

From Colombia, Chicken Soup with a Twist

BY TANIA SIGAL

As a child growing up in Colombia, Sundays were the best day of the week. That's when we went to my Aunt Bela's, where I'd be greeted by the most enticing aromas. The source would inevitably be a huge pot of chicken soup simmering on the stove. It's called ajiaco, and I've yet to taste another chicken soup that can match its earthy aromas, hearty textures, and bright flavors.

Why would Colombians know anything about a cold-weather dish like chicken soup? Isn't the country on the equator? Yes, but I lived in Bogotá, which is high in the Andes and is cold and damp all year. Ajiaco (pronounced ah-hee-AH-koh) is the perfect antidote to the weather. In fact,

Ajiaco (Colombian Chicken Soup)

Serves eight.

The soup and the aji can be made a day ahead. If the soup is too thick after it's reheated, thin it with a little water. Aji is traditionally made with chiles that haven't been seeded, but you'll probably find it plenty spicy without the seeds. Leftover aji is delicious on roasted or grilled meats.

FOR THE SOUP:

- 3 pounds cut-up chicken, skin removed, rinsed well**
- 1 large white onion, peeled and cut into quarters**
- 1 leek (white and light green parts only), cut into 1-inch rings, and rinsed thoroughly**
- 1 green bell pepper, seeded and cut into 1-inch pieces**
- 2 ears fresh corn, cut crosswise into quarters**
- 2 ribs celery, cut into 1-inch pieces**
- 2 large carrots, peeled and cut into 1-inch pieces**
- $\frac{3}{4}$ pound Yukon Gold potatoes, peeled and cut into 1-inch cubes**
- $\frac{3}{4}$ pound Idaho potatoes, peeled and cut into 1-inch cubes**
- $\frac{3}{4}$ pound small red potatoes, peeled and cut into 1-inch cubes**
- 6 cloves garlic, peeled**
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup fresh cilantro leaves**
- 2 chicken bouillon cubes**
- 1 tablespoon kosher salt; more to taste**
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon ground black pepper**

FOR THE AJI:

- 4 scallions (white and light green parts only)**
- 1 medium tomato, peeled and seeded**
- 1 small white onion, peeled**
- 2 fresh Scotch bonnet or habanero chiles or 2 fresh hot red chiles, stems and seeds removed (wear gloves, and don't touch your eyes)**
- 3 tablespoons fresh cilantro leaves**
- 3 tablespoons white vinegar**
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon kosher salt**

FOR THE GARNISHES:

- 2 ripe avocados, peeled and cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch cubes**

1 cup sour cream or crème fraîche

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup nonpareil or other small capers, rinsed and drained (if using large capers, chop them coarsely)

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped fresh cilantro leaves

Make the soup: Put the chicken in a large (at least 8-quart) stockpot and add 8 cups water. Bring to a boil over high heat and then reduce the heat to a vigorous simmer. Simmer for 10 minutes, frequently skimming off the foam that floats to the surface.

Add all the vegetables, the garlic, the cilantro, and the bouillon cubes to the pot, along with the salt and pepper. Stir a few times to distribute the vegetables and submerge as many of the solids as possible. When the broth returns to a gentle boil, partially cover the pot and simmer, stirring once or twice, for $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours. Taste for salt and add more if needed.

Using tongs or a slotted spoon, pick out the chicken pieces and put them on a large plate. Stir the soup with a large spoon, breaking up some of the potatoes to thicken the soup slightly. Keep hot if serving soon or let cool and refrigerate.

When the chicken is cool enough to handle, pull the meat off the bones and shred it by hand. Discard the bones and tendons, and put the shredded chicken in a serving bowl.

Make the aji: In a food processor, pulse all the aji ingredients until they're finely minced. Transfer to a serving bowl.

Serve the ajiaco: Put the avocados, sour cream or crème fraîche, capers, and cilantro leaves in small bowls and set them on the table along with the bowls of shredded chicken and the aji. Reheat the soup if necessary and ladle it into large soup bowls, putting a quarter ear of corn in each bowl. Let your guests add the garnishes and the aji to their own servings.

it's a specialty of the region and one of Colombia's most famous dishes.

Three elements set this chicken soup apart from all others. First, there's the broth, which is thick and full-bodied, almost like a stew, thanks to the addition of three types of potatoes (see below).

Second, there's the aji (AH-hee), a spicy condiment that gives the soup some fiery punch (the aji goes into the individual servings, so each person gets to control the intensity). Aji is simply a minced mixture of chiles, onions, tomatoes, vinegar, and cilantro, and it takes less than a minute to make in a food processor.

Finally, a bowl of ajiaco isn't complete without its garnishes: capers, diced avocado, sour cream, and chopped cilantro. You'll be surprised at how these varied ingredients come together to give the soup an entirely different dimension.

Since I live in South Florida now, I don't often get the urge to make this unusual soup, but the moment we're hit with a cold spell, my family knows to look for the ajiaco pot on the stove. With the chicken, vegetables, and potatoes, it's a complete meal in a bowl. We eat it as a main course for dinner, with perhaps a small salad beforehand.

Tania Sigal is the chef-owner of Tania's Table, a catering company in Miami. ♦



Chiles

Colombian cuisine isn't as spicy as some others in the region (think Mexican), but we do use our share of chiles, most often in our aji sauces. Scotch bonnet and habanero chiles tend to be our first choice, but be warned: They can be intense. They're members of the Chinense species, which has hundred of varieties, some of which are nonpungent. The heat level of an average habanero is hot but varies immensely; typically, it ranges between 80,000 and 150,000 Scoville units. (The Scoville scale measures the amount of heat, or capsaicin, in chiles; it runs from 0 to 577,000 units—the hottest Chinense chile ever measured.) To give you some perspective, that means a habanero is 20 to 50 times hotter than a jalapeño, whose heat level is also quite variable (between 2,500 and 10,000 Scoville units). In any case, if you're not hot on heat, use fewer of these chiles and add more cilantro to the aji.

A few ingredients turn a basic soup into a special meal



Cilantro

Cilantro figures prominently in ajiaco. It infuses the broth, and a sprinkling of chopped leaves garnishes each bowl, giving the soup a fresh, tangy accent. Cilantro also counters the chiles' heat, playing a vital role in my aji recipe.

Sometimes called Chinese parsley or fresh coriander, cilantro needs tender handling. When you get it home, remove any metal ties and pick out any decaying or yellowing sprigs, which would cause the rest of the bunch to rot. Wrap in a barely damp paper towel, put in a plastic bag, and refrigerate. Wash and dry just before using. A fresh, healthy bunch should last for almost a week.



Potatoes

Traditional ajiaco calls for three kinds of potatoes. For color and flavor, Colombian cooks use a tiny yellow potato called papas criollas. You might find them sold either frozen or jarred in the U.S., but I avoid them in that form. Instead, I use Yukon Golds, whose buttery yellow flesh makes them an excellent substitute. Next, we use Idahos or russets. These high-starch potatoes break down quickly during cooking and become part of the broth, giving it a thicker, richer consistency. And we use red potatoes for the opposite reason. They're low in starch, and they don't fall apart when boiled. This ensures that the soup has some nice size pieces of potato, giving the ajiaco a more interesting texture.