

## March Spice Club:

# Mexican Oregano



You may think “Mexican oregano” won’t be very different from the common oregano most of us have at home. They look similar, they share a name, but be assured, these superficial commonalities are deceitful. True oreganos, belonging to the mint family and hailing from Mediterranean and Eurasian regions, are far removed from the *Lippia graveolens* plant, which is a member of the verbena family and native to Central and South America.

The differences in the flavors and aromas of these herbs stand out as well (we encourage you to compare them side-by-side)! Cherished in Mexican cuisine, particularly in salsas, marinades, and meat dishes, Mexican oregano possesses robust and citrusy aromas with hints of mild licorice that lend a bright and zesty flavor to a wide range of ingredients.

Transcending borders, Mexican oregano has emerged in global culinary circles where its versatility beyond savory dishes makes it a popular choice for infusing oils, vinegars, and beverages with its aromatic essence. Whether incorporated into traditional Mexican classics or innovative fusion creations, this unique herb invites exploration and experimentation in the kitchen. This month, Spice Club invites you to discover the allure of Mexican oregano!

## *Salsa de Jitomate*

### Basic Cooked Tomato Sauce

Nancy Zaslavsky, *Meatless Mexican Home Cooking*

Yields 4 cups | Prep time: 20 mins. | Cook time: 20 mins.

“The sauce may also be used as a table salsa if you serve it at room temperature – be sure to add extra chiles because it must be spicier than this basic cooked sauce.

Leftover sauce may be refrigerated for up to 3 days, or it may be frozen.”

1 ½ lbs. red-ripe tomatoes OR	¼ cup chopped cilantro or flat-leaf
1 20-oz. can plum tomatoes, drained	parsley
1 large white onion, chopped	2 Tbsp dried Mexican oregano
6 garlic cloves, peeled	1 tsp kosher salt
4 red jalapeno or serrano chiles	8 grinds of black pepper
(unseeded), or green if red are	1-2 Tbsp sugar
unavailable, chopped	1 Tbsp vegetable oil

Roughly chop the tomatoes and put them in a processor or blender container. Add the onion, garlic, chiles, herbs, salt, pepper, and sugar. Blend. Stir down everything in the blender, scraping the sides, pulsing the machine and keeping a little texture – this is not a completely smooth sauce.

Heat the oil in a deep pot and add the blended ingredients. Bring to a boil and boil uncovered for 2 minutes, then reduce the heat and simmer for 15 minutes. Taste for seasoning. If the tomatoes are acidic, add an additional tablespoon of sugar and continue cooking for 3 minutes.

## *Carnitas*

### Braised and Fried Pork

Roberto Santibañez, *Truly Mexican*

Serves 8 | Prep time: 20 mins. | Cook time: 2 ½ hrs.

“This recipe is the classic way to make *carnitas* – well, almost. Many restaurants and stalls put a whole butchered pig in a huge copper pot and let it simmer away until any liquid has evaporated”

- 4 lbs. fatty pork shoulder, cut into 2-inch pieces
- 3 cups water
- 1 medium white onion, thinly sliced
- ½ orange, cut into 2 pieces
- ¼ cup pork lard or vegetable oil
- 8 garlic cloves, peeled
- 3 bay leaves
- 1 Tbsp sweetened condensed milk
- 2 tsp Mexican dried oregano, crumbled
- 2 tsp fine salt, or 4 tsp kosher salt

Put all the ingredients in a wide 6- to 7-quart heavy pot (don't worry if the pork is not completely covered) and bring the water to a boil, skimming the surface as necessary. Lower the heat and simmer vigorously, stirring occasionally, until the pork is fork-tender and the liquid has completely evaporated, 1 ½ - 2 hours. Discard the orange pieces and bay leaves. If the liquid hasn't evaporated after 2 hours, transfer the pork pieces to a bowl and let the liquid continue to bubble away, stirring often, until it has.

Preheat the oven to 450°F. Transfer the pork and fat to an ovenproof dish, if necessary, and brown the pork, uncovered, in the oven for 20 – 30 minutes. There's no need to stir.

Serve with prepared black beans, rice, salsa, and guacamole, or make it into tacos. *Carnitas* keeps in the fridge for up to 3 days.

*Note:* To make a half batch, cut the amount of pork, salt, and oregano in half, but use the same amount of the remaining ingredients and water. You will need to use a slightly smaller pot.

## *Suggested Reading on Mexican Cuisine*

*The Gracias Madre Cookbook*

Laura Esquivel, *Like Water for Chocolate*

Laura Fuentes, *The Taco Tuesday Cookbook*

Sandra Gutierrez, *Latinísimo*

Pati Jinich, *Treasures of the Mexican Table*

Roberto Santibañez, *Truly Mexican*

Deborah Schneider, *The Essential Mexican Instant Pot  
Cookbook*

Nancy Zaslavsky, *Meatless Mexican Home Cooking*

## *Enjoy authentic & local Mexican cuisine:*

Pancho Villa (Brunswick)

Taco Escobar (Portland)

El Rayo (Portland/Scarborough)

Luchador Tacos (Auburn)

Margaritas (Brunswick)

El Rodeo (Brunswick)

Locally Sauced (Yarmouth)