

# Peruvian Garlic-Lime Chicken

Authentic versions of this spit-roasted bird boast an evenly bronzed exterior, moist meat, and robust seasoning. We hoped that an oven—and supermarket staples—could do the job.

≧ BY BRYAN ROOF ≦

Peruvian chicken joints have recently developed something of a cult following in the United States, and for good reason. The rotisserie bird that they serve, known as *pollo a la brasa* in the mother country, is deeply bronzed from its slow rotation in a wood-fired oven and impressively seasoned with garlic, spices, lime juice, chiles, and a paste made with *huacatay*, or black mint. Off the spit, the chicken is carved and served with a garlicky, faintly spicy, mayonnaise-like sauce.

I didn't want my lack of a rotisserie to stop me from re-creating this phenomenal dish at home. But when I started researching recipes, I realized that trying to achieve the smokiness and evenly browned skin of the authentic version wasn't going to be as simple as throwing a well-seasoned bird into the oven. I would also have to replicate the flavors of hard-to-find black mint paste, along with the Peruvian *aji* peppers that give both the chicken and the dipping sauce their signature subtle heat.

## First (Marin)ade

Nary a piece of chicken passes through the test kitchen without being rubbed with salt or soaked in a brine. Since salting is our preferred technique when bronzed, well-rendered skin is the goal, I started there. (Both techniques render the bird flavorful and juicy. But while salting helps lock in the bird's existing juices, brining introduces extra moisture to the meat and yields comparatively flabby skin.) After letting the salt seep in for about an hour, I took cues from a few recipes I'd found and coated the exterior of the bird with a simple paste of garlic, extra-virgin olive oil, lime juice, and cumin that I had pureed in the blender. (I'd worry about the mint and smoke flavors later.) I then set the chicken on a V-rack in a roasting pan and cranked the oven to a blazing 450 degrees in hopes of replicating the rotisserie flame. About 45 minutes later the chicken



Roasting the bird on a vertical rack eliminates the need to flip the chicken during cooking.

was brown, all right—but only on one side. What's more, despite the salting treatment, the white meat was parched from all that high-heat exposure, and the punchy flavors from the paste were literally skin-deep at best.

Actually, the lack of flavor made sense. While developing our recipe for marinated beef kebabs, a test kitchen colleague learned that none of the flavors in a marinade (including garlic, spices, and acids) penetrate much beyond the exterior of the meat, no matter how long you leave it to soak—with one exception. Only

salt and other compounds of sodium travel farther into the meat the longer it sits. The flavors of my wet paste would never be more than superficial, no matter how long I let the bird marinate, so two things—salt and plenty of time—would be key to heightening those heady flavors and seasoning the meat.

Since both the salt and the paste were being rubbed onto the chicken, I combined the two flavor components into one step, this time mixing a generous 2 tablespoons of kosher salt into the paste. Instead of merely rubbing it over the skin, I also spread the paste under the skin directly against the meat for maximum penetration; I then let the bird rest for six hours before roasting. The result? Much improved taste. Though my marinade was still missing a few of the trademark elements, the salt in the paste had worked its magic and ramped up the chicken's flavor from skin to bone. (Further testing revealed that it was fine to marinate the bird for up to 24 hours.)

My next test took me back to the supermarket, where I shopped for a replacement for the herbaceous, slightly earthy black mint paste. Fresh ordinary mint was the best option, so I worked a handful of the leaves into my next batch of paste, along with some dried oregano, grated lime zest (to satisfy those who'd requested more citrus flavor but didn't want too much acidity), black pepper, sugar, and just a teaspoon of finely minced habanero chile (a little of this fiery pepper goes a long way). Now the tangy spice flavors of my chicken were popping.

## Vertical Horizon

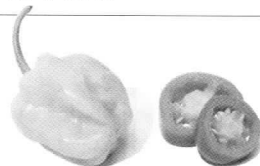
Back to my other major hurdle: replacing the rotisserie. While my goal wasn't necessarily crisp skin—the skin on the chicken I'd eaten in restaurants was well rendered but not crackly—I did want it evenly browned, and the V-rack just wasn't working. One option was to flip the chicken several times during cooking, but with a hefty amount of wet paste

## Approximating the Flavors of Peru



### MINT AND OREGANO

The combination of fresh mint and dried oregano replicates the clean, faintly woody flavor of Peruvian black mint (*huacatay*) paste.



### TWO TYPES OF CHILE

Spicy aji peppers are integral to the marinade and dipping sauce. We replaced the aji with a fiery habanero in the marinade and pickled jalapeno in the sauce.



### SMOKED PAPRIKA

The smoked version of this brick-red powder imitates the wood-fired flavors of a rotisserie.

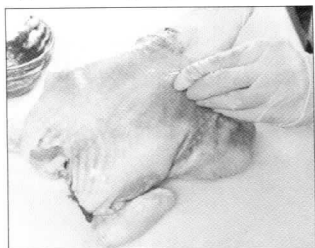


## How Does That Vertical Roaster Work? Watch.

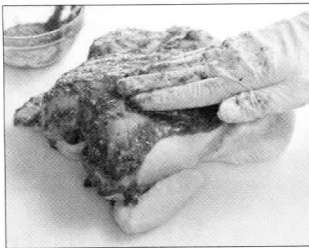
Video available FREE for 4 months at [www.CooksIllustrated.com/apr11](http://www.CooksIllustrated.com/apr11)

## TECHNIQUE | PASTE IT ON

Distributing the flavorful paste both over and under the skin ensures the best taste, and storing the chicken in a zipper-lock bag helps contain the mess. Be sure to wear gloves when working with chiles.



**1. SLIP IT UNDER** Loosen skin from over thighs and breast and rub half of paste directly over meat.



**2. RUB IT OVER** Spread remaining paste over skin of entire chicken.



**3. CHILL THE BIRD** Place chicken in gallon zipper-lock bag and refrigerate for 6 to 24 hours.

slathered on the bird, this turned out to be a messy proposition—not to mention an outright pain. My other idea was a vertical roaster, which cooks the chicken standing upright and allows the heat to circulate freely around the bird for evenly cooked results. I proceeded with my recipe, placing the marinated bird over the roaster's tall cone and setting the whole package on a baking sheet to cook. I knew I was on to something this time: There was no awkward flipping, and the fat dripped freely out of the bird, allowing the skin to render and brown. But it wasn't a perfect solution: The rotisserie's subtle smokiness was predictably absent, and without the roasting-pan walls to shield it from the blasting heat, the white meat was still dry.

There was only one way to keep the chicken from dehydrating: lowering the oven temperature. Indeed, when I roasted the next bird at a relatively gentle 325 degrees, the meat was tender and juicy—but the skin was only lightly tanned. Stuck between these two opposing ideals, I opted for a two-pronged approach that we've used before in the test kitchen. Once the low-roasted chicken was almost cooked through, I let it rest briefly at room temperature, cranked the oven to 500 degrees, added a little water to the roasting pan (to prevent the rendered fat from smoking), and returned the chicken to the much-hotter oven to brown thoroughly. At last: perfectly cooked meat and skin. That left just the missing smoke flavor to resolve.

Nothing about my roasting technique was going to infuse smokiness—but I did have something in my spice cabinet that might help. Smoked paprika, which has recently become widely available, isn't a traditional part of the Peruvian marinade, but 2 teaspoons mixed into the paste turned out to be a pretty close approximation of the real thing.

Finally, there was the sauce. The ideal texture is thinner than traditional mayonnaise but still viscous enough to coat the chicken when dunked. With that in mind, I whipped a whole egg (instead of just a yolk, as in traditional mayonnaise) and vegetable oil in the food processor with a little water, onion, lime juice, cilantro, yellow mustard, and garlic. The consistency was right—but it lacked the punch of those elusive aji peppers. The next best thing? A pickled jalapeño, which kicked up the acidity a notch, too.

Looking over my recipe, I was surprised at how easily I'd been able to replicate the authentic flavors with a few supermarket staples and a vertical roaster. But I wasn't surprised that among my fellow test cooks, this Peruvian mainstay had developed a cult following of its own.

### PERUVIAN ROAST CHICKEN WITH GARLIC AND LIME

SERVES 4

**NOTE:** This recipe calls for a vertical poultry roaster. If you don't have one, substitute a 12-ounce can of beer. Open the beer and pour out (or drink) about half of the liquid. Spray the can lightly with nonstick cooking spray and proceed with the recipe. If the top of the chicken is becoming too dark during roasting in step 3, place a 7-inch-square piece of foil over the neck and wingtips. If habanero chiles are unavailable, 1 tablespoon of minced serrano chile can be substituted. Wear gloves when working with hot chiles.

- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- ¼ cup lightly packed fresh mint leaves
- 2 tablespoons kosher salt
- 6 medium garlic cloves, peeled and roughly chopped
- 1 tablespoon ground black pepper
- 1 tablespoon ground cumin
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 2 teaspoons smoked paprika
- 2 teaspoons dried oregano
- 2 teaspoons finely grated zest and ¼ cup juice from 2 limes
- 1 teaspoon minced habanero chile (see note)
- 1 (3½- to 4-pound) whole chicken

1. Process all ingredients except chicken in blender until smooth paste forms, 10 to 20 seconds. Using fingers or handle of wooden spoon, carefully loosen skin over thighs and breast and remove any excess fat. Rub half of paste beneath skin of chicken. Spread entire exterior surface of chicken with remaining paste. Tuck wingtips underneath chicken. Place chicken in gallon-size zipper-lock bag

and refrigerate at least 6 hours and up to 24 hours.

2. Adjust oven rack to lowest position and heat oven to 325 degrees. Place vertical roaster on rimmed baking sheet. Slide chicken onto vertical roaster so chicken stands upright and breast is perpendicular to bottom of pan. Roast until skin just begins to turn golden and instant-read thermometer inserted into thickest part of breast registers 140 degrees, 45 to 55 minutes. Carefully remove chicken and pan from oven and increase oven temperature to 500 degrees.

3. When oven is heated to 500 degrees, place 1 cup water in bottom of pan and return pan to oven. Roast until entire skin is browned and crisp and instant-read thermometer registers 160 degrees in thickest part of breast and 175 degrees in thickest part of thigh, about 20 minutes (replenish water as necessary to keep pan from smoking), rotating bird 180 degrees halfway through cooking.

4. Carefully remove chicken from oven and let rest, still on vertical roaster, 20 minutes. Using kitchen towel, carefully lift chicken off vertical roaster and onto platter or cutting board. Carve chicken and serve, passing Spicy Mayonnaise separately.

### SPICY MAYONNAISE

MAKES ABOUT 1 CUP

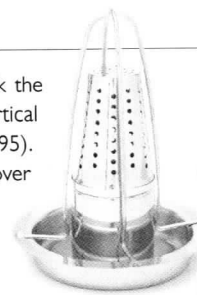
**NOTE:** If you have concerns about consuming raw eggs, ¼ cup of an egg substitute can be used in place of the egg.

- 1 large egg (see note)
- 2 tablespoons water
- 1 tablespoon minced onion
- 1 tablespoon juice from 1 lime
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh cilantro
- 1 tablespoon canned pickled jalapeño, minced
- 1 medium garlic clove, minced or pressed through garlic press (about 1 teaspoon)
- 1 teaspoon yellow mustard
- ½ teaspoon kosher salt
- 1 cup vegetable oil

Process all ingredients except oil in food processor until finely chopped, about 5 seconds. With machine running, slowly drizzle in oil in steady stream until mayonnaise-like consistency is reached, scraping down bowl as necessary.

## Standing Upright

In lieu of a rotisserie, we cook the chicken on our favorite vertical roaster from Norpro (\$27.95). While it doesn't spin the bird over an open flame, it does allow the oven's heat to sweep evenly over the bird for a well-browned exterior, and it catches the rendered drippings in the reservoir at its base.



NORPRO VERTICAL ROASTER