

Sopa Seca

We found that the best way to cook this Mexican noodle dish wasn't on the stovetop.

BY KEITH DRESSER

Literally translated as “dry soup,” *sopa seca* refers to a broad category of Mexican dishes in which toasted noodles—and a host of accompaniments—are cooked in a flavorful broth. The noodles soak up the broth as the dish cooks, turning the soupy assemblage into something neither particularly dry nor particularly wet but completely addictive. I wanted to produce a streamlined version that would make a perfect weeknight alternative to plain old red-sauced pasta.

Authentic Mexican recipes all begin with *fideos*, pretoasted coils of vermicelli. While these noodles can be purchased in some supermarkets and almost any Latin American market, I found them rare in certain regions of the country. Fortunately, it was easy enough to toast plain vermicelli in a hot skillet with a splash of oil. One caveat: The strands of pasta had to be broken into reasonably sized lengths to fit the pan; otherwise, they wouldn't toast evenly. To prevent the noodles from flying to and fro about the kitchen while I broke them into pieces, I simply wrapped them in a dish towel first (see “Neatly Breaking Long Strands of Pasta”).

To flavor the broth in which the noodles are cooked, most recipes commence with a handful of aromatics—garlic, onion, chiles, and spices. I quickly discovered after a few tests that a medium chopped onion and a couple of cloves of garlic, once sautéed, laid a proper foundation for the broth. As for the chiles, I worked my way through options such as fresh jalapeños and serranos before deciding that they lacked the punch and depth the dish required.

Dried, bittersweet ancho chiles tasted better, and smoky chipotle chiles were better yet, adding a potent combination of smoke and heat. While they are available dried, I used the more convenient canned chipotle chiles available at nearly every supermarket, which require no more prep work than a quick mince. As for the spices, a dusting of ground cumin sufficed; much more than that and the wheaty flavor of the noodles disappeared.


The use of tomatoes among the recipes varied greatly. Some recipes called for fresh tomatoes, others canned, and still others specified jarred salsa. I tried all three variations and found that canned tomatoes yielded the most consistent results. And as for the liquid element, chicken broth was a shoo-in, providing heaps more flavor than water ever could (though water is acceptable as a vegetarian option).

As for cooking the *sopa seca*, I initially embraced the simplest method: I browned the noodles and removed them from the pan. Then I sautéed the aromatics before adding the broth and returning the noodles to the pan to simmer. This method worked OK, but the noodles hydrated unevenly. I had better luck when I transferred the components to a baking dish and simmered everything in a 350-degree oven. Within 15 minutes, the noodles had soaked up the broth and were perfectly tender and flavorful. I adorned the top with shredded Monterey Jack cheese, threw the dish back into the oven so that the cheese would melt, and then served the *sopa seca* topped with chopped cilantro. Easy and delicious—what's not to love?

SOPA SECA

SERVES 4

We use straight vermicelli because it's commonly available; if you prefer to use coiled vermicelli, decrease the amount of chicken broth by $\frac{1}{4}$ cup. If you want a less spicy dish, use only $1\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons of chipotle chile. Browned and drained Mexican-style chorizo can be added along with the tomatoes in step 2.

- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 8 ounces vermicelli, broken in half 
- 1 onion, chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 (14.5-ounce) can diced tomatoes
- 1 tablespoon minced canned chipotle chile in adobo sauce
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups low-sodium chicken broth
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
- 2 ounces Monterey Jack cheese, shredded ($\frac{1}{2}$ cup)
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup chopped fresh cilantro
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup sour cream

1. Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 350 degrees. Heat 1 tablespoon oil in 12-inch skillet over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add vermicelli and cook, stirring constantly, until noodles are golden brown, 4 to 5 minutes. Transfer noodles to 13 by 9-inch baking dish.

2. Add remaining 1 tablespoon oil and onion to empty pan. Cook, stirring frequently, until onion softens and browns slightly, about $2\frac{1}{2}$ minutes. Add garlic and cumin and toast until fragrant, 30 seconds. Add tomatoes and their juice, chipotle, broth, and salt. Bring mixture to boil, then pour over pasta.

3. Place baking dish in oven and bake until all liquid is absorbed and pasta is tender, about 15 minutes. Remove baking dish from oven, stir to combine ingredients, and then sprinkle evenly with Monterey Jack. Return baking dish to oven and bake until cheese melts, 2 to 3 minutes. Spoon portions onto individual plates and garnish with cilantro and sour cream. Serve immediately.

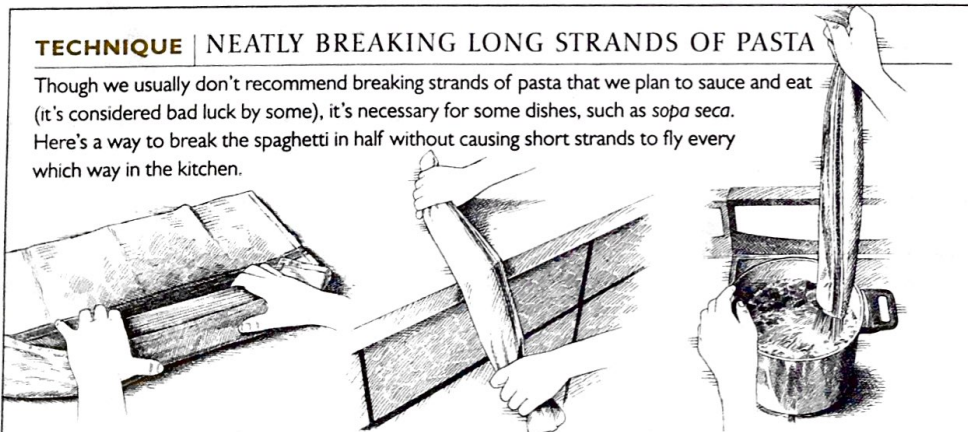
SOPA SECA WITH BLACK BEANS

Adding black beans and replacing the chicken broth with water makes this a one-dish vegetarian meal.

Add 1 (15-ounce) can black beans, rinsed, with tomatoes and chipotle and substitute water for broth.

TECHNIQUE | NEATLY BREAKING LONG STRANDS OF PASTA

Though we usually don't recommend breaking strands of pasta that we plan to sauce and eat (it's considered bad luck by some), it's necessary for some dishes, such as *sopa seca*. Here's a way to break the spaghetti in half without causing short strands to fly every which way in the kitchen.



1. Roll up bundle of spaghetti in dish towel that overlaps pasta by 3 or 4 inches at both ends.

2. Hold both ends firmly, center rolled bundle over edge of counter, and push down with both hands to break pasta in middle of bundle.

3. Holding bundle vertically over pot of boiling water, release bottom of towel so that pasta slides neatly into pot.

* With w.w. pasta:
after 15 min, add more
H₂O and cover with foil.
Cook for another 10 min