

Tex-Mex Rice

Typically, the rice that comes alongside a burrito at restaurants has about as much flavor as the color red.

We wanted to taste the tomato. BY MARÍA DEL MAR SACASA

TEX-MEX RICE SHOULD be a gutsy, nicely spicy, sunset-orange pilaf. Sadly, more often it's an uninspired side dish piled up next to your enchiladas or stuffed into your burrito as cheap filler. Looking for an upgrade on these restaurant versions, I made several recipes, but they weren't much better. They all followed the basic pilaf cooking method: Sauté vegetables with onions and spices for flavor; toast long-grain white rice in fat to ensure distinct rice grains; add liquid, bring to a boil, cover, and simmer until the rice is tender. The major difference among the pilafs was the type and quantity of tomatoes that flavored the rice. Recipes made with fresh tomatoes were fluffy, but regrettably light in flavor. On the other end of the spectrum were pilafs overwhelmed by canned tomatoes and jarred salsas, sticky messes with the taste of processed food and the texture of bad risotto. Clearly, Tex-Mex rice's star ingredient—the tomatoes—needed to be handled with care.

My early tests led me straight to canned diced tomatoes. Their flavor is more concentrated than that of fresh tomatoes, and in the test kitchen we've found they taste fresher than canned puree. I whirled them around in a food processor before using them as the liquid in which to cook the rice. But the dense puree weighed down the rice and turned it to slop. I'd have to figure out how to add enough tomato for flavor without ruining the texture of the rice.

Obviously, I'd need to dilute the concentrated puree. In the test kitchen, we've found that a ratio of 1½ parts water to 1 part rice makes for the fluffiest pilaf. But a thick tomato puree, which is not 100 percent liquid, doesn't work the same way as water. To cook 1½ cups long-grain white rice, I eventually arrived at 1½ cups each tomato puree and chicken broth (which had better flavor than water). This pilaf was perfectly cooked and had distinct tomato flavor.

Now I looked for ways to streamline my method. Most pilaf recipes recommend rinsing raw rice to wash off excess starch. I tried to skip this rinse, without success: It really did yield fluffier rice.

Next, I omitted the step of sautéing the grains in fat. Drat! There was no denying that the sautéed version came out more tender and evenly cooked. Our science editor explained that acids strengthen the pectin in the cell walls of cereal grains, so that rice that's cooked in an acidic ingredient like tomato puree will toughen. Sautéing the rice first, he added, weakens the cell walls, cancelling out the acid's effects.

Since I had to sauté, I might as well get all I could from the technique. In a classic pilaf, rice is sautéed for three minutes or so. To add toasty depth to my Tex-Mex rice, I sautéed it about twice that long, until the grains were deep golden and aromatic. To add heat and flavor, I stirred chopped jalapeño chiles and poblanos in with the chopped onion that started my pilaf. There was no need for chili powder, which tasters said made this homemade pilaf taste like the store-bought stuff. Ground cumin, by contrast, was aromatic and warm, and dried oregano tied the dish together.

A colleague suggested I reserve some of the sautéed aromatics to stir in at the end of cooking for a boost of vibrant flavor. This rice was bold and beautiful.

TEX-MEX RICE Serves 4 to 6

Can't find poblanos? Use an Anaheim chile or a green bell pepper combined with an extra jalapeño instead. For more heat, leave the ribs and seeds in the jalapeños.

- 1 (14.5-ounce) can diced tomatoes
- 1½ cups long-grain white rice
- ¼ cup vegetable oil
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- 1 poblano chile (see note), seeded and chopped fine
- 2 jalapeño chiles, seeded and chopped fine (see note)
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1½ cups low-sodium chicken broth
- Salt

1. RINSE RICE Process tomatoes in food processor until smooth; set aside. Place rice in fine-mesh strainer set over large bowl. Rinse under running water until water runs clear, about 1 minute. Drain rice well.



For the brightest flavor and best texture, we cook the rice in a seasoned puree of diced tomatoes.

2. SAUTÉ AROMATICS Heat oil in Dutch oven over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add onion, poblano, and jalapeños and cook until softened, about 5 minutes; reserve ¼ cup pepper mixture. Stir rice, cumin, and oregano into pot and cook, stirring frequently, until rice is deep golden, 5 to 6 minutes.

3. SIMMER RICE Add broth, processed tomatoes, and 1 teaspoon salt and bring to boil. Cover, reduce heat to low, and simmer until liquid is absorbed and rice is tender, about 25 minutes. Remove from heat and stir in reserved pepper mixture. Cover and let stand for 10 minutes. Fluff with fork and season with salt. Serve.

STEP BY STEP Keys to Tex-Mex Rice

Tex-Mex rice can be gloppy and bland. Ours repairs the texture and turns up the flavor.



1. Don't skip this step. Rinsing the rice really does rid it of gummy starches, preventing, in turn, a gummy finished dish.



2. Don't be impatient. For deep, nutty flavor we toast the rice on the stovetop for about 5 minutes, nearly twice as long as usual.



3. Split the difference. We made our own flavorful puree from canned diced tomatoes thinned with chicken broth.