

MENU

*Chiles Frios
(Guacamole in
roasted green chiles)*



*Grilled Chicken
Salpicón
with a chile-spiked
lime dressing*



*Grilled Pico de Gallo
(Chunky vegetable salsa)*



*Grilled Pineapple
with Butter-Rum Sauce*





A Tex-Mex Menu from the Grill

The vibrant dishes of “border cuisine” are alive with chiles, fresh vegetables, and lots of smoke from the grill

BY W. PARK KERR

Marinated chicken gets shredded and seasoned with a chile-spiked lime dressing (left) for Grilled Chicken Salpicón, the main dish of this Tex-Mex menu. Spirited Grilled Pico de Gallo (above), an unsurpassable salsa, accompanies the smoky chicken. Guacamole cools the tongue. Stuffed into roasted mild green chiles to make Chiles Frios (right), it can be eaten with a fork like a side dish. Even dessert comes off the grill. For Grilled Pineapple with Butter-Rum Sauce (bottom right), hot, juicy, tangy pineapple slices are paired with a buttery sauce and vanilla ice cream.



I live in El Paso, which, for those of you who are geographically challenged, is on the border of Mexico, and I mean on the border: stroll ten minutes from downtown, cross a little pedestrian bridge, and suddenly you’re in another country.

Sharing the border with Mexico has led to lots of cross-cultural traditions down here, especially when it comes to food. Border cuisine is a special type of food that you’ll only find in west Texas, southern New Mexico, and Arizona. It’s not Santa Fe food, nor is it the Tex-Mex of restaurant chains with lots of gloppy cheese and mushy beans. Our food is *cocina del pobres*—cuisine of the poor—which, in my opinion, is one of the richest, most exciting cuisines you could be lucky enough to eat.

OPEN-AIR MARKETS INSPIRE THE MENU

My inspiration for cooking border cuisine comes from the open-air markets in Juárez, the city across the border from El Paso. I go over early on Saturday mornings to take my pick of the fresh fruit, chiles, vegetables, and herbs overflowing from the stalls that line the narrow, winding streets. The market buzzes, not just with the pitches from the vendors, but with the technicolored displays of limes, melons, papayas, chiles, cilantro, and cactus pads, and the smoky-sizzly smells

of the street food that's cooked and served on the spot.

I think the stall owners are the real culinary geniuses of our region. They take that-morning fresh ingredients, apply very few techniques (a chop here, a peel there), and then add a kiss of smoke and char from their portable mesquite-fired braziers to make delicious stuff: salsas, burritos, fresh salads—the kind of dishes that I immediately go home and try to recreate on my backyard grill. This kind of casual, outdoor food is, of course, great for entertaining, since in El Paso, we throw our guests out in the back yard the minute they arrive.

WHAT'S IN THE BORDER PANTRY?

As I said, border cuisine is simple but vivacious. The mainstay is lots of fresh produce. A border cuisine “starter kit” would include:

- ◆ red, ripe tomatoes, Haas avocados, onions, garlic, bunches of cilantro, juicy little Mexican limes;
- ◆ lots of different chiles: dried red chiles, fresh green chiles, chipotles (dried, smoked red jalapeños), fiery *chiles de arbol*, mellow, fleshy poblanos;
- ◆ stacks of fresh flour and corn tortillas and pots of pinto beans—not black beans (except in trendy restaurants);
- ◆ a great abundance of fresh Mexican fruits, for desserts and drinks.

While there are typical ingredients in border cuisine, the cooking itself is improvisational. Whatever is freshest and most appealing the morning I go

shopping is what I make for dinner. I do have some consistent tactics, however:

Two chiles are better than one. And three are even better. If you're not familiar with chiles, you may think they just add “heat,” but in truth, chiles also offer a broad range of flavors, from grassy to smoky to fruity.

The heat level of chiles varies, too. Anaheims (or long green chiles) are quite mild, while *chiles de arbol* and skinny

My cooking isn't about tongue-scorching heat.

I want the chiles to hold hands with the other flavors in a dish.

serranos do add some BTUs. But my cooking isn't about tongue-scorching, intense heat. I want the chiles to be a condiment and to peacefully hold hands with the other flavors in a dish. I often grill or roast them to transform the sharp naïveté of a raw chile into a more complex and balanced flavor.

I also find that a good way to cook with chiles is to incorporate more than one type. Because they each have a distinct flavor, you can get a real symphony of rounded chile flavor when you use two or more varieties in one dish.

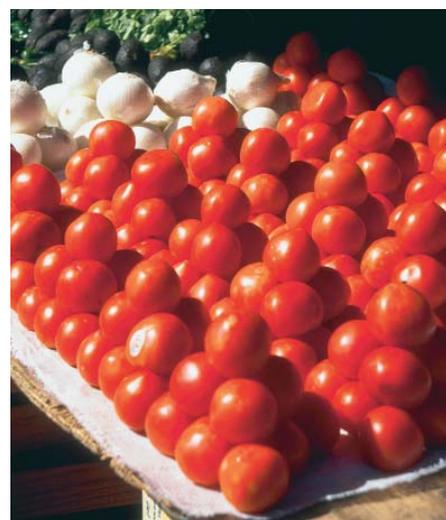
A trio of bright accents: cilantro, garlic, and lime. The vibrancy that's typical of border cuisine comes in part from what I call “accent ingredients”—garlic, lime juice (fresh-squeezed only; Realime need not apply at my house), occasionally tequila, and lots and lots of fresh cilantro. While growing up in El Paso, I didn't know there was life without cilantro. Back when chefs in other parts of the country still thought cilantro was a zodiac sign, we were eating it in breakfast, lunch, and dinner dishes.

THE GRILL IS THE PLACE TO BE AT SUMMER PARTIES

For this menu, I've picked a few favorite dishes for entertaining, my goal as a host always being to spend the least time in the kitchen and the most time with my guests, actually eating my own food.

The main dish is smoky chicken in a tangy vinaigrette. My grilled chicken *salpicón* is a variation on a traditional border dish of shredded boiled beef brisket dressed in a tangy sauce. For the grilled chicken version, you get to do most of your cooking outdoors on the grill. I believe that God meant for people to own gas grills, but charcoal grills are allowed, too. I like a really big smoke finish on my meat and poultry, so I grill the chicken with the lid closed, preferably over some mesquite or hickory soaked in cheap bourbon. I pour a little marinade onto the grill, too, just to increase the smokiness.

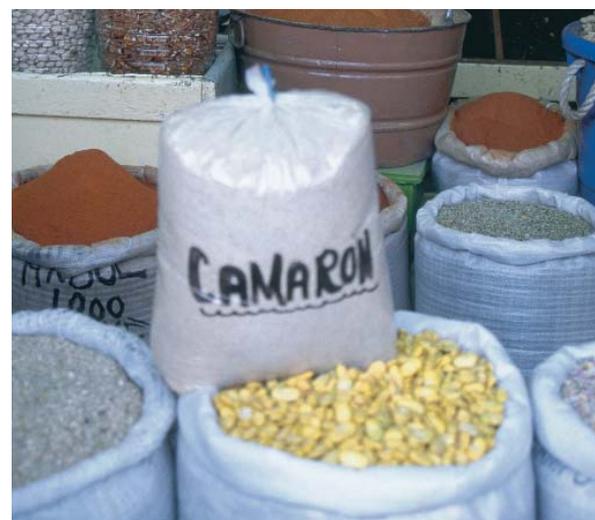
A chunky salsa that works like a side dish. I serve the chicken with a great



Border food is unimaginable without ripe tomatoes and fresh onions.



A cook at one of the market stalls demonstrates her technique for making tortillas from scratch.

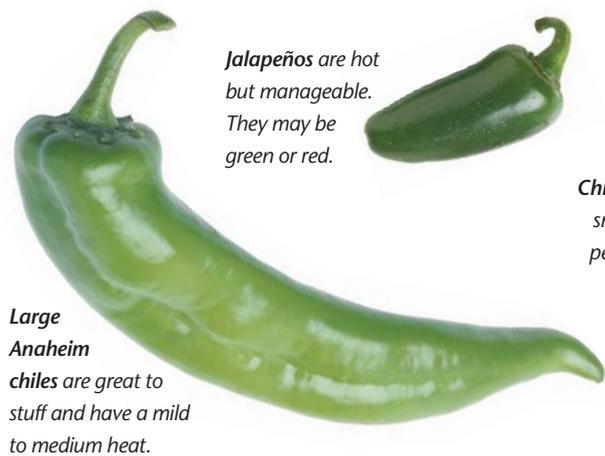


Sacks of beans, ground chiles, and dried shrimp (*camarón*) are plentiful in the markets of Juárez.



Make it chunky. Grilled to a smoky smoothness, the vegetables in this salsa are best cut into big pieces.

Chile peppers: staples of the border pantry



Large Anaheim chiles are great to stuff and have a mild to medium heat.

Jalapeños are hot but manageable. They may be green or red.

Chipotles, very hot smoke-dried jalapeños, are easiest to find canned in adobo sauce.

Pinkie-size serranos are hot but with a grassy character.

Plump poblanos are mellow and fleshy; they're wonderful roasted.

Dried chiles de arbol have a vibrant, hot, and sharp flavor.



grilled vegetable salsa that's so chunky it resembles a ratatouille. Salsas are key in border cuisine, and there are a million versions, but most are based on tomatoes, which provide a wet, saucy component. Grilling the ingredients caramelizes the sugars in the vegetables and gives them a delicious smoky-sweet flavor.

Guacamole soothes the burn. Guacamole is a suave, cool foil to all the spice and smokiness in the other dishes. For this menu, I suggest stuffing the guacamole into roasted long green chiles. People can eat it with a fork like a side dish, or scoop it onto other things.

The fruit dessert isn't local. My dessert—grilled pineapple with butter-rum sauce—can also be cooked entirely on the grill (except for the ice cream). I must admit that the recipe has nothing to do with border cuisine. When I was a kid, my parents went to New Orleans and ate bananas Foster; we've been enjoying variations ever since. So the dish is really a 1960s suburban El Paso thing.

Chiles Frios

(Guacamole in long green chiles)

To fix the chiles up to a day ahead, oil and grill them, and then store them in a zip-top bag, but don't peel the chiles until you're ready to use them. *Yields 4 cups; serves eight.*

8 Anaheim or long green chiles, the longest and fleshiest possible, with a secure stem

Olive oil

4 ripe Haas avocados

4 Roma tomatoes, halved, seeded, and chopped coarse

1 small onion, chopped fine

2 cloves garlic, minced

3 scallions (white and green parts), chopped fine

¾ cup chopped fresh cilantro

Juice of 2 limes (about 3 Tbs.)

1 small jalapeño, seeded and chopped fine

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Grill and peel the chiles. Heat the grill or the broiler. Lightly brush the chiles with oil, grill on high heat until very blackened and blistered, turning frequently, about 15 min. Seal the blackened chiles in a paper bag, a heavy plastic bag, or foil, and leave them to steam for at least 10 min. Right below the crown, start peeling away the skin, taking care not to rip off the stem.

With a paring knife, make a vertical slit from the top of each chile to about ½ inch from the tail and remove the seeds. Be sure to leave the ribs in, or the flesh will come with them. (These ribs aren't that hot.) Set aside.

Make the guacamole. Peel and pit the avocados and put the flesh in a large bowl. Add

the tomatoes, onion, garlic, scallions, cilantro, lime juice, and jalapeño, and mash with a fork until blended but still fairly chunky. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Spoon the guacamole into the chiles. Serve chilled or at cool room temperature.

Grilled Chicken Salpicón

Serve this dish with a stack of warm, fresh flour or corn tortillas (see Notes, p. 16).

Serves eight.

8 boneless, skinless chicken breast halves, pounded slightly to flatten

FOR THE MARINADE:

Juice of 2 limes (about 3 Tbs.)

½ cup olive oil

¼ cup tequila

¼ cup orange marmalade

3 large cloves garlic, minced

1 canned chipotle chile, puréed (optional)

Salt to taste

FOR THE DRESSING:

½ cup fresh lime juice

½ cup olive oil

1 jalapeño, seeded and minced fine

1 serrano, seeded and minced fine

1 fresh poblano, roasted, peeled, and chopped

Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

FOR THE GARNISH:

1 large ripe tomato, cut in ½-inch chunks

2 large ripe Haas avocados, cut in ½-inch chunks, tossed in lime juice

½ cup lightly packed chopped cilantro leaves

1 small bunch chopped scallions (green parts only)

1 small red onion, chopped

Handful of radishes, rinsed and sliced

In a nonreactive container, combine the chicken with the marinade ingredients. Swish to combine. Marinate about 2 hours at room temperature or 4 hours in the refrigerator.



Heat the butter-rum sauce on the grill as you cook the pineapple and the only reason you'll have to go into the kitchen is to fetch another bottle of tequila.

Roasting enhances the flavor of chiles and makes them easy to peel. Once roasted, put the chiles in a paper bag to steam for about 10 minutes and their skins will slip right off.



1 fresh poblano
 4 jalapeños (a mix of red and green, if possible)
 10 plum tomatoes
 10 to 12 scallions
 2 large onions, halved crosswise
 8 medium tomatillos, papery husks removed
 Olive oil
 3 cloves garlic, chopped
 1 Tbs. balsamic vinegar
 Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Toss the poblano, jalapeños, tomatoes, scallions, onions, and tomatillos with a few splashes of olive oil in a large bowl until the vegetables are well coated.

Heat the grill. Arrange the vegetables on the grill, clustering them to make controlling the heat easier. Cook them, turning fairly often, until lightly charred and softened. If flames start to spit, squirt some water on the coals. When done, take the vegetables off the heat and let them rest until cool enough to handle.

Seal the blackened chiles in a paper or heavy plastic bag (or foil) and leave to steam at least 10 min. Peel the chiles, pull off the stems, and remove the seeds. Cut the chiles and the other vegetables into chunks (the tomatoes will be mushy). Toss in a large bowl with the garlic, vinegar, salt, and pepper. Adjust the seasonings and serve at room temperature.

Grilled Pineapple with Butter-Rum Sauce

You can cook this sauce by putting the pan right on the grill, or make it ahead and reheat it while you grill the pineapple. *Serves eight.*

8 Tbs. (1 stick) unsalted butter
 1 cup lightly packed brown sugar
 ½ cup Meyers or other dark rum
 A pinch each of nutmeg, cinnamon, allspice
 Oil or spray oil for the grill
 8 slices, 1 inch thick, very ripe fresh pineapple, cored if not totally soft in the center

In a small saucepan, cook the butter, sugar, rum, and spices over medium heat, stirring, until the sugar is dissolved and the butter

melted. Bring to a simmer and let cook for about 10 min. longer, stirring occasionally, until the sauce is slightly syrupy and coats the back of a spoon. Keep warm.

Heat the grill, making sure it's clean, and brush or spray it with a touch of oil so the pineapple doesn't stick. Grill the pineapple slices until warmed through and caramelized, about 10 min. each side.

Serve immediately, in rings or chunks, with the warm sauce and ice cream, if you like.



Park Kerr and his Chihuahua, Maximilian, enjoy border cuisine at their home in El Paso, Texas. Kerr founded the El Paso Chile Company and has written five cookbooks, including *Chiles and Tortillas (Morrow)*. ♦

Heat the grill. Grill the chicken until just done, about 5 min. per side. Set aside until cool and then pull it apart into long shreds.

While the chicken is marinating or cooling, make the dressing by whisking together the lime juice, oil, jalapeño, serrano, roasted poblano, salt, and pepper. Toss with the shredded chicken.

Just before serving, gently toss the chicken with the garnish ingredients. Mound the salpicón in a lettuce-lined bowl and serve at room temperature or slightly chilled.

Grilled Pico de Gallo

For this recipe, aggressive cooking is the key. Don't be shy, grill the ingredients until they're *buen cocido*—well done. *Yields 5 cups.*

Tequila choices

The bold flavor of gold tequila is a good match for spicy chicken salpicón

In the Mexican state of Jalisco, just west of Guadalajara, the sweet sap of the blue agave (not a cactus, but a cousin to the amaryllis) is distilled into tequila. Distinctively flavored and ranging widely in complexity, quality and price, tequilas are a versatile ingredient for drinks and cooking.

Of the three main types of tequila, white or silver (*plata*) is the lightest and freshest tasting. In wine terms, it compares to a Chardonnay aged in stainless steel, as opposed to oak. Gold tequila can be aged in wood and is sometimes colored with caramel. Aged tequila (*añejo*), the

costliest, spends at least a year in oak barrels, giving it more character and depth.

The chicken *salpicón* with grilled *pico de gallo*—sweet, spicy, and smoky—needs a bold tequila in both the recipe and in the glass. Go for a gold, on ice or spritzed with lime-flavored mineral water. And

with the juicy grilled pineapple dessert, savor a splash of fine *añejo* in a brandy snifter. Both Sauza and Herradura make reliable varieties of all three types of tequila.

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