

THE FREE PRESS CUISINE

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Sassy Salsa

Visit a Mexican restaurant anywhere in the Americas, and you're bound to see at least one table salsa, the all-in-one special sauce of "la cocina Mexicana" that is appetizer, condiment and garnish.

Traditionally used according to each diner's personal taste, salsas come in many styles, including "red" (made with tomatoes) or "green" (with tomatillos), cooked or raw. The amount of chile and the variety and even the part that is used determines whether a salsa is tame enough for a child or ferocious; for aficionados who want to feel the burn, it's the hottest salsas that keep them coming back for more.

The heat-generating compound in chiles, capsaicin, is concentrated not in the walls of the chile but in its ribs, veins and seeds. These "hot" parts make up a larger proportion of the total volume in small chiles compared to larger ones — a botanical tidbit, along with variety differences, that explains the firepower of a Mexican jalapeno or serrano no longer than a toothpick.

Fresh fruit salsas combine sizzle with sweet. Made with pineapple, melon, papaya and other sunny fruits, these chutney-like mixtures complement lighter Mexican-style dishes, grilled poultry or fish, or even burgers and sandwiches. Chilling fruit salsas, covered, for at least an hour before serving fully develops their flavor, but all fresh salsas taste best when eaten within two days.

Success Tips:

□ To soften the "bite" of raw garlic in fresh salsas, toast unpeeled garlic clove in heavy skillet over moderately high heat, turning clove until peel is lightly browned. Peel and chop garlic before adding to salsa.

□ Chiles can irritate or burn skin, eyes and mucous membranes; use caution when tasting or handling chiles, especially unfamiliar varieties. When handling chiles, avoid touching face or eyes, and if skin is sensitive, wear rubber gloves.

□ After handling chiles, wash hands, utensils and work surfaces thoroughly with soap and water; rinse well.

Salsa Cruda

This mild-tasting uncooked salsa is simple to make. Set out warm, crisp-fried triangles of tortilla (tostadas) or slices of bell pepper, cucumber and carrot for dipping into the salsa (no double-dipping allowed); drizzle it over scrambled eggs or seafood;

or spoon it into tacos and burritos.

1 yellow onion, peeled and minced

3 vine-ripened tomatoes, peeled, seeded and coarsely chopped

2 tablespoons minced cilantro

1 clove garlic, minced

1 small jalapeno or serrano chile, minced (or more to taste)

1 tablespoon fresh lime juice

Salt to taste

In a small bowl, combine all ingredients except salt no more than 1 hour before serving. Do not add salt until the last minute before serving.

Salsa Azteca

Hotter than the preceding recipe, this fresh-tasting salsa is naturally chunky but can be blended for a smoother texture. For a milder taste, use canned diced green chiles instead of the fresh jalapenos or serranos.

3 jalapenos or 4 serrano chiles, fresh or canned, minced

5 vine-ripened large tomatoes, peeled and finely chopped

2 clove garlic, minced

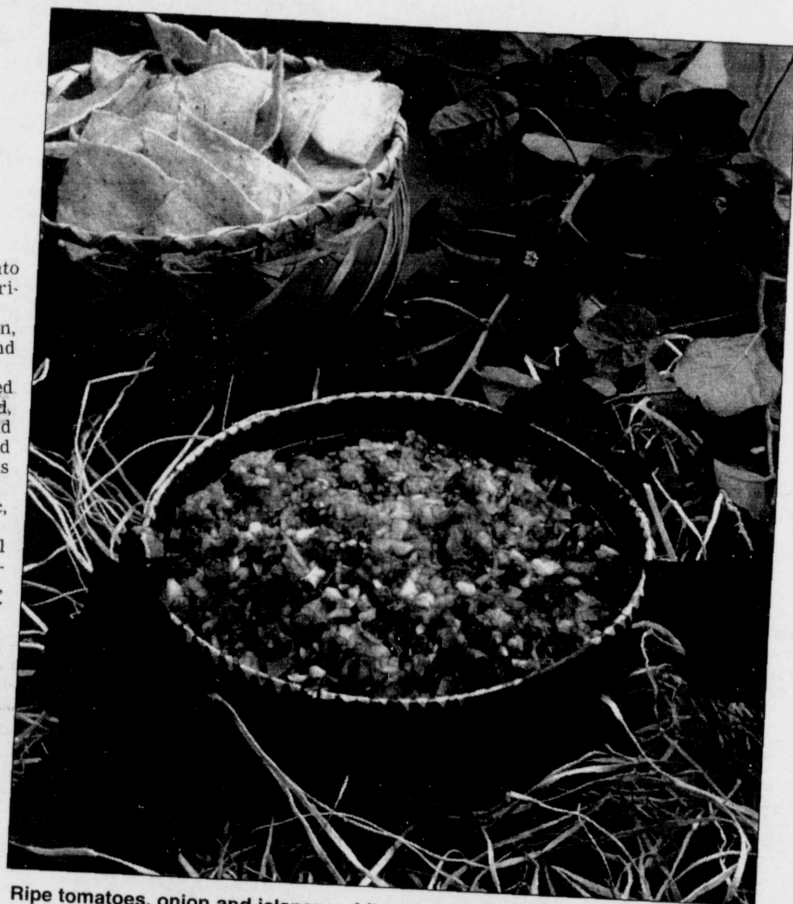
1 small white onion, minced

1 tablespoon vinegar

2 tablespoons chopped cilantro

Salt to taste

In a medium bowl, mix together chiles, tomatoes, garlic, onion and vinegar. Stir in the cilantro and salt just before serving.



Ripe tomatoes, onion and jalapeno chiles flavour an authentic Salsa Cruda to serve with crisp-fried tortilla triangles.

Pineapple-Tomato salsa

The riper the pineapple, the sweeter the salsa. Serve with pork or chicken.

1/2 pineapple, diced in 1/4-inch pieces

2 medium tomatoes, diced

1 smaller cucumber, seeded and diced

2 shallots, minced

1/4 cup minced cilantro

2 tablespoons freshly squeezed lime juice

1 tablespoon white wine vinegar

1 tablespoon vegetable oil

1/2 teaspoon salt

In a 2-quart non reactive bowl, gently mix all ingredients. Cover and refrigerate at least 1 hour before serving.

Short on time in the kitchen? Help is on the way! Most Canadians feel that a lack of time stands in the way of eating as well as they would like.

"In today's fast paced society, you may find yourself skipping meals, grabbing whatever is available to relieve hunger and relying on the same 5-10 main weekday meals" says Lise Smednjo, R.D., Dietitians of Canada. "These practices can limit food choices and keep you from eating enough nutrients, that are important to health."

"When you think of healthy eating in a hurry, think F.A.S.T." she suggests.



Food

Food for healthy eating can also be quick and easy. Having a good supply of easy-to-

prepare, nutritious foods in your cupboards, fridge and freezer ensures that you'll have the foods you need on-hand to make healthy meals in a hurry.

Active

Active living leads to more energy and a feeling of well-being. Activity doesn't just burn calories, it loosens muscles, relieves stress and releases substances into the body which can elevate your mood. Another plus is the way exercise builds muscles which increases energy needs (so you can actually eat more without gaining weight) and improves your quality of life as you age.

Save

Save time for family and friends by making time to plan, cook and enjoy meals together. Make tonight's dinner with a friend, child, family member or spouse. Use the time to catch up on news with each other.

Taste

Taste and pleasure of food is paramount. Healthy eating and great taste naturally go hand in hand. Nature offers fast foods that you can grab and enjoy like fresh fruit and vegetables, breads, cereals, milk, cheese and yogurt, nuts and seeds and many others.