

Tacos al Carbón

Each component of our quick and easy steak tacos—tender, juicy meat; corn tortillas; and scallion-jalapeño salsa—is cooked on the grill to infuse it with smoky char.

BY LAN LAM

In Sonora, Mexico, a state dominated by cattle ranches, *tacos al carbón* are a specialty. They're not complicated—*al carbón* just means that the protein, usually steak, is cooked over charcoal. The meat is seasoned with a marinade or spices, grilled, tucked into soft corn tortillas, and topped with straightforward garnishes such as charred scallions and lime juice. I would adore these tacos even if they weren't so simple to make, but the fact that they come together easily is an undeniable perk.

Many cuts of steak are used for tacos al carbón, but skirt and flank are high on the list. I chose flank here. Like skirt steak, flank is thin and beefy, cooks quickly, and has lots of surface area for picking up flavor. And flank is less expensive and more widely available. After a quick trim to remove any patches of fat, my first steak was just about ready to throw on the grill.

To flavor the meat, I opted for a spice paste. Minimalists use a combination of salt, cumin, and garlic. At the other end of the spectrum are recipes that call for a laundry list of ground spices and chili

Since I had a hot grill, I decided to do the rest of the cooking outside as well.

To produce the complexity of the latter via the short ingredient list of the former, I popped open a can of chipotles (smoked jalapeños) in adobo sauce. This powerhouse ingredient would contribute spicy, smoky, and savory notes. I added cumin, oil, and a little salt to the minced chipotles to make a paste. After evenly coating the steak with the ruddy mixture, I headed outside and lit a chimney full of charcoal.

Grilled directly over the coals (a gas grill works well, too), the thickest part of the steak was medium-rare (125 degrees) in 10 minutes. After letting the meat rest, I thinly sliced it against the grain. The chipotle paste was a keeper, but the thinner areas of the steak were overdone. What's more, the meat was unevenly browned and didn't have much grill flavor.

For my second try, I sliced the steak into thirds lengthwise. This separated the tapered edges from the thicker center so I could grill each piece to the proper doneness. These narrow strips, once sliced, would also fit nicely into 6-inch tortillas.

The mediocre browning in my first test had been a result of the steak buckling as it cooked; the bottom of the steak (closest to the heat source) cooked more quickly than the top, which caused its fibers to shrink



We lightly char corn tortillas in batches on the hotter side of the grill and then wrap them tightly in foil so they stay soft and warm until serving time.

and gave the meat a concave shape. Frequent flipping helped the top and bottom shrink at about the same rate, so the steak stayed flat and browned evenly.

Flare for Flavor

As for the flavor deficit, I knew that cooking on a grill doesn't necessarily guarantee grill flavor. Many of the compounds responsible for this flavor are created when fat and juices drip onto the coals, vaporize, and waft up and condense onto the food. If I wanted deep grill flavor, I needed drippings. And I had been trimming away a main source: the fat on the steak.

I grabbed another steak, trimmed the thicker fat deposits to $\frac{1}{8}$ inch, and left the thinner ones in place. I applied the chipotle paste and grilled the steak, flipping it every 2 minutes. Rendered fat dripped onto the coals, causing small flare-ups that brought with them a smoky, meaty flavor that tasted like success. This was an A-plus steak.

Toppings al Carbón

Since I had a hot grill, I decided to do the rest of the cooking outside as well. Inspired by the charred scallions that often adorn tacos al carbón,

PHOTOGRAPHY: CARL TREMBLAY

COOK'S ILLUSTRATED

I decided to whip up a grilled scallion salsa. Along with the scallions, I threw some jalapeños onto the fire, making a note that next time, I could grill the chiles alongside the steak since they cook in about the same amount of time. This would not only be more efficient but also infuse the chiles with the flavors of the vaporized drippings. Finally, I blistered tortillas on the hotter side of the grill until they picked up a toasty, popcorn-like aroma and then wrapped them tightly in foil so that they would stay warm and soft.

Back inside, while the steak rested, I seeded and finely chopped the jalapeños and coarsely chopped the scallions. I combined them in a bowl with a squeeze of lime and a sprinkle of salt, assembled some tacos, and rounded up my colleagues. This time no one doubted that the rosy steak had come from the grill. They also praised the lively salsa but felt that the two elements were too disparate. I reached for the canned chipotles and stirred just enough of the savory adobo sauce into the salsa to tie its flavor to the steak. That, along with dollops of rich crema and a few more squirts of lime, brought everything together.

EASY GRILLED STEAK TACOS (TACOS AL CARBÓN)

SERVES 4 TO 6 TOTAL TIME: 1 1/4 HOURS

This steak's grill flavor is created when some of the fat and juices land on the fire and create small, controlled flare-ups, so choose a steak that has some fat deposits. Sour cream can be substituted for the crema, if desired.

- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- 2 teaspoons minced canned chipotle chile in adobo sauce, plus 1 teaspoon adobo sauce
- 2 teaspoons kosher salt, divided
- 3/4 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 (1 1/2- to 1 3/4-pound) flank steak
- 2 jalapeño chiles
- 20 scallions
- 12 (6-inch) corn tortillas
- 1 1/2 tablespoons lime juice, plus extra for seasoning, plus lime wedges
- Fresh cilantro leaves
- Mexican crema

1. Combine 1 tablespoon oil, chipotle, 1 1/2 teaspoons salt, and cumin in bowl. Trim fat deposits on steak to 1/8-inch thickness. Cut steak lengthwise (with grain) into three 2- to 3-inch-wide strips. Rub chipotle mixture evenly into steak, then transfer steak to rimmed baking sheet.

2A. **FOR A CHARCOAL GRILL:** Open bottom vent completely. Light large chimney starter mounded with charcoal briquettes (7 quarts). When top coals are partially covered with ash, pour evenly over half of grill. Set cooking grate in place, cover, and open lid vent completely. Heat grill until hot, about 5 minutes.

Thirst-Quencher

Agua fresca means "fresh water" and is the catchall term for a variety of beverages made by combining fruits, grains, seeds, or flowers with sugar and water. To make a watermelon version, we whiz chunks of melon with water in a blender and strain out the pulp before accenting the mixture with lime juice, agave nectar, and a pinch of salt to bring out the sweet and tart flavors.

WATERMELON-LIME AGUA FRESCA

SERVES 8 TO 10 (MAKES 7 CUPS) TOTAL TIME: 15 MINUTES

Watermelons vary in sweetness. Adjust the amounts of lime juice and sweetener to your taste.

- 8 cups seedless watermelon, cut into 1-inch pieces
- 2 cups water
- 1/4 cup lime juice (2 limes), plus extra for seasoning



- 2 tablespoons agave nectar or honey, plus extra for seasoning
- 1/8 teaspoon salt
- Fresh mint leaves (optional)

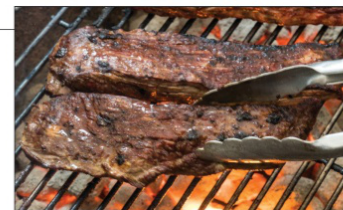
Working in 2 batches, process watermelon and water in blender until smooth, about 30 seconds. Strain mixture through fine-mesh strainer into 2-quart pitcher; discard solids. Stir in lime juice, agave, and salt. Season with extra lime juice and extra agave to taste. Serve over ice, garnished with mint, if using. (*Agua fresca* can be refrigerated for up to 5 days; stir to recombine before serving.)

2B. **FOR A GAS GRILL:** Turn all burners to high, cover, and heat grill until hot, about 15 minutes. Turn off 1 burner (if using grill with more than 2 burners, turn off burner farthest from primary burner) and leave other burner(s) on high.

3. Clean and oil cooking grate. Arrange steak and jalapeños on hotter side of grill. Cook (covered if using gas), flipping steak and jalapeños every 2 minutes, until meat is well browned and registers 125 to 130 degrees (for medium-rare), 7 to 12 minutes, and jalapeños are blistered and charred in spots, 7 to 10 minutes. Transfer steak to clean cutting board and tent with aluminum foil. Transfer jalapeños to medium bowl and cover tightly with plastic wrap.

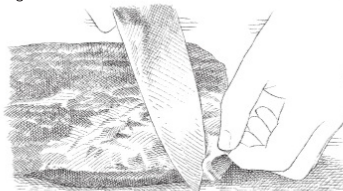
4. Place scallions on hotter side of grill and cook until dark green parts are well charred on 1 side, 1 to 2 minutes. Flip scallions, arranging them so that dark green parts are on cooler side of grill while white and light green parts are on hotter side. Continue to cook until whites are well charred, 1 to 2 minutes longer. Transfer to bowl with jalapeños and cover tightly with plastic. Arrange 6 tortillas on hotter side of grill and cook until lightly charred, 45 to 60 seconds per side. Wrap warmed tortillas tightly in foil. Repeat with remaining 6 tortillas.

5. Without peeling, stem and seed jalapeños; reserve seeds. Chop jalapeños fine and transfer to bowl. Chop scallions coarse and transfer to bowl with jalapeños. Stir in lime juice, adobo sauce, remaining 2 tablespoons oil, and remaining 1/2 teaspoon salt. Season with salt, extra lime juice, and reserved jalapeño seeds to taste. Slice steak thin against grain and transfer to serving platter. Serve steak in tortillas, passing salsa, lime wedges, cilantro, and crema separately.



For Flavor, Leave Some Fat On

To make sure that our *tacos al carbón* live up to their name—that is, have lots of grill flavor—we leave some of the steak's fat attached. As the meat cooks, the fat will melt and drip onto the fire. The grease, along with meat juices, hits the coals and creates small flare-ups, sending up vapors that condense on the steak, giving it a meaty, smoky grilled taste.



DON'T TRIM TOO MUCH

Trim fat deposits to 1/8-inch thickness.



STEP-BY-STEP VIDEO AND
NUTRITION INFORMATION
CooksIllustrated.com/AUG19