

CHICKEN-CHILI TAMALE PIE

Makes 6 servings

When I was just married and our cookbook shelf had only a few books on it, I used to make the tamale pie from *Joy of Cooking* just about weekly. The reasons for my devotion were many: The dish was easy enough for me, a novice, to get right (especially since I used a boxed mix for the topping); it could be made in my teeny kitchen; it was inexpensive; the ingredients were readily available; and my husband, Michael, loved it. Although I let it drop from my repertoire decades ago, Michael never stopped loving it and asking for it. So I came up with this version — which has all the attributes of the old pie, plus exciting new flavors and textures.

Tamale pie is two good things in one: chili and cornbread, one on top of the other. In my dish, the chili is made with cooked chicken (you can use a rotisserie bird or leftover turkey, if that's what you've got); peppers, both hot and sweet; and black beans and diced tomatoes, both from cans. I know it sounds heretical, but I use the canning liquids in the chili — they're too tasty to ditch.

These days, I serve the pie with a crisp green salad — think romaine or a wedge of iceberg. In the old days, I'd top it with sour cream, still a good option.

WORKING AHEAD

The chili can be refrigerated, covered, for up to 2 days.

For the chili

- 1 medium sweet potato
- 2 tablespoons grapeseed, canola or other neutral oil
- 1 large onion, finely chopped, rinsed and patted dry
- 2 garlic cloves, germ removed (see page 320) and finely chopped
- Fine sea salt
- 1 large red bell pepper, cored, seeded and finely chopped
- 1 medium jalapeño, finely chopped
- 1 tablespoon ground cumin, or more to taste
- ¼ teaspoon chipotle (or other) chile powder, or more to taste
- One 10-ounce (283-gram) can diced tomatoes with chiles, with their juice
- One 15½-ounce (439-gram) can black beans, with their liquid
- Freshly ground pepper
- 1 canned chipotle in adobo sauce, finely chopped, plus 1 teaspoon of the adobo sauce
- 1 teaspoon honey, or more to taste
- 1½ to 2 cups (½ pound; 227 grams) shredded or chopped cooked chicken (or turkey)
- About ½ cup (120 ml) chicken broth, if needed
- About ¼ cup (10 grams) finely chopped fresh cilantro

For the cornbread

- 1⅓ cups (200 grams) yellow cornmeal
- ⅔ cup (91 grams) all-purpose flour
- 1½ teaspoons baking powder
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ½ teaspoon fine sea salt
- ¼ teaspoon chipotle (or other) chile powder, or more to taste
- 1¼ cups (300 ml) whole milk
- 2 large eggs
- 2 tablespoons grapeseed, canola or other neutral oil
- 1 tablespoon honey
- About 3 tablespoons finely chopped fresh cilantro

(Recipe continues)

TO MAKE THE CHILI: Bring a medium saucepan of salted water to boil. Meanwhile, peel the sweet potato and cut it into 1-inch cubes. Drop the sweet potato cubes into the saucepan and cook until not quite tender, about 8 minutes, then drain and set aside. The potatoes will be cooked more, so don't let them get too soft now.

Warm the oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Toss in the onion and garlic, season lightly with salt and cook, stirring, for about 3 minutes, until softened. Stir in half of the bell and jalapeño peppers (save the remainder for the cornbread), the cumin and chile powder and cook for another 5 minutes or so, just until the peppers soften. Add the tomatoes and beans, including their juices, 1 teaspoon salt, some black pepper, the chopped chipotle, adobo sauce and honey. Cook for 5 minutes, then add the chicken and cook for about 10 minutes, so the flavors to have a chance to permeate the chili.

Gently stir in the sweet potatoes. If the mixture looks dry — you want to see a little liquid bubbling up around the edges — add some or all of the chicken broth. Taste for salt, pepper, cumin and chipotle powder, adjusting the seasoning as needed. Stir in the cilantro. The chili is ready to be used in the tamale pie — or, if you just can't wait, served as is. *(You can make the chili up to 2 days ahead and keep it covered in the refrigerator. Bring it to a simmer before continuing with the recipe — and check the seasonings again. You'll also probably need to add a little broth.)*

TO MAKE THE CORNBREAD AND BAKE THE PIE: Center a rack in the oven and preheat it to 425 degrees F. Turn the chili out into a 2- to 3-quart rectangular baking dish (I use a Pyrex 11-by-7-inch roaster, but a 9-by-9-inch pan will work).

In a medium bowl, whisk the cornmeal, flour, baking powder, baking soda, salt and chile powder together. In another bowl or a large spouted measuring cup, whisk together the milk, eggs, oil and honey. Pour the liquid ingredients over the dry and, using the whisk, mix — don't beat — until blended. Switch to a flexible spatula and gently stir in the cilantro and the reserved peppers from the chili. Pour and smooth the cornbread batter over the chili. (If you have any batter left over — and you might, as it's hard to judge how the chili will fill the pan — bake it in a small pan or muffin cup alongside the pie.)

Bake the pie for 20 to 25 minutes, until the filling is bubbling and the cornbread is golden brown and firm to the touch all the way to the center; a tester inserted into the center will come out clean. Serve immediately, preferably in bowls — like any chili, this one can be messy.

STORING: You can keep leftovers in the fridge for a day or so and reheat them in the oven or a microwave, but the cornbread won't fare as well as the chili.