

Carnitas - The Lard Experiment

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Carnitas is one of the greatest contributions of the Mexican culinary culture, and my favorite way of preparing pork. Take a pork shoulder roast, braise it in it's own fat and a limited but tasty concoction of other ingredients for about 6 hours. When the pork shreds just by looking at it, shred it, put it on a baking sheet, slide it under a broiler for about 30 seconds so it gets a little crispy, and serve with lime, diced white onion and cilantro.

I've made this dish dozens of times now, although not as much over the last six months because of my Challenge training, but it's there, in the back of my head most times I go to a restaurant. I've never had carnitas in a restaurant that came anywhere near as good as mine. Recently, I told some friends of mine that when they were all in town again (one of them lives in San Antonio) I would make up a plate full. Someone mentioned "I'll bring the lard" and I wondered what he was talking about. I don't use lard in my recipe... maybe there's some aspect to carnitas I hadn't realized. I know my standard recipe is far from authentic (the secret ingredient is Japanese for chrissakes)... so I did some research and then some shopping and today I did some cooking.

I will start out by saying that, as of this writing, I know I still haven't published a journal for my trip over the summer of 2008, I haven't published the journal for my trip up to Sequoia-King's Canyon (even though it's 90% written already), and I also haven't even posted a single picture from Egypt. Well, what can I say, I run this site, I get to publish on my own priority schedule :) I looked up a couple of recipes on the Google for carnitas that involved lard. They are all fairly simple: melt lard, cube pork roast, put roast in lard, wait 90 - 120 minutes, remove, consume. There were small variations, so I stuck with one that seemed to make the most sense to me. It was also the only one that involved oranges in any fashion which struck me because orange juice is a vital contribution to the braising fluid in my other recipe. From my reading, carnitas cooked in lard is the authentic Mexican method for cooking the meal, but is also, as you can imagine incredibly unhealthy if consumed repeatedly. Hell, this isn't a daily recipe, this is something you make for friends on a weekend when you have plenty of time to prep, plenty of time to cook, time to knock back a few beers with your buddies before sitting down to feast. That's precisely what a mess of carnitas is: a feast. You don't feast every day, or every week or even every month. It's a celebration, and when you do... don't stint just because of a few extra bits (ok... LOTS of extra mg) of saturated fat.

I headed out to Whole Foods to get my supplies. Normally, I like their selection of meat better than the other local grocery stores, and since the ingredient list is tiny, I figured I could get out of there without having to hand over too much cash. The only thing I couldn't find there, you guessed it: lard. They won't sell it. The butcher there told me that it had too many "additives" and "bad things" in it that Whole Foods refused to stock. My estimation of a butcher that doesn't know that lard is only rendered pork fat, is fairly low. So I grabbed my stuff and got out of there. I headed up to a Ralph's Grocery Store in El Segundo and went up to the meat counter and rang for the butcher. He got a wistful look in his eye when I asked him if they had lard. He said that they didn't sell enough of it, so they had stopped stocking it on the shelves. He had a few one pound bricks left in the back though if I wanted some. So I asked him for three pounds (to match my three pound roast). I asked him where I would go to get more in the future and he said "you'll have to go to the other side of the 405. Everyone on the west side cooks with shit like Canola oil now." That's a shame I'm sure. I'll have to find a Carniceria to befriend somewhere... probably can get what I need there.

So I got home with my limited ingredients. As follows...

- 3 lbs. Pork Shoulder Roast
- 3 lbs. Lard
- 2 Oranges
- Salt

In addition, corn tortillas, diced white onion, coarsley chopped cilantro and fresh lime wedges for squeezing are the traditional accompaniment. Since it is California, I usually make fresh guacamole and picco di gallo too, but didn't want to go the full route on this (I am in training after all). On to the cooking...

First, I took the lard from the boxes and put them in a dutch oven with the heat set on VERY low. I just wanted to get them to melt, not actually get it to cooking heat yet. While the lard was melting, I cut the roast into one to two inch chunks, trying to keep everything in as uniform a size as possible so ensure even cooking. Once the roast was disassembled, I spread it out and seasoned it. I'm not sure how useful this is, since it's essentially going to be bathing in fat for the next two hours, but I figured it couldn't hurt. So sea salt all around.

With the roast prepared and the lard melting, I turned my attention to some of the more scientific aspects of the entire process. Some of my reading suggested that the lard would reach a temperature, then the pork goes in with the orange slices. As the water was released by the orange slices, the lard would boil. Then as the boiling subsided over the course of the first hour or so, the actual heat retained by the lard would increase and consequently the chunks of roast would brown nicely by the time they were done cooking as well as be cooked through. I wanted to check this process if I could to make sure I was on the right track, so I had to assemble a temperature probe for the oil. I concocted one out of the "spare hands" I have for soldering electronics, and the temperature probe I use for cooking chicken in the oven. It worked out fantastic.

As I was preparing the probe, I turned the heat up on the lard to that strange region between "medium" and "medium low". The probe reached about 190F. At this point, the lard looked like a gigantic pool of lightly golden liquid... not bubbling at all. I got my fire extinguisher and made sure it was handy and started to carefully, VERY CAREFULLY, put the chunks of pork into the lard. As each went in, the lard went from calm pool of gold to quickly frothing. I briefly worried that it might boil over, but it didn't, the bubbles didn't start to stack so it was all good. My suspicion, was that since I had seasoned the pork with salt and let it sit for about 15 minutes, it had started to break down the outer cell walls, releasing a small amount of water that hissed and popped when it hit the oil. That's why I always have a fire extinguisher handy in

the kitchen. Just in case I do one thing that I don't realize will react with another and result in doom. Better safe than sorry!

So, in with the pork and once it was all layered in, I sliced the oranges into four gigantic slices (about 3/4 inch thick). I layered them carefully on the top and they started to sizzle a little bit. I just left them there and set the timer for one hour. As the pork had gone in, the temperature had lowered to about 180, so I added a little bit of power to the burner until it raised back up to 190 then turned it back down to that medium-medium-low temperature. I watched for about 10 minutes to make sure it wasn't going to boil over immediately and then went over and read up on lard on wikipedia for a while and watched some TV, all while keeping a watchful eye on the goings on.

After the first hour, I went over and checked on the progress. The lard was bubbling a little more diligently, but still much more of a constant simmer really than a boil. That seemed ok, and the temperature had, indeed, risen to about 205 degrees. The color of the oil seemed to have gotten a little darker too, no longer looking like melted butter, but had a slightly browner aspect to it. I set the timer for 30 minutes and started to prep the fixings.

I diced up the onions and cilantro, throwing them into a storage container and then Cuisinarted tomatoes, more onions, a clove of garlic, juice of one lime, and a sliced jalapeno together for the Pico Di Gallo. That also went into a storage container... this is the sort of meal that makes massive quantities of left overs so there's no point putting it into glassware then into the container. Especially since I'm the only one here to eat!

After 90 minutes, the pork and lard had gotten darker still, and the lard was now bubbling steadily... still a simmer, but an aggressive one. There was barely any spatter around. The temperature was now up to about 210 degrees. I set the timer for another 30 minutes and cracked open a beer and started cleaning up my kitchen utensils. Once everything was cleaned up, the beer was done and the 30 minutes had passed. The lard looked significantly different now. Very dark and definitely boiling. The oranges had grown exceptionally brown and had puffed up quite a bit. I grabbed tongs and pulled up some pork to look at and the ones from the bottom had caramelized very nicely and some were exceptionally crispy too. I figured it would probably be like bacon and that if I could get it out of its own fat and dry it off while it rested, most of it would get a nice crispy texture to it.

I turned the burner off and grabbed a mixing bowl, layering it with a couple of wadded up paper towels. I carefully extracted the pork and set it in the bowl and then tossed the oranges in the trash. I grabbed another paper towel and pressed it against the top of the bowl of pork and soaked up a little bit of the stuff before it had a chance to run down. Then I set it aside to rest for a bit. Meanwhile, I was impressed that the dutch oven retained the heat very, very well and the lard continued to bubble for at least another 15 minutes even after the heat was turned off.

I spread the pork onto a cutting board and discarded the EXTREME quantity of lard and fat that was at the bottom of the mixing bowl, along with the paper towels. I shredded / chopped the pork very roughly and put it into a nice warm serving bowl. Normally, I just shred the pork with a couple of forks, but this was denser than my usual method, so I wanted to preserve the... chunkiness... somewhat.

Now. The taste. Honestly, the first taste I had, I was unimpressed. Just grabbing a couple of chunks from the cutting board and popping them in my mouth, the texture was right, maybe a little crunchier than usual, but the flavor just didn't wow me. I didn't expect it to have quite the same flavor impact as my other recipe does, but this was significantly duller. I did know that carnitas can tend to be better the second day, so I let myself be patient. I cleaned up the stove area as I let everything just sort of sit for about 15 to 20 minutes in a warm oven. The second try, I heated up a couple of tortillas and decided to keep it very simple, very traditional. Use the tortilla to grab some of the carnitas from the bowl, toss on a good few fingerfulls of raw white onion and cilantro, give it a squeeze of lime and a tiny sprinkle of sea salt. The taste, this time, was dramatically different. Maybe more "honest" to the pork, than by braising in a water based liquid. The pork was succulent, although there was the dense, crispy, caramelized bits from the bottom of the dutch oven. I mean it's waaaay delicious. Tasty enough, that as I write this upstairs in my office, I'm thinking about heading back downstairs to grab a chunk out of the fridge to nibble. The second sample was with a little of the pico de gallo underneath and I didn't like it as

much. I like the simple rustic flavor of the onion, cilantro, lime, salt and pork. Man it's tasty.

So, what do I think: braise in lard vs. braise in water based fluid. The flavor and texture between the two is so different: lower texture but higher flavor with the water based braise, but higher texture with subtler flavor with the lard based method. Certainly, the water based braise is FAR healthier (as healthy as this recipe can possibly get... which is to say, it's still essentially heart poison) than cooking your pork in liquid cholesterol and saturated fat. I like the novelty of the lard, and sometimes, it's nice to cook something that makes people just roll their eyes.

The experiment is a success... but I don't think it's enough to make me change my ways. But man I'm glad I gave it a try! I have two pounds of pork left... good thing I have hungry coworkers. Taco day tomorrow at work!