



Black Bean and Huitlacoche Soup

HUITLACOCHÉ,

A Serendipitous Blight

Krista Towns

Perfectly formed rows of kernels on golden ears of corn thrive in well maintained, sunny cornfields. But to the despair of most farmers, during the annual rainy seasons the maize may evolve overnight into almost unrecognizable, grayish knobs. The fungus, *Ustilago maydis*, is responsible for transforming healthy corn kernels into ugly galls. Outside of Mexico, just one affected kernel can render an ear unsalable, but to the delight of Mexican corn farmers, from the blight emerges a prized delicacy of Mexico: huitlacoche.

Despite its long, cherished history in Mexican cuisine, huitlacoche, (pronounced Hoo-eet-la-KOO-che), has been labeled in the United States as “corn smut” or even “devil’s corn,” due to the disdain of American farmers. In some parts of the USA however, there are ongoing experiments to grow the fungus and reap its value from sales to gourmet restaurants and popular chefs. Spores of this basidiomycete, of which puffballs and stinkhorn mushrooms are also members, are naturally present in soil and travel by air, settling onto nearby plants. The blight can be cultivated by inoculating the stalks with the fungal spores. When sold commercially, a more appealing name is attributed, now labeled “corn mushrooms” or “corn truffles,” and used in fillings for tacos, quesadillas, soups, or blended into sauces for grilled meats and chicken.

My first exposure to huitlacoche was with a pound of frozen kernels, and met with trepidation. The bulbous, unappetizing, blackish-gray appearance alone gave me pause. But with the thought, “If there’s a safe fungus among us ... give it a taste” ringing in my head, I took my own advice and after a few bites, fully understood its appeal. The flavor is earthy, similar to morels, with a nuttiness of truffles and a wonderful sweet smokiness coming from the corn’s sugars. “It may have been ambrosia of the Aztec gods with an inky, mushroomy flavor that is almost impossible to describe,” wrote Diana Kennedy, author of, *The Cuisines of Mexico*.

Fresh huitlacoche is delicious in flavor and texture and is sometimes available during the corn season, so consider yourself lucky if you find it! If not, you may find it frozen, an excellent and best alternative. When cooked, the corn has a pleasant, soft and slightly chewy texture, and is healthier than regular corn with higher levels of protein and lysine. A third option, although lacking in flavor, and packed in citric acid, is canned huitlacoche. Still, it’s a fair substitute for tacos or

quesadillas and usually available online or from your local Mexican grocer.

I’m sharing a few simple recipes featuring this unique and delicious fungus, along with some tips on making pickled onions, rehydrating dried chilies, along with a versatile recipe for roasted chili salsa—all for a worthy Mexican food celebration, with or without corn smut.

Buen Provecho!

Huitlacoche Quesadilla with Maitake

Likely the most popular preparation of huitlacoche is in tacos or quesadillas. In quesadilla, the rich gooey cheese and earthy mushrooms perfectly complement corn mushrooms. And, as an added bonus, this recipe works just fine with canned

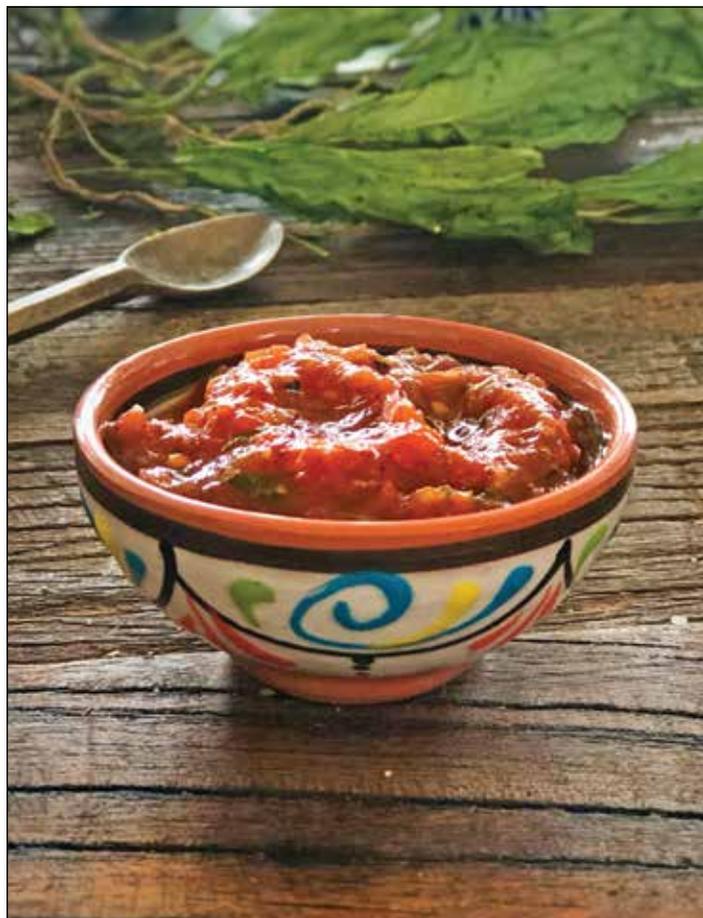


huitlacoche! Pair it with roasted, smoky chipotle salsa. Makes 4–6 servings.

- 2 tbsp. olive oil or butter (more as needed)
- 1 medium onion, diced
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 jalapeño or serrano peppers, stemmed, seeded and chopped
- Pinch of salt
- 4 oz. maitake or other earthy mushrooms, trimmed and roughly chopped
- 2 plum or one medium tomato, diced
- 1 cup huitlacoche, fresh, frozen or canned
- 1 tsp. dried epazote, or substitute cilantro
- 2 cups shredded Mexican melting cheese, ideally asadero or chihuahua
- 8 corn tortillas

Heat the oil or butter in a large sauce pan over medium-low heat. Add the onions, garlic, peppers and salt, and sauté until just softened. Add the mushrooms and continue to cook until cooked through. Add the tomato, huitlacoche and epazote, and cook until the mixture has “tightened” and come together—about 5–6 minutes. Add a splash of water if the filling becomes too dry. Set aside. (If cooking ahead the mixture can be refrigerated at this point.)

Place a skillet on medium high heat, lightly oil the tortillas, place as many that will fit in the skillet, top with the fillings, and using a spatula, fold the tortillas in half. Press the tortillas down in the pan and cook until crispy, then carefully flip the tortillas over and crisp the other side. The filling should be hot and the cheese nice and melty. Serve with Roasted Chipotle Salsa.



Roasted Chipotle Salsa

A smoky salsa recipe perfect for quesadillas or tacos, grilled fish or chicken, eggs, or simply enjoy with a big bowl of tortilla chips! Makes about one cup, double or triple the recipe for a crowd.

- 1 small onion, peeled and quartered
- 1 large or two small jalapeño peppers
- 2 garlic cloves, peeled
- 3 plum or 2 medium tomatoes
- 2 canned chipotle chilies
- 1/3 cup fresh cilantro leaves
- 2 tbsp. fresh lime juice or more to taste
- Pinch of sugar
- Salt

Place the onion, chilies, garlic cloves and tomatoes on a baking sheet in a preheated 400 degree oven and roast for 15–20 minutes or until the vegetables are lightly charred. Transfer to a food processor or blender, add the chipotle chilies and cilantro and blend until almost smooth. Transfer to a bowl and adjust seasoning with lime juice, sugar and salt. Cover and store any unused covered salsa in the refrigerator.

Black Bean and Huitlacoche Soup

Earthy black beans and huitlacoche simmer in a rich, chili flavored stock to make a simple, slightly spicy and smoky soup—perfect for chilly spring nights. Garnish with crema, avocado, fresh chilies, toasted pepitas, cilantro or crispy tortilla strips. Makes about four servings.

- 1/4 cup canola or vegetable oil, or lard if available
- 1/2 medium onion, chopped
- 3 cloves garlic, sliced
- 3 cups cooked black beans, drained if canned
- 2 cups homemade or enriched chicken stock
- 1 tsp. regular or 1/2 tsp. Mexican oregano
- 1 tsp. ancho chili powder
- 1/2 tsp. cumin
- 1 tbsp. adobe sauce
- 1/2 cup huitlacoche, ideally fresh or frozen, substitute canned

Heat the oil in a skillet over medium heat, sauté the onions and garlic until softened, add the beans, stock, oregano, chili powder, cumin, adobe sauce and huitlacoche. Cook for 15–20 minutes. Puree in a blender, pour back in the pot and continue to cook for a few more minutes, adjust seasoning and add stock if needed to reach your preferred consistency. Garnish and serve!

Porcini Crusted Pork Chop with Huitlacoche Sauce

Pick your favorite cut of pork, lightly oil and lightly coat with porcini powder (available in some grocery stores or make your own). Sear over medium high heat until cooked to preference. Generously drizzle with huitlacoche sauce (below). Top your dish with a drizzle of crema, cotija cheese, fresh cilantro,



pickled onions or fresh corn if you like. Note: if using canned huitlacoche (which can be somewhat salty) adjust seasoning after the mixture is cooked and puréed.

Huitlacoche Sauce

Huitlacoche simmered with onions, garlic, chilies, stock and epazote, puréed until smooth and finished with cream. Rich and delicious over meat and chicken. Makes 4–6 servings.

- 2 small dried pasilla or ancho chilies
- 1 cup or more hot water
- 1 cup veal or chicken stock
- 2 tbsp. butter
- 1/2 onion, chopped
- 1 clove garlic, sliced
- 1 1/2 cups huitlacoche, ideally fresh or frozen
- 1 tsp. dried epazote or cilantro
- 2 tbsp. heavy cream (optional)
- Salt

Remove the stems and seeds from the chilies. Place a skillet over medium-high heat and quickly sear the chilies for about 1–2 minutes. Remove to a bowl with hot water to cover, and soak for about 20 minutes or until softened. Strain, reserve the chilies and 1/2 cup of the soaking liquid (see notes).

Place a saucepan over medium-low heat, add the butter and sauté the onion and garlic until softened. Stir in the huitlacoche and the chilies with the soaking water, stock, and epazote and simmer partially covered for 15–20 minutes. Cool and purée in a food processor or blender, add back to the saucepan, stir in the cream and adjust seasoning with salt if needed.

Rehydrating Dried Chili Peppers

Dried chilies are easy to find in most grocery stores. Look for ones that are still soft, older chilies tend to be dry and brittle. Wipe the chilies first with a damp towel, then cut off the stems and slice them lengthwise, remove the seeds and veins, and tear

into large pieces. Using a spatula, press the chili pieces into the bottom of a hot skillet for about 30 seconds per side. Remove the pan from heat, add enough water to cover, then set aside and let soak for about 20–30 minutes or until softened. The chilies are now ready to blend into your sauce. Taste the soaking liquid— if it's not bitter use it in the sauce too, or replace with stock.



Pickled Onions

A colorful tangy condiment to add extra “oomph” to your Mexican dishes. Add to tacos, burritos, or scatter on roasted meats, sandwiches, even eggs—anytime you want to liven things up a little. For quick, thin slices, use a mandoline or cut by hand with a sharp knife. The onions will increase in flavor and color within a couple of hours of marinating, or even better, overnight. Makes about 1 1/2 cups.

- 1 medium red onion
- 1/2 cup apple cider or white wine vinegar
- 1/4 cup water
- 2 tbsp. sugar
- 1 tsp. salt
- *Optional additions:
- 1–2 bay leaves
- 4–5 peppercorns
- 1 tsp. dried oregano

Peel and thinly slice the onion, (no larger than 1/8”) and place in a glass or metal bowl. Heat the remaining ingredients in a saucepan over medium heat, stirring occasionally, until the sugar and salt is melted. Pour over the onions, cover and refrigerate. †

