

Maya-Mediterranean Chocolate Rice Pudding

SOURCE: The Splendid Table (www.splendidtable.org)

Adapted from *The New Taste of Chocolate: A Cultural & Natural History of Cacao*
with Recipes by Maricel E. Presilla (Ten Speed Press, 2001)

In a hole-in-the-wall bookstore in Mérida, Yucatan, I once found a curious little cookbook written long ago by a town historian: a gold mine of traditional recipes from another era. My favorite was a simple rice pudding with achiote seeds (also called "annatto") and chocolate. "This is history in a pudding," I said to myself as I read the recipe. Someone in colonial times had the brilliant idea of uniting an ancient Maya chocolate drink dyed with the classic coloring of the New World tropics and a homespun Mediterranean sweet. It has been a part of my repertoire for many years, but I'm not sure the town historian would recognize what I have done with his quiet, simple model. The original had no spices, except for cinnamon, while my version is rich with spices to suit my mood. But no matter what I do with this rich, sultry, red-tawny dish, I always pledge my Latin American allegiance with a can of our indispensable condensed milk. And I always follow my own idea of what a good rice pudding should taste and feel like - perfumed and sensuous, with the grains of rice almost melting into the matrix of the scented milk. For this, I start by cooking the rice in achiote-infused water so that it will soften nicely and take up the orange color of the seeds before I add the milk. My final touch is another bit of New World culinary history: the irresistible note of pure vanilla bean. This is a generous recipe, ideal for entertaining a crowd.

INGREDIENTS:

- * 1 C whole achiote (annatto) seeds
- * 10 C water
- * 1 C short-grain rice, preferably Spanish
- * 1 TBS aniseeds
- * 12 allspice berries
- * 4 (3"-) sticks true cinnamon (soft Ceylon cinnamon, sold as canela in Hispanic markets)
- * 1 dried arbol or serrano chile
- * 2 tsp salt
- * 4 C fresh whole milk
- * 2 (14-oz) cans condensed milk
- * 3 oz finely chopped dark chocolate (El Rey Bucare 58.5% cacao, or Valrhona Pur Caraibe 66% cacao, OR other fruity dark chocolate)
- * 2 plump Mexican vanilla beans
- * Ground true cinnamon (soft Ceylon cinnamon, sold as canela in Hispanic markets) for dusting

DIRECTIONS:

Place achiote in medium-sized saucepan & cover with the water. Bring to gentle boil & simmer, uncovered, 5 minutes - strain through fine-mesh sieve into bowl & set aside. (You can save the achiote seeds and reuse them for another purpose by again steeping in hot liquid)

Meanwhile, rinse rice under cold running water till water runs clear. Set aside to drain well in sieve or colander. Tie aniseeds, allspice, cinnamon sticks & dried chile in a piece of cheesecloth. Pour reserved achiote water into heavy-bottomed 5- or 6-qt saucepan. Add drained rice, spice bouquet + salt. Bring to boil - reduce heat to medium & cook,

uncovered, till rice is soft (20-25 minutes). Stir in the whole milk & condensed milk. Reduce heat to low and cook 5 minutes. Add chocolate, stirring with wooden spoon to mix evenly as it melts. Cook, uncovered, another 40 minutes, stirring occasionally; it should be very creamy but not dry. Halfway through the cooking, split vanilla beans lengthwise with small sharp knife and scrape the seeds into mixture. Add scraped beans and stir to mix well.

When the pudding is done but still a little loose-textured, remove & discard spice bouquet & vanilla beans. Pour into serving dish - dust lightly with ground cinnamon and serve warm or at room temperature.

Note: Products using porcelana cacao beans are available from chocolate makers Domori, Scharffen Berger and Valrhona.

Makes 8-12 servings