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A Taste of Local History

By Susie Iventosch



California Rancho Beans Photo Susie Iventosch

preservation and interpretation of the early settling of California's East Bay region, with particular emphasis on the Rancho period, which fell between the Mission period and the Gold Rush. The adobe and the surrounding grounds will depict the lifestyle and cultural experiences of the settlers.

In my research for what constitutes "Early California Rancho" cooking, I found two widely varying descriptions. One resource indicated that beef, beans and tortillas were a mainstay, highly seasoned and cooked in the Spanish style. The other shunned the idea that the "Rancho" diet consisted of beans, beef and corn, but rather placed more emphasis on the bounty of garden and farm and dishes included roasted and stuffed sweet chiles, clay pot quail or dove, spit roasted chickens, butternut squash enchiladas, crab enchiladas, squash blossoms, wild boar sausage, jalapeno and sweet-hot jellies and preserves, lots of quesada fresca, citrus and herbs, and prawns and shrimp in everything from chili to tacos. Oh, and plenty of wine!

Chef Vollmar has a vision of early California Rancho cuisine as a combination of these two ideas, with meals incorporating beef, pork, and seafood as well as frijoles and corn.

"We will prepare dishes in each of the meal categories and I plan to choose something a little different and out of the ordinary for the event," Vollmar said. "What we do best is to set up the format for people to gather for a common cause, (in this case the Joaquin Moraga Adobe preservation), explore the food and the culture, and sit and share the meal just as they would have done, at a very large table, in the California Rancho period."

Because I needed a dish to accompany my homemade chicken enchiladas, I decided to run with the beef, beans and tortillas definition of Early Rancho Cooking. And, while I am certain the rancheros raised their own beans, dried them and boiled them, I find opening a can of pinto beans can be nearly as satisfying ... and a whole lot quicker to prepare! So, if you are inclined to boil your own pinto beans, just make this same recipe, but cook the beans according to the directions on the package before adding the remaining ingredients. Also, because individual tastes for seasoning and spice vary, don't hesitate to add or subtract from the quantities I've listed in the recipe. These are a perfect accompaniment to any sort of grilled meat, and especially to enchiladas!

Adobe Rancho Cooking Class
 Sunday, July 20, 4 to 7 p.m.
 Wilder Ranch House

Chef Charles Vollmar, owner of Epicurean Exchange in Orinda, will be holding a "hands-on interactive" cooking and dining experience at the Wilder Ranch House in Orinda from 4 to 7 p.m. Sunday, July 20. The theme of the event is "Early California Rancho Cooking" and Chef Vollmar will prepare authentic dishes reflective of this period. All proceeds will benefit the Friends of the Joaquin Moraga Adobe and their efforts to preserve the adobe, which is the oldest surviving building in Contra Costa County. It is recognized as a California State and National Historic Landmark.

According to the Moraga Adobe website, the adobe was built in 1841 by Don Joaquin Moraga as one of two of the original homesteads on a 13,316-acre land grant from the Mexican government. The mission of the Friends of the Joaquin Moraga Adobe is to transform this historic landmark property into a history and learning center, dedicated to the

2 Wilder Road, Orinda

Cost for the event: \$150 per person

For reservations and/or more information: www.moragaadobe.org

For information on Epicurean Exchange: <http://www.epicureanexchange.com>

For more information on Rancho style foods and cooking: <http://factcards.califa.org/ran/food.html>, and

<http://forums.egullet.org/topic/60935-california-rancho-cooking/>

The Joaquin Moraga Adobe is located at 24 Adobe Lane in Orinda.

Rancho Style Beans

(serves 10 as a side dish)

INGREDIENTS

2-3 tablespoons olive or canola oil

2 medium onions (one yellow, one red), peeled and chopped

1 teaspoon Tajin Clasico (chili-lime seasoning available in the spice section of your grocery store)

1 teaspoon powdered coriander

1 teaspoon powdered cumin

1 teaspoon garlic salt

3 16-ounce cans of pinto beans, drained and rinsed

Juice of 1/2 large lime, or one small lime

2 -3 tablespoons of your favorite hot sauce (we use Valentina Salsa Picante)

1/2 cup grated cheese

DIRECTIONS

In a large frying pan, heat oil and add onions. Cook until translucent. Add spices and garlic salt. Continue to cook until golden-brown and spices become aromatic. Add beans and mix well with onion mixture. Stir in lime juice and hot sauce. Just before serving, sprinkle cheese over the top of the beans and continue to heat until cheese begins to melt. Serve!

*If you want to add cooked chicken or beef to the beans, you could easily make this a main dish and serve with warmed tortillas.

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[back](#)

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