



Sonoran Cooking: Salsa 101

Beyond Red or Green

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Red or Green?

That's the question asked at pretty much every taqueria and takeout taco or burrito place when you pick up your order - and if they don't ask, you can usually expect to find a tiny container of one of each tucked inside the bag or arrive home feeling slighted. The quality of these salsas varies drastically, from bitter yet oddly bland to extraordinary.

Salsas are a cornerstone of the Sonoran-style cuisine local to the Sonoran Desert along the Arizona-Mexico border. I first learned how to make salsa from the Flores family, who have been serving salsas at their Tucson restaurants for over 100 years.

Salsa is part of the Sonoran region's collective identity. Salsa means "sauce" in Spanish, so technically all sauces are salsas.

Salsa in this region reflects both collective and personal influences, from Native American to Spanish to Mexican to U.S. occupation. Each has shaped the cuisine in many ways, but through it all, salsa remains a staple. There are local salsa recipes that have been passed down for five generations or more. The following sauces and salsas are a few of my favorites.

Red and green is an important question, but it's just the beginning.

This collection of salsa recipes from the Sonoran Desert region north of the Arizona-Mexico border showcases Tucson's regional culinary influences. The recipes are compiled from my four published cookbooks and my recipes.jackiealpers.com website, and the collection includes brand-new recipes published here for the first time.

Introduction

When I started a blog sharing my recipes and food photography in 2010, I never imagined that it would evolve into four cookbooks, dozens of photography awards and editorial features, and my work being shared and celebrated all over the world.

I am thankful for the opportunity to share my love of creating recipes and images from here in my home in the Sonoran Desert with all of you.

This collection brings together salsa recipes from me and from some of the Sonoran region's most celebrated chefs. They are all excellent examples of how living, working and eating in the Sonoran Desert inspires the food we make. I'm excited for you to try them.

Thank you for supporting my work. And thank you for helping me celebrate this unique community in the region surrounding the Arizona-Mexico border along with the inclusivity and diversity that Sonoran cuisine signifies.

I hope you enjoy these recipes and that they inspire you to learn more about Sonoran cooking. You'll find hundreds more on my website at recipes.jackiealpers.com.

~ Jackie



From left: chiltepin chiles, Mexican oregano and masa harina.

INGREDIENTS

Pantry Staples

- **Chiltepin Chiles:** The size of a pea yet very hot with a fruity, smoky flavor. They add a slow burn that doesn't overpower other ingredients.
- **Mexican Oregano:** a relative of lemon verbena with a more citrus based flavor than Mediterranean oregano
- **Masa Harina:** Flour made from dried nixtamalized corn.
- **Canned Tomatoes:** preferably [Bianco DiNapoli](#)
- **Sonoran Sea Salt:** Salt: Milled from the Sea of Cortez has a high moisture content and unique mineral composition.



Other varieties of dried chiles with dried chipotles in the center unmarked (for reasons unknown).



Tomatillos

INGREDIENTS

Fresh Ingredients

- **Tomatillos:** More acidic and less sweet than tomatoes.
- **Mexican Limes:** Also called key limes are $\frac{1}{4}$ the size, sweeter and more acidic than Persian limes. Substitute four Mexican limes for one Persian.
- **Cilantro:** The stems have more flavor than the leaves, so be sure to use them too. Heat dulls cilantro, so add it at the end.



Varieties of fresh chiles from 12:00 spiraling inward (much like myself most days): two jalapeños, one poblano, five red/green serranos, one long Hatch, two (yellow) caribes.

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SALSAS

Tomatillo Salsa Verde

Can green be a flavor? The recipe for this highly coveted, bright and bracing salsa was developed by Patricia Schwabe for her restaurant Penca, and it really does taste green. [View this recipe on my website](#) and [get this recipe is in my Taste of Tucson cookbook](#).

INGREDIENTS

10 tomatillos
2 serrano chiles, stemmed
1 jalapeño chile, stemmed
2 scallions, roughly chopped
2 cups firmly packed cilantro leaves
2 large garlic cloves
2 teaspoons Mexican oregano
1 teaspoon sugar
Sonoran Sea Salt, to taste

INSTRUCTIONS

Remove the husks from the tomatillos and rinse the fruit. Quarter each tomatillo and add to a food processor or blender. Add the serranos, jalapeño, scallions, cilantro, garlic, oregano, sugar and salt. Pulse until well combined. Taste and add more salt and an additional ½ teaspoon of sugar if needed. on half of the battle already.



Chiltepin Salsa Rojo

An all-purpose hot and spicy red salsa that can be used for dipping, for seasoning and as a taco sauce. A little goes a long way. If you prefer a milder salsa, cut the amount of chiles down by a half or a third. Chiltepin salsa is one of the defining elements of Sonoran-style cuisine because the bushes that produce the chiles grow wild in parts of southern Arizona and aren't common in other regions. [View this recipe on my website](#) and [get this recipe is in my Taste of Tucson cookbook](#)

INGREDIENTS

1 cup water
3 garlic cloves, peeled
1 (28-ounce) can crushed tomatoes
¼ cup chopped white onion
¼ cup white vinegar
¼ cup loosely packed, roughly chopped cilantro
2 tablespoons dried Mexican oregano
2 tablespoons olive oil
1 tablespoon dried chiltepin chiles
2 teaspoons sea salt

INSTRUCTIONS

Put the 1 cup of water and garlic in a blender and puree.

Add the tomatoes, onion, vinegar, cilantro, oregano, olive oil, chiles and salt. Pulse until well combined.

Refrigerate for at least an hour to let the flavors meld before serving.



Salsa Negra

Though this sheet-pan-roasted salsa is made with blackened ingredients, the color is actually a lovely shade of brown. The recipe is inspired by the [Charro Steak](#) roasted salsa recipe in my [Taste of Tucson](#) cookbook. If you can't get Hatch chiles, use two Anaheim or jalapeños instead.

INGREDIENTS

5 Roma tomatoes
4 hot or mild Anaheim or [Hatch chiles](#), about 6 ounces
1 large white onion, peeled and quartered, about 8 ounces
1 small head of garlic, about 3 ounces
1 teaspoon olive oil
1 (15-ounce) can crushed tomatoes
1 cup water
½ cup firmly packed fresh cilantro leaves and stems
2 tablespoons apple cider vinegar
1 tablespoon sea salt
1 tablespoon [Mexican oregano](#)

INSTRUCTIONS

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Rub most of the skin from the outside of the head of garlic, then slice off the stem to expose some of the inner cloves. Spray or brush the garlic head with olive oil.

On a baking sheet, roast the Roma tomatoes, chiles, onion and garlic for 1 hour, or until soft, blistered and blackened, turning the chiles and tomatoes halfway through and flipping the onion over on its remaining flat side. Let cool slightly.

Squeeze the uncut side of the garlic to release the cloves from the paper skins. Pull the chile stems to detach and discard.

Using tongs, transfer the roasted vegetables to a high-speed blender. (A [Vitamix](#) works perfectly for this.) Add the crushed tomatoes, water, cilantro, vinegar, sea salt and Mexican oregano and blitz on high until well combined, using a spatula to scrape down the sides of the blender as needed.

Refrigerate for at least 1 hour to let the flavors meld. Serve with tortilla chips and/or grilled meats. Keeps in the refrigerator for up to 1 week.



Mustard-Habanero Salsa Amarillo

Serve with steak or vegetables, or as a dip.

INGREDIENTS

2 tablespoons yellow mustard, preferably Plochman's
¼ cup tahini
1 (2-ounce) slice white onion
1 habanero chile, stem removed
1 medium seedless orange, peeled, about 5 to 6 ounces
2 large garlic cloves
Juice of 1 medium lemon, about 2 tablespoons
¼ cup white vinegar
1 teaspoon ground turmeric
1 teaspoon dry mustard
½ teaspoon sea salt
½ teaspoon granulated cane sugar

INSTRUCTIONS

Put all ingredients in a high-speed blender and blitz on high for 1 to 2 minutes, or until pulverized. Chill for 1 to 2 hours before serving.



Queso Blanco Salsa

Serve with tortilla chips for dipping or as a sauce for shrimp or other seafood. This version uses masa harina as a thickener, so it's gluten-free. [View this recipe on my website.](#)

INGREDIENTS

1 tablespoon butter
1 tablespoon masa harina
½ cup milk, any variety
1 teaspoon onion flakes
½ cup finely shredded queso quesadilla, Jack, pepper Jack or other melty Mexican cheese
1 teaspoon juice from pickled jalapeños
Pickled jalapeño slices, for garnish
1 ounce queso añejo, cotija or other hard Mexican cheese, for garnish

INSTRUCTIONS

Melt the butter in a nonstick skillet over low heat. Whisk in the masa harina, then slowly whisk in the milk until thickened. Mix in cheese, onion flakes and jalapeño juice, stirring constantly for 3 or 4 minutes until the cheese melts into the milk mixture and forms a smooth sauce.

Transfer to a serving bowl. Top with jalapeño slices and crumbled queso añejo. Serve immediately.



Pico de Gallo Salsa

This salsa is sometimes called salsa fresca or salsa cruda, but this type of chunky salsa made with raw fresh tomatoes, chiles, onions and lime is commonly called “pico,” so I’m sticking with that. The key to this salsa is the ratio: four parts tomatoes to one part onion, plus one small serrano chile. Then, adjust the citrus and salt to taste. Use the best produce you can find. Mealy tomatoes make boring pico. [Get this recipe is in my Taste of Tucson cookbook.](#)

INGREDIENTS

1½ cups chopped fresh tomatoes
¼ cup finely diced white onion
2 tablespoons finely chopped cilantro
2 tablespoons fresh lime juice
1 serrano chile, finely chopped
½ teaspoon sea salt, or to taste

INSTRUCTIONS

Combine all ingredients in a large bowl and stir well. Refrigerate for a half hour before serving.



Pineapple-Mango Salsa

A tropical fruit salsa that works just as well for snacking as it does in desserts.

INGREDIENTS

1 cup finely diced pineapple
1 cup finely diced mango
¼ cup finely diced red onion
1 finely diced red and/or green serrano chile, about 1 tablespoon
1 tablespoon chopped fresh cilantro leaves
1 tablespoon freshly squeezed lime juice
1 tablespoon apple cider vinegar
1 teaspoon sugar
½ teaspoon sea salt

INSTRUCTIONS

Combine all ingredients in a nonreactive bowl. Cover and refrigerate for 1 hour before serving.

For paletas: Combine ½ cup prepared Pineapple-Mango Salsa with ½ cup vanilla Greek yogurt and ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon. Spoon into ice-pop molds, add sticks and freeze until set, about 4 hours.



Chunky Guacamole

Chunky, spicy, salty and creamy yet crisp and bright guacamole with lots of citrus and just a tiny bit of crunch.

One avocado per person is a good general rule for serving size, so this recipe is per person. Once at a party I asked a friend why the guacamole she'd made was the best I'd ever had. Her reply: "The secret is salt!" So, don't skimp on the salt, but also, you know, don't go overboard. [View this recipe on my website](#) and [get the recipe in my Taste of Tucson cookbook](#).

INGREDIENTS

1 avocado, cubed
1 tablespoon chunky salsa
Juice of ½ lemon
1 teaspoon finely chopped fresh cilantro
1 serrano chile, finely chopped (optional)
1 ounce crumbled Mexican cheese such as [Cacique Cotija](#)

INSTRUCTIONS

Mix all of the ingredients together in a small bowl, adding the cheese in at the end. For a smoother consistency, mash with a fork. Serve immediately.



Spicy French Onion Ranch Dip

Two perfect dips living as one. Together at last! Homemade ranch amped up with a spicy French onion kick. It's made with dry buttermilk powder, Greek yogurt, onion flakes and hot sauce. Serve it with tortilla chips, potato chips, or crudités. [View this recipe on my website.](#)

INGREDIENTS

Copycat Ranch Dip Mix

This replaces one prepackaged packet of ranch dip powder.

2 tablespoons dry buttermilk powder, found in the baking section of the supermarket

1 teaspoon dried parsley

¼ teaspoon dried dill

¼ teaspoon garlic salt

¼ teaspoon garlic powder

¼ teaspoon salt

⅛ teaspoon sugar

⅛ teaspoon black pepper

¼ teaspoon MSG (optional)

For the Spicy French Onion Ranch Dip

1 (16-ounce) container plain Greek yogurt or sour cream

Copycat Ranch Dip Mix (above) or 1 packet powdered ranch dip mix

3 tablespoons dried chopped onion flakes

1 tablespoon hot sauce, preferably Tapatio

½ teaspoon paprika

INSTRUCTIONS

Mix all the ingredients together with the dried dip mix. It's easier to mix if you use a butter knife instead of a spoon or spatula. Refrigerate for at least 15 minutes. Serve with chips or colorful veggie dippers.



Molé Cómodo Cacahuete Marrón

This slightly sweet, quick and convenient molé is made with peanut butter, tahini, Dutch-process cocoa and Abuelita chocolate. [View this recipe on my website.](#)

INGREDIENTS

1 tablet Mexican chocolate, such as Abuelita, about 1.3 ounces
½ small white onion, coarsely chopped, about ¼ cup
2 garlic cloves
2 tablespoons raisins
1 (14.5-ounce) can fire-roasted diced tomatoes
1½ cups vegetable broth or stock
¼ cup unsweetened peanut butter or almond butter
2 tablespoons tahini
2 tablespoons unsweetened Dutch-process cocoa powder
2 to 3 tablespoons mild or hot red chile powder
1 tablespoon Mexican oregano
½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
1 (6-inch) corn tostada shell, broken into pieces, or 4 tortilla chips
½ teaspoon sea salt
¼ teaspoon ground black pepper
1 tablespoon sesame seeds

INSTRUCTIONS

Put all the ingredients in a high-speed blender and blitz until smooth. Transfer to a saucepan and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to low and simmer for 30 minutes, stirring occasionally. Taste and add more salt, pepper and chile powder if desired.



Molé Amarillo

Nuttier and less sweet than its chocolate-based cousin, this version of Molé Amarillo comes from Tucson chef Suzana Davila. Serve over chicken or tamale pie along with a pretty salad, as Suzana would. [View this recipe on my website.](#)

INGREDIENTS

8 yellow bell peppers
4 garlic cloves, peeled
2 yellow tomatoes
2 [Güero \(Caribe\) chiles](#)
½ cup raw sesame seeds
1 cup raw almonds
½ cup raw [pepitas](#) (shelled pumpkin seeds), plus more for garnish
3 to 4 cups chicken broth
2 tablespoons olive oil
½ cup chopped white onion
1 teaspoon [dried Mexican oregano](#)
6 (6-inch) corn tostada shells
2 teaspoons granulated chicken-flavored bouillon, preferably [Knorr brand](#)

INSTRUCTIONS

Place the bell peppers, garlic, tomatoes and chiles on a baking sheet. Place under the broiler at 475°F until the skins are blackened and charred, about 15 minutes. When cool enough to handle, remove the stems, seeds and skins. Blend the roasted peppers, tomatoes, chiles and 2 cups of the chicken broth until smooth. Break the tostada shells into pieces and add them to the blender with the bouillon. Blend until smooth, then transfer to a bowl and set aside.

In a dry 12-inch skillet over medium heat, toast the sesame seeds until golden brown, about 2 minutes, stirring frequently. Remove from the skillet. Toast the almonds and pepitas in the same dry skillet until the pepitas puff up but do not darken, about 2 minutes. Transfer the nuts and seeds to the food processor or blender. Add 1 cup of the broth and blend until smooth.

Heat the olive oil in the same skillet over medium heat. Sauté the onion and oregano in the oil until the onion is tender, about 5 minutes. Add the pureed nuts and vegetable mixtures. Reduce the heat to low and cook, stirring often, for 20 to 25 minutes. If the sauce becomes too thick, add the fourth cup of broth. Serve garnished with pepitas.



Rancheros Sauce

Rancheros sauce is a smooth, tomato-based sauce that is served warm. It is the defining ingredient in both Huevos Rancheros and Bistec Rancheros. This recipe comes from Chef Isela Mejia of El Sur Restaurant, who makes my favorite Bistec Rancheros.

INGREDIENTS

3 tablespoons olive or vegetable oil
2 cups diced white onion
3 medium tomatoes, coarsely chopped (about 1 cup)
3 Anaheim chiles, stemmed, seeded and cut into ½-inch pieces
1 (28-ounce) can tomato puree
¾ cup water
3 tablespoons granulated chicken-flavored bouillon, preferably Knorr brand
3 teaspoons granulated beef-flavored bouillon, preferably Knorr brand
¼ teaspoon sea salt, or to taste
¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper, or to taste

INSTRUCTIONS

In a large saucepan or Dutch oven, heat the oil over medium heat. Add the onion, tomatoes and chiles. Sauté until the vegetables are soft, stirring frequently, 10 to 12 minutes. Stir in the tomato puree. When it starts to boil, add the ¾ cup water and the bouillons. Reduce the heat to low and simmer for 5 minutes. If the sauce becomes too thick for your taste, add a bit of water. Season with salt and pepper, then taste and adjust if desired.



Enchilada Salsa Verde

In the late summer, chile vendors start showing up at local farmers markets and grocery store parking lots. They roast green Anaheim, New Mexico and/or Hatch chiles in huge spinning steel cages set over an open fire. They are amazing, but if you don't have the opportunity to use freshly roasted green chiles, the frozen green chiles from the supermarket are a fine substitute. [Get this recipe is in my Taste of Tucson cookbook.](#)

INGREDIENTS

2 cups chopped roasted green chiles, thawed if frozen
4 large garlic cloves, peeled
½ small white onion (about 4 ounces)
2 tablespoons all-purpose flour or masa harina
2 tablespoons olive oil
½ teaspoon sea salt
2 cups vegetable, beef or chicken stock

INSTRUCTIONS

Puree the chiles, garlic, onion, flour, oil and salt in a blender. Transfer to a medium saucepan and stir in the stock. Bring to a boil, then reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer for 20 minutes, stirring occasionally.



Enchilada Salsa Colorado

Once chiles turn red in early autumn, they can be dried and turned into red enchilada sauce, which is made with rehydrated dried red chiles instead of fresh red chiles. The fresh red chiles have a different flavor profile and are more commonly used in rancheros or other salsas.

Look for dried chiles that still have some elasticity to them. If they easily turn to dust when crushed, they are probably too old. You can still use them, but the flavor will be subdued. [Get this recipe is in my Taste of Tucson cookbook.](#)

INGREDIENTS

6 chiles colorados (dried Anaheim chiles)
4 dried chiles de árbol
4 cups boiling water
6 garlic cloves, peeled
2 tablespoons olive oil
3 tablespoons all-purpose flour or masa harina
1 tablespoon dried Mexican oregano
½ teaspoon sea salt
Chicken, beef or vegetable stock, to thin if needed

INSTRUCTIONS

Remove the stems and seeds from the chiles and place the chiles in a large bowl. Pour the boiling water over the chiles, cover the bowl and let steep for 15 minutes.

Using a slotted spoon, transfer the chiles to a blender along with 2 cups of the steeping water. Add the garlic and pulse until smooth.

Heat the olive oil in a large saucepan over medium-low heat. Add the pureed chile mixture, flour, Mexican oregano and sea salt. Simmer for 10 minutes. Thin with stock to desired consistency, if needed.



Prickly Pear and Mesquite Honey Barbecue Salsa

A truly unique barbecue sauce that blends vibrant, sweet and tart prickly pear cactus fruit (also called tunas) with smoky mesquite honey and warming spices.

INGREDIENTS

1½ cups tomato paste
1 cup white vinegar
⅓ cup prickly pear jam or 2 tablespoons prickly pear syrup
¼ cup mesquite or clover honey
1 teaspoon hickory liquid smoke
2 teaspoons smoked paprika
2 teaspoons kosher salt
2 teaspoons ground cinnamon
1 teaspoon black pepper

INSTRUCTIONS

Combine all ingredients in a small saucepan and bring to a simmer over medium heat. Cook for 5 minutes, stirring occasionally. Refrigerate for 4 hours before serving.



Green Chile Ranch Salsa

A creamy ranch and roasted Hatch green chile salsa. Serve it on cheese crisps or as a dipping sauce for hot wings.

INGREDIENTS

1 cup crema Mexicana agria, such as [Cacique](#)

1 (1-ounce) packet Hidden Valley Ranch Restaurant Style Dressing powder or Copycat Ranch Dip Mix (above)

6 roasted Hatch green chiles, stems and seeds removed (about 12 ounces), divided

INSTRUCTIONS

In a high-speed blender, combine 4 of the roasted green chiles with the crema and ranch powder and blitz until smooth. Refrigerate until ready to use.



Sweet & Spicy BBQ Hot Wings

Grilled chicken wings in a marinade inspired by molé negro, made with sweet Hungarian smoked paprika, hot New Mexico chile, unsweetened ground chocolate and red wine.

INGREDIENTS

12 chicken wing pieces
¼ cup red wine vinegar
½ cup red wine
¼ cup olive oil
1 tablespoon ground hot New Mexico chile
1 tablespoon sweet smoked paprika
1 tablespoon unsweetened ground chocolate
1 teaspoon dried oregano, preferably Mexican
1 teaspoon taco seasoning, preferably [Jackie's Homemade Taco Seasoning](#)
1 tablespoon minced cilantro
1 tablespoon coarse ground salt
1 tablespoon onion flakes
2 garlic cloves, minced
1 cup **Mesquite Honey and Prickly Pear Barbecue Salsa (above)**
½ cup **Green Chile Ranch Salsa (above), for serving**

INSTRUCTIONS

Combine all the marinade ingredients in a large resealable plastic bag along with the chicken. Massage the marinade into the chicken wings until well combined and coated. Marinate for at least 4 to 6 hours or overnight.

Heat a grill or grill pan to medium. Grill for 15 to 20 minutes per side, covered, until the juices run clear.

Toss in the Mesquite Honey and Prickly Pear Barbecue Salsa or serve it on the side for dipping, along with the Green Chile Ranch Salsa.



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Resources

ON THE WEBSITE

- [Recipe Index and Archive: Recipes.JackieAlpers.com](https://Recipes.JackieAlpers.com)

THE COOKBOOKS

- [Taste of Tucson: Sonoran Style Recipes Inspired by The Rich Culture of Southern Arizona](#)
- [The Unofficial Yellowstone Cookbook: Western Americana Recipes Inspired by the Dutton Family Ranch](#)
- [The Unofficial Elf Cookbook: Recipes Inspired by the Holiday Film](#)
- [Sprinkles! Recipes and Ideas for Rainbowlicious Desserts](#)

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