

## Foodie Freak: Tacos at home

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 Sunday, 23 November 2008  
 Last Updated Sunday, 28 June 2009

With the Foodie Freak columns I want to help people discover places and foods they may not have experienced before and to save money when cooking at home. So when I made a recent change at home I thought it was something that I wanted pass on.

Theresa is a cashier at my local mega-mart and she has become accustomed to hearing me moralize about making everything myself. One day when I purchased pre-packaged macaroni and cheese in a box, she looked at me as if I was purchasing a dirty magazine and seemed a tad disappointed in me. I laughed uncomfortably and said, maybe a little too loudly, "My wife and daughter like this stuff!" Theresa smiled and went back to scanning my groceries.

It's not that I'm an elitist snob that only eats truffles and caviar; I just prefer to make foods myself and from scratch. If you make food yourself at home you can make it healthier than the pre-made pre-packaged items you find on the store shelves — to me even salad dressing tastes better if it doesn't come out of a jar or bottle.

It pains me to see families with shopping carts full of boxed dried "meals" and I just want to tell them, "You can make that same dinner at home, almost just as easily, with less fat, less salt, and for pennies on the dollar — think how much more money you could have in your pocket every month!"

And then one day I was making tacos at home and thought, "Why do I keep buying these packets of taco seasoning? There must be a better way!" Spices are expensive, and spice mixes are even worse. After all, not only are you paying for the individual spices, but then you're paying someone to mix them together and put them in all new pretty packaging.

So I started researching taco seasonings and experimenting with what I liked best, and here's the funny part: I also wanted to experiment with fajitas seasonings and started to look for a fajita spice recipe — and found that they were basically the exact same spices as the taco seasoning recipes! So why buy a packet that says "taco seasoning" and another packet that says "fajita seasoning" when you can mix up your own jar of spices to your own taste and use it for whatever type of meal you're having?

Once I experimented a bit and felt I had a great taco seasoning put together I made tacos for lunch for my daughter's school. I also threw together a fairly simple taco sauce just for fun. Later, the students and teachers were begging for the taco sauce recipe, and I didn't remember how I made it! So I had to spend a while playing around with different ideas and think that I have finally recreated it, and have included it here for you to try.

The taco seasoning recipe I have included will season one pound of ground beef. As a time saver you can make it in quadruple batches and then just use 1/4 cup taco seasoning to 1 pound cooked drained ground beef and 1/4 cup of water. The seasoning mixture will hold its flavor well for three months.

One of the spices I included in the taco spice mixture is smoked paprika and I can't recommend it highly enough to you. It adds a new dimension to dishes that I can't live without now. Not only does it improve taco seasoning but goulash, ratatouille and osso bucco all become dishes fit for royalty when adding some smoked paprika. It's available at many local mega-marts so look for it on the spice rack on your next shopping trip.

Readers may have noticed that I rarely list salt in my recipes and the reason for that is just that salt is such a subjective flavor, and with its health/diet issues I prefer you make salt decisions in your own home. For me, these recipes are fully flavorful enough.

In an effort to share these (in my opinion) fantastic seasonings and sauce with the world, I've tried to get commercial kitchen/bottling companies to take my recipes and start a line of specialty food products, but they either want thousands of dollars up front or they don't return my calls or letters at all. So my failure to start a line of specialty foods is now your benefit. Here are my recipes for taco seasonings and sauce.

### Taco/Fajita seasoning

1 tablespoon dried onion flakes 1 teaspoon onion powder 1 teaspoon garlic powder 1 teaspoon smoked paprika 1 teaspoon ground cumin 1 teaspoon sugar 1 teaspoon dried oregano 1/4 teaspoon chipotle powder 1/4 cup water

For tacos 1 pound ground beef

Mix all of the dry ingredients and set aside. Brown ground beef in a skillet and drain any excess fat. Return to heat and add spice mixture and water, stir until well mixed and slightly thickened (about one minute). Remove from heat and serve.

For fajitas 1 pound sliced beef strips

Mix all of the dry ingredients and set aside. Brown your favorite fajita beef strips, then add grilled onions, bell peppers, seasoning mix, 1/4 cup water and the juice of one lime, cook until onions and peppers are slightly softened.

Taco sauce

1 can (7.5 oz) Chipotles in Adobo 1-15 ounce bottle (1 and 1/2 cups) raspberry vinegar 1 1/4 cup brown sugar 3 cloves of garlic

Add all ingredients (including the adobo sauce) together in a blender and blend until very smooth (i.e., give it at least a minute). Pour through a strainer or mesh to remove seeds. Pour into storage containers (once washed, the raspberry vinegar bottle acts as a perfect serving vessel) and refrigerate over night to let the flavors meld. Makes about three cups, and will keep in refrigerator well for several months. You can hold back the adobo sauce that the chipotles come in from

the recipe for a milder sauce, and also to make it even milder you might wish to add some ketchup. As the recipe is written the sauce is spicy to the taste but without being overwhelming while inside a taco.

Ross A. Christensen is an award-winning gardener and gourmet cook. He is the author of "Sushi A to Z, The Ultimate Guide" and is currently working on a new book. He has been a public speaker for many years and enjoys being involved in the community.

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