

Stuffing Peppers Mexican Style

Everything from plain cheese to savory meat and fruit *picadillo* tastes wonderful in *chiles rellenos*

BY SUSAN WHALE



Whenever I bite into a *chile relleno* with its soft, hot filling and sauce-soaked coating, I tell myself that it's been too long since I last made them. Luckily they're on the menu at most Mexican restaurants. Though they are a bit of work to make—the peppers are peeled, seeded, stuffed, coated with an egg batter, fried, and then reheated in a sauce—none of the steps is difficult, and the results are worth the effort. I like to serve them as the starter in a multicourse dinner, feature them in a vegetarian meal, or serve them with rice and tortillas for a satisfying supper.

LOOK FOR POBLANO PEPPERS

The pepper most often used for stuffing here in Mexico is the *chile poblano*, a large, dark green, pointed chili pepper that ranges from very mild to moderately hot. (For suggestions on where to get poblanos, see Sources on p. 63.) But many peppers can be used, not just poblanos. Red and green bell peppers make delicious *chile rellenos* (literally “stuffed peppers”), though the flavor will not be as complex as with poblanos.

Make sure the peppers are fresh, have bright, shiny skins, and feel firm to the touch. Old chiles with dull, wrinkled skin and soft flesh disintegrate too easily during roasting and peeling. Straight peppers without deep creases are the easiest to peel. If you're using bell peppers, choose small to medium-size ones, because large peppers will be overwhelmingly big once they're filled, battered, and fried.

PEELING OFF THE TOUGH SKIN

Peeling the fresh peppers isn't difficult if they're first charred and sweated. You must peel poblano peppers because their tough skin is no fun to eat, but this step is optional with thinner-skinned bell peppers. When charring peppers, get the pepper as close to a flame as possible so that the skin blisters and loosens quickly before the flesh overcooks and disintegrates. I like to char them right on a gas burner where I can keep an eye on them and turn them as needed (see photo at right). You can char them under a broiler instead, but I find it takes longer and the flesh is too soft by the time the skin blisters. If you have an electric stove, put the peppers on a rack right over the burner (a small cake-cooling rack works well). Or, if you want to avoid making a mess on your stove, try blackening the peppers outside on a grill. No matter where you blacken the peppers, turn them frequently with a

As pleasing to the mouth as it is colorful, chile en nogada combines the slight heat of a poblano chile pepper, the sweet creaminess of walnut sauce, the tang of the picadillo filling, and the juicy crunch of the pomegranate-seed garnish.

Photos: Suzanne Roman

pair of tongs so that the skins blister evenly.

As soon as each pepper is charred, put it in a plastic bag along with the other blistered peppers. Twist the bag shut and drape a wet cloth over the bag. Let the peppers sweat for 10 to 15 minutes, and then wash the skins off in a bowl of water or under a running tap. If the skins have been well blistered, they'll come off easily.

After you've peeled the peppers, make a small slit along the length of the pepper just big enough to allow you to snip out the ball of seeds near the stem and remove the thick, whitish veins from the inner walls of the pepper (see photo at right).

Peeled and deveined peppers freeze very well, so it's worth buying large quantities of peppers when they're at their best, peeling the whole batch, and storing them in the freezer to have ready when you want to make *chiles rellenos*. Freeze them flat with a

of these fillings for additional flavor and to help bind the mixture together so that it doesn't fall out of the chile during frying, but it isn't necessary.

Filling the peppers goes quite quickly. First stick a one- to two-ounce chunk of cheese or a spoonful of the filling into the pepper and close the opening in the pepper. Resist the urge to pack in a lot of filling, because when the pepper's battered and cooked, it will be too much for one person to eat.

Until you've had a bit of practice and can hold the stuffed pepper together with your fingers while you dip and fry it, it helps to fasten the pepper closed with a toothpick. Overlap the cut edges and stick the toothpick through both pieces of flesh. Remember to remove the pick after frying.

The next step is to coat the peppers with flour (see photo on p. 62). I like to season the flour with salt, pepper, and a little powdered chicken bouillon.



Charring peppers over a flame loosens the tough skin. After the poblano peppers are fully charred, they're put in a plastic bag to sweat for 15 minutes. The blackened skin will slip right off.

The pepper needs some flesh near the stem to keep its round shape, so don't cut too close to the stem when removing the seeds.



piece of plastic wrap between each layer so that you can take them out as you need them.

STUFFING THE PEPPERS

Cheese makes a wonderful stuffing for *chiles rellenos*; it's what you'll find most often on menus at Mexican restaurants. Any soft, mild-flavored cheese will do. My two favorite Mexican cheeses to use are *panela* and *manchego*. Cheeses more readily available in the United States that would work well are mozzarella, Monterey Jack, and Gouda.

While cheese is the most common filling in *chiles rellenos*, the possibilities are endless. I like to stuff peppers with sweet-and-sour *picadillo* (recipe on p. 62) and with a mixture of sautéed zucchini, mushrooms, garbanzos, corn, and tomatoes. Other fillings I like are puréed potatoes, refried beans, tuna fish, sardines, risotto, leftover chicken, and sautéed squash blossoms. You can add grated cheese to any

A half cup of flour is plenty for six peppers. Dip each stuffed pepper into the flour and pat the pepper to make sure the flour sticks. I find it's easiest to stuff a pepper and immediately cover it with flour while I still have it in my hands.

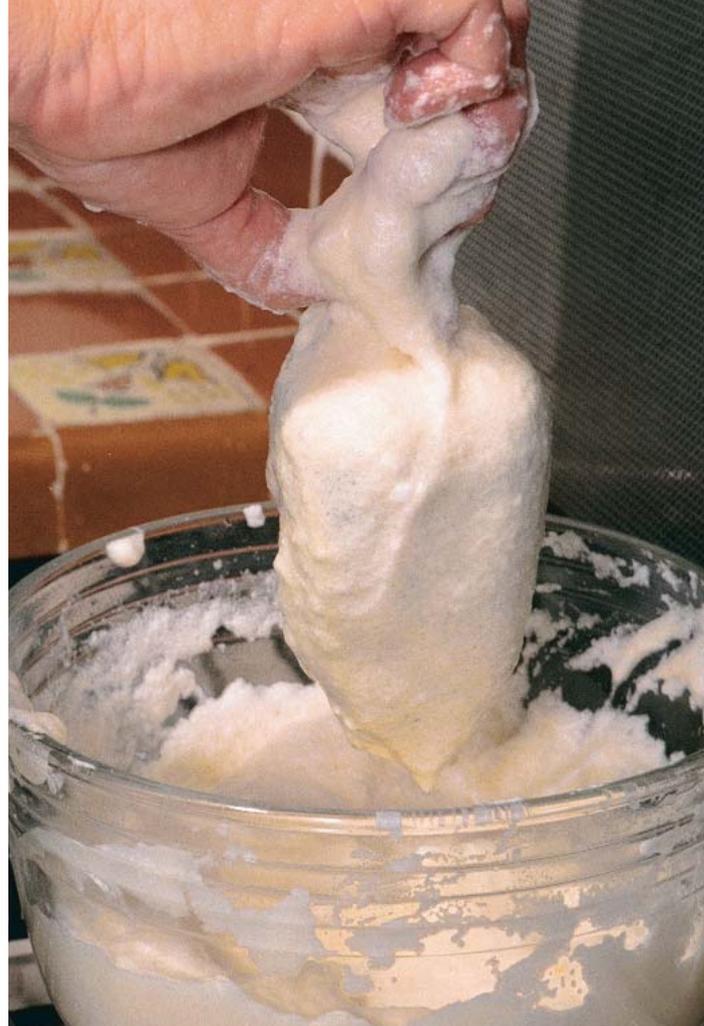
COATING IN BATTER AND FRYING

When the peppers are stuffed and coated with flour, you'll dip them in a simple batter made only from eggs and then fry them. Since the whipped egg whites in the batter quickly fall back to a liquid state, get everything ready for frying the peppers before you begin to make the batter. Put about an inch and a half of oil into a wide, shallow saucepan or a frying pan. Get out two spatulas or spoons to turn the peppers. A deep-fat fryer will work as long as it's wide enough to reach in with the two spatulas to turn the peppers over. Set a plate covered with several sheets of paper towels near the stove



A coating of flour helps the egg batter stick to the stuffed peppers. These peppers are stuffed with a mixture of meat and fruit called picadillo.

A generous battering and quick frying make for a light, non-greasy coating for the stuffed peppers.



to drain the fried peppers. Heat the oil slowly over moderate heat.

When these items are ready, turn to the eggs. Four large eggs are ample to coat six medium chiles. Carefully separate the whites from the yolks. Lightly whisk the yolks and set them aside. Beat the whites in a clean, dry bowl with a clean whisk or electric mixer until the whites stand up in peaks and stick to the whisk or beaters. Gently fold the yolks into the whites with a fork or a whisk. The mixture should be an even, pale yellow color and have a meringue consistency.

Check to see that the oil is hot enough for frying the peppers by dropping a bit of the egg batter into it. If it sizzles and quickly turns brown, the oil is ready.

Take the peppers one at a time and shake off any excess flour. Immerse the pepper in the egg batter and turn it until it's completely coated (see photo above right). Carefully lay it in the hot oil. If the egg batter doesn't brown in 15 to 20 seconds, turn up the heat a bit, because the longer the pepper sits in the oil, the more grease it will absorb. While the egg batter is browning underneath, splash or spoon oil on the top of the pepper to help set the coating that hasn't cooked yet. Once the bottom is brown, partially turn the pepper with the two spoons or spatulas and continue frying until the pepper is evenly browned on all sides (see photo on opposite page). Remove the peppers from the oil and drain them on the paper towels. It's easier to fry the peppers with two people: one coating and the other frying. If you're working alone, be patient and fry the peppers one by one so that you can turn them frequently to help them keep their shape.

After the chiles have been coated and fried, they are traditionally served covered with a thin tomato sauce (see recipe at right) and accompanied by Mexican rice and tortillas. Since the egg coating isn't meant to be crunchy, the fried peppers hold well for several hours before serving. Reheat the peppers by simmering them in the sauce for a couple of minutes

or arranging the chiles in a microwaveable dish, pouring the hot sauce over them, and heating them in a microwave on high for about four minutes.

Up until now, I've only talked about *chiles rellenos* that are coated with egg, fried, and served hot, but *chiles rellenos* don't have to be fried and can be served cold. In fact, if your peppers fall apart when you peel them, you're better off not cooking them further. Fill them with something that's tasty cold, such as tuna or chicken salad, and serve them on a bed of lettuce covered with a cream, yogurt, or vinaigrette dressing.

A special type of *chiles rellenos* called *chiles en nogada* is stuffed with *picadillo* and covered with a walnut cream sauce (recipes at below and at right). It can be made with or without the batter coating. Garnished with red pomegranate seeds and green parsley, *chiles en nogada* have the colors of the Mexican flag and are great to serve on Mexico's Independence Day, the sixteenth of September (see photo on p. 60).

PICADILLO

(Meat and fruit filling)

Fruits, nuts, and tomatoes work together to give this meat filling a sweet-and-sour flavor. To make delicious *Chiles en Nogada*, stuff peppers with *picadillo* and cover them with walnut cream sauce. *Enough to stuff 8 to 10 peppers.*

½ cup sliced almonds or chopped walnuts

1 small onion, chopped fine

2 cloves garlic, crushed

1 tsp. oil

1 lb. ground pork (or half pork and half beef)



1½ cups canned crushed tomatoes, with juice
1½ tsp. powdered chicken bouillon or 1 bouillon cube
½ tsp. oregano
¼ tsp. cinnamon
1 bay leaf
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
½ cup water
½ cup chopped or crushed canned pineapple, drained
1 small banana, mashed
½ cup raisins
Sugar
Cider vinegar

Toast the almonds or walnuts on a baking sheet in a 350°F oven until they emit a nutty aroma, about 5 min.

In a large frying pan or saucepan, sauté the onion and garlic in the oil until soft but not browned. Crumble in the ground meat and cook until the meat begins to lose its pink color. Stir in the crushed tomatoes and season with chicken bouillon, oregano, cinnamon, bay leaf, pepper, and salt if necessary. Add the water, turn down the heat, and simmer for 15 to 20 min. (stirring occasionally to prevent sticking), until the mixture is still moist but not runny. Remove from the heat, take out the bay leaf, and stir in the nuts, pineapple, banana, and raisins. Set the mixture aside until cool.

Taste the mixture. To bring out the flavor of the fruits and tomatoes, add ½ tsp. sugar and ½ tsp. cider vinegar. Taste again and add a little more sugar or vinegar, if necessary.

WALNUT CREAM SAUCE

To complete the *chiles en nogada*, spoon cool walnut cream sauce on the peppers right before serving and garnish with pomegranate seeds and sprigs of parsley. This sauce uses a homemade thick cream, similar to Mexican *crema espesa*, that you'll need to start the day before. (You can also use store-bought *crème fraîche*.) Traditionally, the brown skins are peeled off the walnuts to make this sauce creamy white, but I put up with some brown specks in the sauce and use the walnuts unpeeled. *Makes 2½ cups.*

1 cup shelled walnuts
2 cups thick cream (see recipe above right) or crème fraîche
1 to 2 Tbs. sherry (optional)
½ tsp. salt

Toast the walnuts on a baking sheet in a 350° oven for about 5 min. Grind them fine in a blender or food processor. Stir in the cream, sherry, and salt. Thin with a little milk, if necessary.

Keep the chiles from flattening out during frying by turning them frequently.

A great do-ahead meal, chiles rellenos reheat nicely in a microwave or on the stove.



THICK CREAM

Makes about 2 cups.

1½ cups heavy cream
¾ cup buttermilk

Take the chill off the cream by heating it slightly in a saucepan or in the microwave, but keep it below 100°. Stir in the buttermilk and put the cream in a jar or bowl. Partially cover and let stand in a warm spot overnight (at least 8 hours) to thicken. Refrigerate until needed.

TOMATO SAUCE

This thin, mild tomato sauce is a good accompaniment to any cheese-filled *chile relleno*. *Enough for 6 to 8 chiles.*

1 Tbs. oil
½ small onion, minced
2 cloves garlic, minced
1½ cups water or chicken stock
1 cup tomato purée
Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Heat the oil in a saucepan and sauté the onion and garlic until translucent. Add the water or chicken stock and the tomato purée. Season the sauce with salt and pepper and simmer for 10 min.

SOURCES FOR POBLANO PEPPERS

Poblano peppers grown in the U.S. are in season August and September, while poblanos from Mexico are available most of the year. If your market doesn't carry them, see if the produce manager can order some for you. You can order fresh or frozen poblanos from the following stores.

Melissa's by Mail, PO Box 21127, Los Angeles, CA 90021; 800/468-7111. (Fresh poblanos.)

Chile La Isla, PO Box 1379, Fabens, TX 79838; 800/895-4603. (Roasted and individually frozen.)

Don Alfonso Foods, PO Box 201988, Austin, TX 78720; 800/456-6100. (Roasted and frozen in 5-pound blocks.)

Chiles rellenos weren't in the curriculum at the English hotel school where Susan Whale was an instructor. They've become part of her repertoire during the sixteen years that she's lived in Cuernavaca, Mexico, where she is a caterer and cooking teacher. ♦