

Barbacoa – Comfort du Jour

This recipe turns a simple chuck roast into something mouthwateringly delicious. All you need is a slow cooker, some onions and garlic, a few basic condiments from the refrigerator door and patience.

Barbacoa is traditionally a spicy meat dish, but making it at home puts you in control of the heat level. It's a fabulous filling for street-style tacos, with fresh crunchy radishes and cilantro, plus a squeeze of lime. Or wrap it up in a larger flour tortilla with rice and peppers. Or serve it in a bowl with black beans, rice, lettuce, avocado and pico de gallo or salsa. If you're like me, you probably won't be able to resist having "just one more taste" straight from the slow cooker. Let's call it "quality control."

INGREDIENTS

3-4 lb. beef chuck roast
Kosher salt and black pepper
2 Tbsp. smoky Mexican BBQ rub* (see notes)
2 Tbsp. olive or canola oil
1 medium onion
5 cloves garlic
1/2 fresh poblano pepper*
1/2 red jalapeno*
1 small can mild chopped green chiles
2 Tbsp. Worcestershire
2 Tbsp. brown sugar
2 Tbsp. apple cider vinegar
1 Tbsp. chipotle puree with adobo*
2 tsp. liquid smoke
Juice of 1 lime
About 1/2 cup water or beef broth
2 dried bay leaves

*NOTES

An ideal smoky BBQ rub for this dish would include some type of smoked pepper (ancho or chipotle, for example), some garlic, onion and herbs. The main thing I recommend when choosing a pre-made rub is to pay attention to the sodium content. Ingredients are listed in order of their ratio, so if salt is listed early, the blend has a lot of it.

We enjoy spicy foods at our house, and I used a couple of fresh peppers that we already had on hand. Poblanos have some mild heat, but primarily a smoky flavor. Red jalapeno is hotter. Use what you're comfortable with, or leave them out altogether in favor of an extra onion. This is what's great about cooking at home—you get exactly what you like.

For the chipotle puree, we dump a can of chipotles with adobo directly into the food processor. The result is a thick, smoky sauce that has heat but also some fruitiness and a big dose of smoke. It keeps well in the fridge for several weeks and is a good addition to any type of Mexican dish or chili.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Cut the chuck roast into equal, baseball-sized chunks. Sprinkle them all over with kosher salt and black pepper (unless your spice blend already has both).
2. Combine the BBQ rub and oil in a large bowl. Toss the roast chunks in the oil until all sides are evenly covered. Cover the bowl and rest it at room temperature for at least 30 minutes, or up to an hour.
3. Chop up the onion, garlic and any fresh peppers you are using, and set them aside.
4. In a measuring cup, combine the remaining ingredients and whisk until blended.
5. Heat a large pot or skillet over medium-high heat. Drizzle a small amount of oil into the pot and add the roast chunks, a few at a time to avoid crowding the pan. Remember that a quick drop in temperature will prevent good searing. Turn the pieces over when the bottom is browned, and continue this until all sides are browned. Our slow cooker has a browning feature, so I was able to do this directly. A cast-iron skillet would be perfect for this, if your slow cooker has a ceramic crock.
6. Scatter the onions, garlic, peppers and green chiles over the top of the meat.
7. Pour the liquid ingredients into the cooker. If you used a separate skillet for browning, you may first want to swirl some of the liquid into it to deglaze and gather up all the tasty browned bits, so that you don't miss any of that fabulous flavor.
8. Tuck the bay leaves down into the liquid. Cover and cook on low setting for about 10 hours. We set this up at bedtime and woke up to the most amazing aromas.
9. When the meat is nice and tender, remove it with tongs to a cutting board or glass baking dish and shred it. We found that undisturbed overnight cooking left the bottom of the meat chunks tender, but the unsubmerged parts were still firm. We simply turned the meat over and gave it another hour or so. To shred the meat, use two forks to pull it apart in opposite directions.
10. Return the shredded meat to the flavorful liquid and keep it warm until ready to serve. If you plan to serve it later, refrigerate the meat and liquid together, and re-heat the amount for your recipe in a saucepan over low heat, or return it to the slow cooker if you plan to serve the whole amount.