

Tex-Mex Pulled Chicken

Ingredients

Chicken thighs,	2-2½ lbs	Caldo de tomate	2 Tbsp
Yellow onion, large	1	Bay leaves	2
Garlic cloves	4-6	Limes	2
Mexican spice blend	4 Tbsp	Fresh cilantro, chopped	½ cup
Salsa	7 oz. can	Kosher salt	to taste
Chicken stock	2½ cups	Lard	2 Tbsp

Directions

Preheat oven to $275^{\circ}F$ — Pat **chicken thighs** completely dry — Large dice **onion** — Mince **garlic** — Chop **cilantro** — Juice **limes** ($\frac{1}{4}$ cup)

1. Pat **chicken thighs** completely dry with paper towels. Season skin side lightly with **kosher salt**. Heat dutch oven over medium-high heat with no added fat. Place **thighs** skin-side down and do not move them. Render and sear for *8-10 minutes* until deeply golden-brown and skin releases easily from the pan. Flip briefly for *1-2 minutes*, then remove **chicken** to a plate. Pour rendered fat into a bowl, reserving 2 Tbsp in the pot along with all the fond.
2. Reduce heat to medium. Add diced **onion** to the fond, stirring to coat in fat. Cook *5-7 minutes*, stirring occasionally, until edges start browning—not just translucent, we want some color and caramelization.
3. Add 4 Tbsp **Mexican spice blend** to the **onions**. Cook *45-60 seconds*, stirring constantly, until a toasted fragrance develops. You will smell the distinct shift from raw spice to bloomed aromatic. Immediately add the entire 7 oz. can of **Herdez salsa ranchera** to stop the bloom. Scrape all the fond from the bottom of the pot—this concentrated layer is essential for depth.
4. Add minced **garlic** to the tomato mixture and cook for *30 seconds*. Add **chicken stock**, **caldo de tomate**, and **bay leaves**. Stir well and bring to a simmer. Taste the braising liquid—it should be intensely flavored and slightly too salty. If not sufficiently seasoned, add another $\frac{1}{2}$ Tbsp **caldo de tomate**.
5. Return **chicken thighs** to the pot skin-side up. Liquid should come halfway up the **chicken**; add more **stock** if needed. Bring to a bare simmer on the stovetop,

then cover with a tight-fitting lid. Transfer to the preheated 275°F oven and braise for $2\frac{1}{2}$ - 3 hours.

6. Check at $2\frac{1}{2}$ hours: the meat should pull from the bone with zero resistance. If still slightly firm, continue braising for another 30 minutes. Bone-in thighs are very forgiving and can go to $3+$ hours without harm.
7. Remove **chicken** from the pot and let cool for 10 minutes to make handling easier. Pick all meat from the bones—it will slide off easily. Discard skin and bones. Pour the braising liquid through a fine mesh strainer into a saucepan, discarding solids.
8. Tilt the saucepan and use a spoon to skim excess fat from the surface. Reserve 2 Tbsp of this rendered **chicken fat** in a small bowl; discard the rest. Place the saucepan over medium-high heat and reduce the liquid by half, which should take 10-15 minutes. You want approximately $1\frac{1}{2}$ -2 cups final volume. The sauce should look glossy and coat the back of a spoon. Taste periodically as flavor intensifies dramatically during reduction.
9. Shred the **chicken** into bite-size pieces—not too fine, maintain some texture. Add shredded **chicken** to the reduced sauce along with 2 Tbsp **lard**. Fold gently to coat every piece.
10. Add juice of 2-3 **limes** (start with 2, taste, then add more if needed) and $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped **cilantro**. Fold to combine. Taste and adjust **salt** and **lime juice** as needed. The final result should taste deeply savory with subtle smoke, bright acidity, and rich mouthfeel. The sauce should cling to every shred without pooling.
11. Serve immediately in tacos, or hold warm. This **chicken** benefits from resting 15-30 minutes to allow flavors to marry fully.

Equipment Required

- Dutch oven (5-7 quart capacity, oven-safe to 300°F)
- Tight-fitting lid for dutch oven
- Large plate for holding seared chicken
- Fine mesh strainer
- Medium saucepan (for reduction)
- Small bowl (for reserved fat)
- Cutting board and chef's knife
- Measuring cups and spoons
- Wooden spoon or silicone spatula
- Paper towels
- Tongs or fork (for handling chicken)
- Ladle or large spoon (for skimming fat)
- Two forks (for shredding chicken)
- Citrus juicer (optional but helpful)

Ingredient Tips

- Bone-in, skin-on thighs are essential—boneless will not achieve the same tenderness or gelatin-rich sauce
- Choose thighs of similar size for even cooking
- **Herdez salsa ranchera** is preferred for its roasted pepper depth; substitute with quality jarred salsa if needed
- If your **Mexican spice blend** is older than *6 months*, increase quantity by 1 Tbsp as potency fades
- Use fresh **garlic** only—powdered garlic is already in the spice blend
- **Chicken stock** quality matters; homemade or low-sodium store-bought preferred
- Reserve rendered **chicken fat**—it's gold for finishing and adds authentic richness
- Fresh **Mexican limes** (Key limes) are more authentic but regular Persian limes work well

Mise en Place

- Remove **chicken thighs** from refrigerator *30 minutes* before cooking to take chill off
- Pat **chicken** completely dry—moisture prevents proper searing
- Prepare all vegetables before starting: dice **onion**, mince **garlic**, chop **cilantro**
- Measure **spice blend** and set near stove for quick addition
- Have all liquids measured and ready—braising moves quickly after sear
- Open **salsa** can and have ready to add immediately after spices
- Juice **limes** after **chicken** goes in oven (keeps juice fresh)

Preparation Tips

- The sear is critical: don't rush it. Deeply golden skin = maximum fond = concentrated flavor
- Resist moving the **chicken** during searing—let it release naturally when ready
- The fond (brown bits) contains concentrated Maillard compounds; scrape thoroughly
- Brown the **onion** edges—this adds another layer of caramelization
- Bloom spices until fragrant shift occurs, usually *45-60 seconds*—under-blooming leaves raw taste, over-blooming creates bitterness
- Add **salsa** immediately after blooming to halt cooking and prevent burning

- Taste braising liquid before adding **chicken**—should be intensely flavored
- During braise, liquid should barely simmer; vigorous bubbling means oven is too hot
- Skim fat before reduction—too much fat makes sauce greasy rather than rich
- Reduce sauce properly—half volume concentrates flavor exponentially
- Add **lime juice** and **cilantro** only at the end to preserve brightness
- Shred **chicken** to bite-size pieces, not fine threads—texture matters
- Top with crumbled queso fresco, cotija, or shredded Monterey Jack
- Pair with Mexican rice, refried beans, or charred street corn
- Makes exceptional enchiladas—use as filling with verde or roja sauce
- Works beautifully in tortas, quesadillas, or burrito bowls
- For tostadas: crisp tortillas, spread refried beans, top with **chicken**, shredded lettuce, Mexican crema
- Leftover **chicken** makes outstanding chilaquiles for breakfast
- Consider crispy skin garnish: remove skin before braising, roast separately until crispy, crumble over tacos
- Traditional accompaniments: salsa verde, salsa roja, pickled carrots and jalapeños, lime wedges, fresh tortilla chips

Make Ahead & Storage

- Can be made up to *3 days* ahead through step 10; refrigerate in sauce
- Flavor actually improves after *24 hours* as spices continue integrating
- If made ahead, add fresh **lime juice** and **cilantro** when reheating
- Reheat gently in covered pot over low heat, stirring occasionally
- Add splash of **stock** if sauce has tightened during refrigeration
- Can be frozen for up to *3 months*; thaw overnight in refrigerator
- After thawing, refresh with additional **lime juice** and **cilantro**
- Leftover rendered **chicken fat** can be refrigerated for *1 week* and used for sautéing vegetables or making rice

Serving Suggestions

- Serve in warm corn or flour tortillas with diced **onion**, **cilantro**, and **lime** wedges
- Excellent with pickled jalapeños, sliced radishes, or quick-pickled red onions

Flavor Profile Notes

- This recipe achieves depth through layering: seared proteins, bloomed spices, reduced sauce, bright finish
- The **Mexican spice blend** with cinnamon and cloves provides northern Mexican/mole-adjacent complexity
- Gelatin from bones creates luxurious mouthfeel and helps sauce cling to meat
- Reserved **chicken fat** adds authentic richness without greasiness when used judiciously
- The acid-fat-salt-umami balance is critical: **lime** cuts richness, **salt** amplifies everything, bouillon/caldo provide savory depth
- Finishing with fresh **cilantro** and **lime** preserves brightness that would be lost during long braise