



Slow Cooker White Chicken Chili

By definition, chili equals heat and liveliness. The slow cooker sure put a damper on things.

BY MARÍA DEL MAR SACASA

WHITE CHILI is a simple yet flavorful stew of shredded chicken and white beans. It's spiked with vibrant, spicy green chiles and earthy spices like cumin and coriander, then finished with a shower of fresh cilantro. I figured it would make a good candidate for the slow cooker: The chicken would cook gradually and flavor the broth, the beans would turn creamy, and the chiles would lace the dish with heat.

Many slow-cooker recipes dump chicken, beans, canned green chiles, onions, garlic, spices, and chicken broth into the slow cooker and let it go for hours. This hands-off approach had ease in its favor, but not much else. I found the results to be more like soup than stew, and by the end of cooking, the dish had no chile flavor—or any flavor at all, no matter how potent the spices were at the start. I resigned myself to doing a little work up front, with the hope that the results would justify the effort.

I identified the best features of the recipes I'd tested and set out to combine them. First, I sautéed the onions, garlic, chiles, and spices before putting them in the slow cooker, a classic cooking technique that builds a foundation of flavor and did indeed give the chili some backbone. Canned green chiles were squishy, rubbery, and had zero heat—and that was before they had cooked for hours. Fresh jalapeños improved the stew considerably. To build another layer of flavor, I reserved some of the sauté to stir in at the end of cooking.

I'd been adding boneless, skinless chicken breasts directly to the slow cooker but suspected that bone-in, skin-on thighs would add deeper flavor, especially if I browned them first. I browned the chicken, then removed and discarded its skin and used the rendered fat to sauté the onion mixture. The chili was notably better—the dark-meat thighs held up better to the long cooking time and weren't in as much danger of drying out.

The flavor was much improved, but the texture remained problematic. In the test kitchen, we know from experience that slow cookers don't allow for evaporation, and so I cut back the chicken broth. I also upped the amount of beans, from the two cans used in many recipes to three cans. The chili was now significantly less soupy and became even better when I pureed one can of beans with some of the broth. The texture was good, but the flavor needed reinforcing.

The idea of corn crossed my mind, and after that there was no turning back. If you didn't grow up in the South or Southwest, you might not know about hominy. I had a hunch that hominy would puree nicely and add flavor, too. I emptied a can into the food processor with the beans. It made for a velvety-smooth chili base with a hearty note of toasted corn. Perfect.

To finish, I stirred in the usual cilantro and was about to add a squeeze of lime when I spied a jar of pickled jalapeños. I chopped a few tablespoons and stirred them in instead. They gave the chili just the right kick and sweetness.

STEP-BY-STEP Building Flavor

The slow cooker has a reputation for washing out flavors. Here's how we fight that.



1. PUREE HOMINY (with beans and chicken broth) to give the broth heft, velvety texture, and subtle corn flavor.



2. BROWN THE CHICKEN parts, then sauté onions, jalapeños, garlic, and spices in the rendered fat to add layers of flavor.



3. TO BRIGHTEN THE FLAVORS, stir in minced pickled jalapeños and half the sautéed aromatics just before serving.



We like to serve this warming chili with diced avocado and lime wedges.

SLOW-COOKER WHITE CHICKEN CHILI Serves 6 to 8

Four bone-in, skin-on split chicken breasts will work in place of the thighs.

- 3 (16-ounce) cans cannellini beans, drained and rinsed**
- 1 (16-ounce) can white hominy, drained and rinsed**
- 3 cups low-sodium chicken broth**
Salt and pepper
- 6 bone-in, skin-on chicken thighs (about 3 pounds, see note), fat trimmed**
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil**
- 2 onions, chopped fine**
- 4 jalapeño chiles, seeded and chopped fine**
- 6 garlic cloves, minced**
- 1½ tablespoons ground cumin**
- 2 teaspoons ground coriander**
- ¼ cup finely chopped fresh cilantro**
- 2 tablespoons drained jarred pickled jalapeños, minced**

1. BLEND BASE Puree 1 can beans, hominy, broth, and $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon salt in blender until completely smooth. Pour into slow cooker.

2. BROWN CHICKEN Pat chicken dry with paper towels and season with salt and pepper. Heat oil in large skillet over

medium-high heat until just smoking. Cook thighs, skin-side down, until skin is well browned and fat has rendered, about 5 minutes. Remove and discard skin, then add thighs to slow cooker.

3. COOK AROMATICS Pour off all but 2 tablespoons fat from skillet. Cook onions, chiles, and $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt until golden brown, stirring occasionally, about 8 minutes. Add garlic, cumin, and coriander and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Transfer half of onion mixture to slow cooker; reserve remaining mixture in refrigerator.

4. FINISH CHILI Add remaining beans to slow cooker. Cover and cook on low until chicken is tender, about 4 hours. Transfer chicken to bowl. When cool enough to handle, discard bones and shred chicken into bite-sized pieces. Stir cilantro, pickled jalapeños, shredded chicken, and reserved onion mixture into slow cooker and let warm. Serve.

SECRET INGREDIENT Hominy

A can of pureed hominy (dried corn kernels soaked in lye or slaked lime to remove the hull and germ) added body and rich corn flavor that tasters loved.