

Tex-Mex Pulled Chicken

Ingredients

Chicken thighs,	3-5 lbs	Caldo de tomate	2 Tbsp
Yellow onion, large	1	Bay leaves	2
Garlic cloves	4-6	Limes	2
Mexican spice blend	5 Tbsp	Fresh cilantro, chopped	½ cup
Herdez salsa ranchera	7 oz. can	Kosher salt	2 tsp.
Chicken stock	2½ cups		

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. 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 4-5 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. Add **salsa** to stop the bloom. Scrape all the fond from the bottom of the pot.
4. Add minced **garlic** to the tomato mixture and cook for *30 seconds*. Add 2½ cups **chicken stock**, 2 Tbsp **caldo de tomate**, and 2 **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.
7. Remove **chicken** from the pot and let cool for 10 minutes to make handling easier. Remove skin and bones, etc.
8. In a large bowl, shred the **chicken** into bite-size pieces, maintaining some texture. Add $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of the **braising liquid**, 2 Tbsp. **reserved chicken fat**, juice of 2 *limes*, and $\frac{1}{2}$ cup **cilantro**. Fold gently to combine. Add more **braising liquid** as needed until moist but not soupy.
9. 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