

One night in Bangkok and the world's your taco

ONE NIGHT IN BANGKOK TACO

PG tested

One of the best things about visiting my daughters in Arlington, Va., is that there are so many funky restaurants to choose from. One of my favorites is Taco Bamba, a chainlet of fast-casual taquerias that dishes up some of the Washington D.C. area's best tacos at surprisingly non-D.C. prices.

Each of its six locations features two taco lists. Traditionals are classics like carnitas, barbacoa, al pastor and birria (here, goat), while the Nuestrros menu highlights original creations with fun names inspired by the neighborhood.

At the Ballston taqueria just around the corner from my daughters' apartment, the El Pollo Rico taco pays tribute to the local Peruvian restaurant of the same name (and Taco Bamba chef/owner Victor Albusu's Latin American heritage) with a filling of Peruvian-ish chicken, green chili puree, ají Amarillo aioli, salsa Criolla, serrano chile and crispy potato.

It's good, but my absolute favorite — and the taco I can't stop thinking about — is the One Night in Bangkok. Seared shrimp is paired with a spicy chorizo lard inside a flour tortilla and topped with mint, basil, chiles and crispy onion.

Lucky for me, and you, chef Albusu agreed to share the recipe so I don't have to drive four hours to eat one.

The list of ingredients is longish, but, save for the lemongrass stalk, everything can be found in your local grocery

Gretchen's table

GRETCHEN MCKAY

store. To quick-pickle sliced Fresno chiles, simply bring 1 cup white wine vinegar, ½ cup sugar and 1 tablespoon salt to a boil in a small saucepan, stirring to dissolve sugar and salt, then pour brine over chiles and cool.

The recipe makes more lard sauce than you'll need for six tacos, but no worries — you'll want to spoon it on top of grilled and shredded chicken, beef or anything that lends itself to Thai flavors.

For lard sauce

- 1 serrano chile, minced
- 2 green onions, minced
- 2-inch piece lemongrass, minced
- ¼ cup soy sauce
- 1 tablespoon fresh lime juice
- 2 teaspoons fish sauce
- ¼ cup sugar
- ¼ bunch mint, chopped (about ¼ cup)
- 4 Thai or Italian basil leaves, chopped
- ¼ bunch cilantro, chopped (about ¼ cup)
- 1-inch piece fresh ginger, peeled and grated

- 1 clove garlic, grated
- ½ tablespoon orange juice

For tacos

- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 12 medium shrimp, peeled and deveined
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 8 ounces ground chorizo
- ¼ cup lard sauce
- 6-8 mint leaves
- 6-8 Thai or Italian basil leaves
- 6-8 cilantro leaves



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- 6 corn tortillas
- 1 scallion, thinly sliced
- 2 tablespoons pickled red Fresno pepper or other spicy pickled chile
- 1 serrano chile, thinly sliced
- 2 tablespoons crispy shallots or onions

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Make lard sauce: Place minced serrano chile, scallion and lemongrass in a medium bowl. Add soy sauce, lime juice, fish sauce and sugar. Stir to incorporate.

Add chopped herbs, grated ginger, grated garlic and orange juice to bowl, and mix to combine. Set aside while you make tacos.

Prepare tacos: In a sauté pan, heat 2 tablespoons cooking oil over medium-high heat. Season shrimp with a little salt and pepper, or whatever spices you like and, once oil is hot, add to the pan. Cook for 12 minutes per side, until the shrimp is opaque all the way

through. Remove from pan and reserve.

In the same pan, add chorizo and cook for about 5 minutes, breaking it into crumbles until cooked through.

Spoon cooked chorizo into a bowl. Add cooked shrimp. Add ¼ cup lard sauce and toss together until meat and shrimp are well coated.

Add mint, basil and cilantro leaves to the bowl, gently tearing them with your fingers and stirring into the mix-

ture. Give it a taste. Add more lard sauce if desired.

With a small amount of oil, toast your tortillas in a pan over medium-high heat, on both sides until the tortilla is hot and pliable.

Divide chorizo-shrimp-lard mixture evenly between your tortillas. Top tacos with sliced scallion, pickled chile, sliced serranos and crispy shallots.

Makes 6 tacos.
— Victor Albusu, chef/
owner Taco Bamba

Your new fall resolution: Eat more apples

APPLES, FROM E-1

While I will always revere the grocery-store apple for her reliability and longevity, she's got nothing on the just-harvested specimens showing up in farm stands and farmers markets. The apple is the undisputed icon of the season. Shouldn't we be eating the best of the best?

It's easy to forget, in this grocery climate of "all produce, all the time," that even the most ubiquitous offerings do actually have a peak season. In southwestern Pennsylvania, the season for apples is now. Generally available for harvest (and even pick-your-own) from late July until the first hard freeze, the locally grown varieties are almost as innumerable as the farms tending them.

Triple B Farms in Monongahela boasts nearly a dozen varieties, and at Shenot's Farm & Market in Marshall you'll find more than double that. Not all varieties are available at all times, but the friendly apple lovers at any local farm will be glad to tell you which apples of their current selection are best for cooking, eating and storing.

Whether you're picking your own or just hitting up the market stands, select apples that feel heavy for their size and have no dents or blemishes. Don't let color alone be your guide! Our region's best apple varieties range from green to tan to bluish to deep crimson, and some have tight, shiny skins while others appear dull and dusty at their peak.

It's hard to beat a great apple, eaten whole and red and plain (I keep one or two in my bag all autumn long to pass time spent stuck in school pickup traffic). But I've met many pies and cakes that give fresh apples a run for their money.

Some of my favorite ways to dress up a bushel date to my grandma. Her chunky, homemade applesauce and baked apple dumplings were among my most-loved treats as a kid, but, alas, I never asked her how to make them. (If you have good recipes for either, send them my way!) Fortunately, her son cooks just as well as she did, and I'm lucky to call him dad — and to have grown up eating his buttered pecan and

VIRGINIA JOANNE'S CRANBERRY SALAD

PG tested

The heart of this recipe was my grandmother's, and it's the first thing I think to make when the weather turns cool. Barely a cranberry sauce, it's nearly a dish unto itself: sweet apples tempered by bitter, jewel-bright cranberries, with an almost addictive chew.

This makes more than enough to serve as part of a large holiday spread, but don't wait that long to give it a try. As soon as you find yourself with fresh, local apples and a bag of cranberries this fall, make a batch. It makes a delightful seasonal breakfast with some creamy yogurt.

- 1 cup shelled pecans (any size)

- ½ cup shelled walnuts (any size)
- 1 pound fresh cranberries, rinsed and picked through, divided

- ½ teaspoon of Chinese Five Spice powder (or one cinnamon stick and 2-3 anise pods)

- 1 vanilla bean, split and scraped (or 1 tablespoon high-quality vanilla extract)
- 1 box strawberry Jell-O

- 4 large, fresh apples, peeled (optional) and cored, sliced into quarters

- 1 whole orange, sliced into quarters, seeds removed but peel intact
- 2-inch piece of fresh ginger, peeled (about the size and weight of a golf ball) and roughly chopped

In a dry pan, briefly toast nuts over medium-high heat,



Courtesy of Jessicarobyn Keyser

Apples are one of Western Pennsylvania's top crops and a favorite fruit in fall.

stirring or shaking the pan often, until they begin to smell toasty, look shiny and take on a golden color, about 3-5 minutes. Remove nuts from the hot pan immediately to avoid burning and allow to cool completely.

While nuts are cooling, add 1 cup of water to a sauce pan with half of the cranberries, the Five Spice powder (or whole spices) and vanilla bean with scrapings (or extract). Bring to a simmer over medium heat until cranberries have all burst and the contents of the pot are red and beginning to thicken, 10-12 minutes.

Remove any whole spices and add an additional ½ cup of water and box of Jell-O powder. Stir to completely dissolve gelatin, bring mixture back to a boil and then remove from heat.

Place cooled nuts into a food processor and pulse

until finely chopped. Do not over-process; you will make nut butter. Remove nuts to a large mixing bowl.

Place quartered apples and orange, fresh ginger and last half-pound of fresh cranberries into the food processor and pulse until finely chopped — you want the pieces of fruit to be about the same size as the nuts. Remove minced fresh fruit to the mixing bowl with the nuts.

Carefully pour the hot gelatin mixture over the minced apples and nuts, and fold to combine. Cover and chill until set, 4-6 hours or overnight. Note: The acids in the fresh apples and orange may keep the gelatin from setting to completely firm. If your dish is on the softer side, it's fine. Mine almost always is.

Serves 8-10.
— Jessicarobyn Keyser



Courtesy of Jessicarobyn Keyser

Pork chops with apple-pecan stuffing taste of pure fall, and are a favorite with kids.

APPLE-PECAN PORK CHOPS

PG tested

I loved this recipe from my dad's favorite cookbook when I was growing up. Here I've simplified and improved upon it, cutting cooking time in half. The apple-pecan stuffing tastes of pure fall, and since pork chops are one of my kids' most loved dinners, it makes this a cool-weather no-brainer. This recipe is easily doubled.

- 2 large apples, peeled (optional) and cored, cut into quarters
- ½ cup cooled toasted pecans, shelled (any size)
- 1 shallot, peeled and roughly chopped
- ¼ cup celery leaves or fresh parsley, or a mix
- 1 tablespoon fresh thyme leaves
- 2 tablespoons butter, divided
- ½ cup crushed salted pretzels or panko breadcrumbs

- 1 tablespoon dried minced onion
- 2 teaspoons real maple syrup
- 4 large pork chops, boned or bone-in, at least 1-inch thick

- Salt and freshly cracked black pepper
- Garlic powder or granulated garlic

- Place apples, nuts, shallots and herbs into a food processor and pulse until finely chopped, taking care not to turn it into a paste. Pieces should be roughly the size of half a pea. Transfer to a mixing bowl.

- Warm** 1 tablespoon butter in a frying pan or skillet over medium-high heat and stir in pretzels or breadcrumbs and dried onion. Toast, stirring often, until golden brown and the mixture is no longer foaming, 5-7 minutes.

- Remove pan** from heat, stir in maple syrup, then carefully fold contents of pan into the minced apples and pecans. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Wipe skillet clean with a paper towel and return to stove.

- Season** pork chops liberally with salt, cracked pepper and garlic powder. Heat remaining 1 tablespoon butter in skillet over medium-high heat until foaming, and add pork chops, taking care not to crowd the pan.

- Cook** 2-4 minutes per side, turning occasionally, until chops are crisped and brown at the edges. If using chops that are more than 1½-inch thick, cook for 5-7 minutes per side. (Chops can also be grilled.)

- Remove** chops and serve. **Serves 4.**
Adapted from "Best of America" by Carla Capalbo

apple pork chops.

Inspired by a recipe found in a cookbook on my childhood kitchen's shelves, my father loved to make stuffed pork chops from Carla Capalbo's "Best of America" (out of print but worth seeking up). I make them year-round, but I've evolved the recipe to suit my apple-loving palate a bit more, and to reduce the cook time.

And while I don't have grandma's dumpling or ap-

plesauce recipe, I do have her instructions for cranberry sauce. I'm sharing that too, because both have similar bones: You can process the apples and pecans for each recipe together to save time.

I know it seems a little weird to be talking about cranberry sauce now, but this is one I never wait to make until the turkey hits the table. It sings with fresh

apple and ginger, is more of a salsa or salad than a sauce and features Appalachian's favorite salad ingredient, Jell-O. It's great lunchbox fodder or with some plain yogurt for breakfast.

In this season of newness and discovery, perhaps making it should be your new fall resolution.

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