



# Food & Wine

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## SAVORY SALSAS

Project that began as English lesson becomes award-winning cookbook for Mexican women in Anderson Valley



Photos by MARK ARONOFF / The Press Democrat

"Secrets of Salsa" contains an array of recipes such as, clockwise from upper right, Mango-Cucumber Salsa, Traditional Fresh Salsa, Mortar and Pestle Salsa, Original Red Salsa and Five Green Salsa.

# RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

By **DIANE PETERSON**

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

In the spring of 1999, when the Mexican women of Anderson Valley started writing down salsa recipes as an English-language exercise at school, they had no idea their action would lead to an award-winning cookbook.

"We simply wanted to teach the women to support each other in their lives," said Barbara Goodell, director of the Anderson Valley Adult School in Boonville. "But when they started to make the salsas, the salsas were so beautiful that we decided to make a recipe book."

"Secrets of Salsa: A Bilingual Cookbook by the Mexican Women of Anderson Valley" has sold 20,000 copies since it was first published in June 2000, with the proceeds going to support the school and the women.

The phenomenal success of the cookbook is due in no small part to the wineries, restaurants and other Anderson Valley businesses that have rallied around the ethnic cookbook with pride and helped boost sales.

With 25 recipes written in both English and Spanish, the cookbook includes both fiery and cooling salsas, and everything in between. The salsas

can be served with beans, carne asada, quesadillas, tacos and all kinds of Mexican food.

Some of the salsas are made from the traditional tomatoes, onions, tomatillos and chilies, while others include more exotic ingredients such as cucumbers, cabbage, potatoes, mangoes and other fruit.

The cookbook, with colorful cover by Ukiah artist Carol Kistler, also includes instructions for roasting chilies and tomatoes. Directions for using a blender or the traditional mortar and pestle, known as a molcajete, round out the compact book, which sells for \$12 in spiral-bound form.

In 2002, Chelsea Green of Vermont bought the hard-bound rights to the cookbook and published a new edition with a foreword by the well-known Latina author Julia Alvarez. That same year, the small "cookbook that could" earned a Tabasco Community Cookbook Award (Western Region). It also garnered a California Human Development Corp. community organization award.

The cookbook project, launched by adult school teacher Kira Brennan, also has been a learning experience for the community, which has witnessed an explosion in its Latino popu-



**Mirella Mendosa, from left, Pilar Echeverria and Angeles Segura work in the kitchen of the Boonville Hotel for a film documentary about their project.**



**Mirella Mendosa prepares a salsa using fresh ingredients such as peppers.**

## COOKING DEMONSTRATION

**What:** "Secrets of Salsa" women will serve homemade tamales and demonstrate salsa recipes and homemade tortillas during a dinner put on by the Slow Food Russian River Convivium, with soft drinks and artisan beer

**When:** 3-7 p.m. May 16

**Where:** Willowside Hall, corner of Willowside and Hall roads in west Santa Rosa

**Cost:** \$60, to benefit the Steele Lane Elementary School Garden and other Slow Food projects

**Information:** 876-3221

*There is no history of salsa, because it's just there. It always has been there, and it always will be there."*

PILAR ECHEVERRIA, one of the "Salsitas" of Anderson Valley

## SUCCESS: 'Salsitas' branch out into catering, demonstrations

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lation in recent years.

"Sixty percent of the population in Anderson Valley is now Mexican," Goodell said. "Twenty-five years ago, there were only about three families. The community now recognizes the women by name and by face, and it's very proud of the book."

Along the way, the book has also inspired the Mexican women of Anderson Valley to launch their own catering group for special events. The "Salsitas" demonstrate and serve salsas, tortillas and other traditional Mexican dishes at various locales, from wineries such as Handley Cellars to the Mendocino County Fair.

On May 16, the Mexican women of Anderson Valley will reveal their salsa secrets in Santa Rosa as part of a dinner to benefit Slow Food, an international nonprofit organization that supports food education and conviviality at the table.

Meanwhile, the women and their tasty condiments are the subject of a documentary currently being made by Anderson Valley filmmakers Heidi Knott and Lee Serrie, a retired NBC News photographer.

"The film is an extension of the book," Serrie said. "It's very inspirational, and it could work as a great half-hour show for TV."

For the film, the Mexican women tried to research the history of salsa — a major component of Mexican cuisine for centuries — but couldn't find anything written down.

"There is no history of salsa, because it's just there," said Pilar Echeverria of Boonville. "It always has been there and it always will be there."

So instead, the women are

creating their own oral history of salsa, culled from their memories of growing up in the central Mexican states of Jalisco, Michoacan, Zacatecas, Guanajuato and Mexico.

Angeles Segura, who grew up in the state of Jalisco and now lives in Philo with her husband and four children, contributed a recipe for Original Red Salsa to the book. She recalls making salsa with her parents and her grandparents, who lived in Guadalajara.

Roasting the chilies and tomatoes gives them a more robust flavor, but there's an art to the process.

"Chilies are hard to roast," Segura said. "They need just a few seconds on each side. You want both sides to be lightly roasted. If you leave it too long, it gets bitter."

While the cookbook offers two roasting alternatives — pan roasting or under the broiler — Segura recalls that her father preferred a more dangerous method: he would hold chilies in the fire by the stem, then pull them out and blow out the flames like a match.

Don't try this at home, though, since the pungent pods contain capsaicin, a potent compound that gives them their fiery heat and can burn the skin — even before you put them in the fire. Tongs or rubber gloves are recommended when handling chilies, especially the smaller chilies, such as jalapeños and serranos, which are more potent.

Echeverria, who grew up in the state of Michoacan, recalled that salsa-making was a daily ritual in her family, as natural as sleeping and breathing.

"Every day we made tortillas before we ate," she said. "My grandfather would pick tomatoes and put them in the barbecue and roast them, and my mother would chop them up for salsa."

Roasting tomatoes takes a little longer than chilies. Tomatoes should roast until they soften, the skin turns black and bubbles begin to form — about 10 minutes total.

In Mexico, the women were



MARK ARONOFF / The Press Democrat

Angeles Segura holds her 5-month-old son, David, as she pours ingredients from a "Secrets of Salsa" recipe. She learned to make salsa from her grandparents in Guadalajara.

For the 23 Mexican women who contributed to the cookbook, the experience has generated feelings of empowerment and pride in their cultural roots.

On any given day, 10 to 20 women attend English classes at the Anderson Valley Adult School, which is supported by the state and private grants.

Some students, like Segura, are also pursuing their GED, or high school equivalency. Others are simply learning how to go to a grocery store and ask a price, or how to read a bill.

"We have to show the first wave of immigrants how to get connected and network, so they can teach each other," said filmmaker Serrie, who hopes to premiere the salsa documentary in late summer.

"These women were sitting at home, away from their extended family, afraid and unable to even go to the grocery store. . . . They're making monu-

sa.com.

This mild-medium salsa is from Angeles Segura, who learned how to make it when she was 15 in Guadalajara. According to "Secrets of Salsa": "This is the original red salsa that was traditionally made in the molcajete — mortar and pestle — not overly spicy, but tantalizes the taste buds."

### Original Red Salsa

- 1 pound tomatoes
- 4 chilies de arbol (dried red chilies) or 4 serrano chilies
- 1 clove of garlic
- Salt to taste

Wash and roast tomatoes. Cool. Wash and roast chilies. (see notes below on roasting instructions)

Process garlic and a small amount of water in a blender or mash garlic (no water) in a molcajete. Add remaining ingredients and blend or mash

To roast tomatoes: Under a broiler, roast the tomatoes on a baking sheet below a medium hot broiler until soft and blistered on one side, then use tongs or a spoon to turn over and roast the other side — about five minutes each side. Keep a close eye on the broiling process. Cool.

To roast chilies: Under a broiler, place fresh chilies on a cookie sheet and broil on medium heat. When one side is done, turn over to broil other side (about 5 minutes each side). Broil until chilies are soft, blistered and turn a yellowish color. For dried chilies, broil until they turn a deep, red roasted color, turning constantly (less than five minutes total).

This traditional salsa, from Maria Elena Mendoza, is one of the most important salsas in Mexican culture. You can also add avocados or nopales (cactus) to give it a twist.

### Traditional Fresh Salsa

- 5 Roma tomatoes
- ½ onion
- 1 lime
- 2-3 serrano chilies
- 1 tablespoons sugar
- ½ bunch cilantro
- 1 teaspoon salt

Finely chop onion and chilies and put into a bowl. Add lime juice, sugar, salt and finely chopped cilantro. Dice tomatoes very finely (discard any juice) and add to mixture just before serving. Tomatoes should always be added last, as the salt draws out the juice. This salsa should be eaten soon after prepared.

"This traditional green salsa has the variation of garlic and lime," says "Secrets of Salsa." "Both ingredients greatly enhance the flavors, creating a delightful and light salsa. Excellent served with all chicken dishes, meat tacos and polenta." The medium-hot salsa was created by Martha Ferreyra, who is originally from La Laguna in Michoacan.

### Five Green Salsa with Garlic and Lime

- 1 pound tomatillos (husked)

½ cup chopped cilantro

Roast chilies and tomatillos under the broiler (see roasting instructions above). Blend garlic first with a little water in blender, or mash using a molcajete (mortar and pestle). Combine garlic with roasted chilies and tomatillos and blend on low. Mash or finely cut the avocado. Combine avocado, cilantro and contents of blender in a bowl. Squeeze lime into salsa and add salt to taste.

This salsa is not in the "Secrets of Salsa" cookbooks, but the Mexican women of Anderson Valley made it up from ingredients they had on hand. It is a delicious, mild-medium salsa that can be served with beans, carne asada and all kinds of Mexican dishes.

### Mortar and Pestle Salsa

- 1 clove garlic
- 1 pinch salt
- 1 serrano chilie
- 3 tomatoes, roasted
- 2 handfuls of chopped cilantro
- 1 teaspoon chopped onion (optional)

Pound the garlic with the salt in the molcajete.

Add the chilie and pound into the mix. Add the roasted tomatoes and pound. (See above for roasting instructions.) Add the cilantro and onion, and pound.

This colorful salsa, perfect to accompany fish or a salad, comes from Teresa Alvarez, who is originally from Uruapan in the state of Michoacan. The combination of cool cucumbers, sweet mangoes, tart limes and hot chilies creates the perfect salsa for summer.

### Mango Cucumber Salsa

- 2 medium cucumbers
- 1 large mango
- 1-2 jalapeños or serrano chilies
- 3 limes
- ½ clove garlic
- ½ teaspoon chili powder
- Salt to taste

Peel mango and cucumbers. Chop into small, bite-sized pieces. Add finely chopped garlic and chilies. Put into a bowl with salt and lime juice. Sprinkle with red chili powder.