big, thick shoulders," Romero says. "The flavor is incredible, with quite a bit of heat. Describing it is like trying to describe sex. Words are just sometimes not adequate."

Cooking with chiles

These recipes are best when made with New Mexico chiles, preferably northern varieties such as Chimayo. Anaheim chiles, which are a New Mexico variety, are widely available throughout the West and make a fine substitute for northern green chiles—roast them over a stovetop burner or under a broiler to blacken the skins. (And if you're sensitive to chiles, wear gloves when handling.) Canned green chiles just don't cut it here.

Ground dried red chiles are used to both season and thicken sauces (don't be intimidated by the large quantities called for; this ingredient is nothing like cayenne or supermarket "chili powder," which is a blend of several seasonings). The ground chiles are sold according to heat level (from mild and sweet to quite spicy), so be sure to buy a batch that suits your taste. Look for it in Latin markets and gourmet stores, or see "Finding New Mexico Chiles," page 128, for mail-order sources.

Green chile chicken enchiladas

Like all good New Mexico food, this is simple, earthy, and delicious. Its heat depends on the chiles; go with Anaheims if you scorch easily.

PREP AND COOK TIME 50 minutes

MAKES 5 servings; 10 enchiladas

NOTES You'll need about half the meat from a roasted 2½- to 3-lb. chicken. Baked enchiladas can be frozen for up to 1 month.

1 lb. roasted skin-on green New Mexico chiles
(see "Finding New Mexico Chiles," page 128)

2 tbsp. olive oil

1 tbsp. butter

5 large garlic cloves, finely chopped

½ tsp. each salt and freshly ground black pepper

3 cups reduced-sodium chicken broth, divided

10 (7- to 8-in.) corn tortillas

2½ cups shredded cooked chicken (see Notes)

2 cups coarsely shredded cheddar or jack cheese, divided

Sour cream

1. Preheat oven to 400°. Peel, stem, seed, and chop chiles.

2. Heat oil and butter in a large frying pan over medium heat. Add garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add chiles, salt, and pepper. Cook, stirring occasionally, 3 minutes. Add 1 cup chicken broth and simmer until reduced by one-third, about 10 minutes.

3. Meanwhile, prepare tortillas: In a small frying pan, bring remaining 2 cups chicken broth to a gentle simmer. Working one at a time, very briefly dip tortillas into broth to barely soften. Transfer each tortilla to a large baking sheet (you may need 2 or 3 sheets). Do not overlap or tortillas will stick.

4. Divide 1¼ cups cheese equally among tortillas and top each with shredded chicken, dividing evenly. Wrap tortilla around filling and transfer, seam-side down, to a 9- by 13-in. baking dish.

5. Pour chile sauce over enchiladas and top with remaining ¾ cup cheese. Bake until cheese is bubbling and browned, 15 to 20 minutes. Serve with sour cream.

PER 2-ENCHILADA SERVING 526 CAL., 50% (261 CAL.) FROM FAT; 32 G PROTEIN; 29 G FAT (13 G SAT.); 38 G CARBO (4.2 G FIBER); 1,402 MG SODIUM; 117 MG CHOL.

Carne adovada (red chile and pork stew)

Pure ground dried red chiles are the star of this simple stew.

PREP AND COOK TIME About 2¾ hours

Food | Field trip

MAKES 6 servings

NOTES Serve with warm corn or flour tortillas if you like.

3 tbsp. vegetable oil, divided

2 medium onions, chopped (about 3 cups)

6 large garlic cloves, minced

3 tbsp. flour

1½ tsp. each salt and ground cumin

1 tsp. freshly ground black pepper

3½ lbs. boned pork shoulder (butt), fat trimmed and meat cut into 1½-in. cubes

1 cup ground dried red New Mexico chiles, preferably from Chimayo (see "Finding New Mexico Chiles," right)

4 cups reduced-sodium chicken broth

1 bay leaf

1. Preheat oven to 350°. Heat 2 tbsp. oil in a large, heavy-bottomed, ovenproof pot over medium-high heat. Add onions and garlic and cook, stirring, until onions are golden, about 6 minutes. Remove from heat and transfer onions and garlic to a bowl with a slotted spoon.

2. In a large bowl, stir together flour, salt, cumin, and pepper. Add pork and toss to coat. Return pot to medium-high heat, add remaining 1 tbsp. oil, and, working in batches, lightly brown meat on all sides, 5 to 7 minutes per batch. Transfer meat to a separate bowl as you go.

3. Return onions and garlic to pot. Sprinkle with ground chiles and cook, stirring, 2 minutes (mixture will be thick). Add broth, stirring to loosen browned bits from bottom of pot. Whirl sauce in a blender until smooth. Return sauce to pot and add bay leaf and reserved pork.

4. Cover pot, put in oven, and cook 1 hour. Set lid slightly ajar and cook until pork is fork-tender, about 1 hour more. Remove bay leaf before serving.

PER SERVING 577 CAL., 47% (270 CAL.) FROM FAT; 57 G PROTEIN; 30 G FAT (8.5 G SAT.); 20 G CARBO (5.4 G FIBER); 1,173 MG SODIUM; 177 MG CHOL.

Green chiles stuffed with almonds and raisins

This dish softens the chiles' heat with raisins, nuts, spices, and a slightly sweet tomato sauce.

PREP AND COOK TIME About 1¾ hours

MAKES 5 or 6 servings

NOTES Queso fresco is a mild, crumbly Mexican cheese sold in Latin markets and some supermarkets. You can substitute farmer's cheese or feta.

15 to **18** fresh green New Mexico or Anaheim chiles (see "Finding New Mexico Chiles," right)

½ cup plus **¾** cup slivered almonds

1 tbsp. olive oil

8 large garlic cloves, divided

¾ cup chopped onion

1 lb. ground beef

1½ tsp. salt, divided

1 tsp. each ground cinnamon, ground cumin, and freshly ground black pepper

½ cup raisins

½ cup plain dried bread crumbs

2 tbsp. chopped fresh oregano

8 oz. queso fresco, crumbled (see Notes)

1 can (28 oz.) crushed tomatoes

2 tbsp. honey

1. Slice off chile stems. With a spoon or melon baller, reach into chiles to scoop out and discard seeds and white membranes (avoid slitting chiles); set chiles aside. Preheat oven to 375°.

2. In a large frying pan over medium-low heat, toast all the almonds, stirring often, until golden brown and fragrant, 8 to 10 minutes. Transfer to a bowl and set aside.

3. Add oil to pan and increase heat to medium-high. Mince 4 garlic cloves and add to pan along with onion. Cook, stirring often, until onion is translucent, about 3 minutes. Add beef, 1 tsp. salt, the cinnamon, cumin, and pepper and cook, breaking up beef with a wooden spoon, until beef is cooked through, about 10 minutes. Add raisins and cook, stirring, 3 minutes. Add bread crumbs, oregano, ½ cup toasted almonds, and queso fresco. Cook, stirring, 2 minutes; remove from heat.

4. Carefully pack each chile with filling. Arrange chiles in a large baking pan and bake 35 to 45 minutes, or until chiles are browned and beginning to blister.

5. Meanwhile, make sauce: In a large frying pan over medium heat, bring tomatoes, honey, remaining 4 garlic cloves, and remaining ½ tsp. salt to a gentle simmer. Cook until most of the liquid is evaporated, about 15 minutes. Stir in remaining ¾ cup toasted almonds. Transfer to a blender, add ½ cup water, and whirl sauce until very smooth, about 1 minute. Drizzle sauce over chiles and serve warm.

PER 3-CHILE SERVING 568 CAL., 52% (297 CAL.) FROM FAT; 31 G PROTEIN; 33 G FAT (11 G SAT.); 40 G CARBO (4.4 G FIBER); 1,202 MG SODIUM; 76 MG CHOL. ■