

CUBA COOKS



**RECIPES AND SECRETS FROM CUBAN
PALADARES AND THEIR CHEFS**

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PULPO A LA PLANCHA CON ACEITE DE INFUSIÓN DE CARBÓN

Seared Octopus with Charcoal-Infused Oil

Cuban chefs are fantastic collaborators. Because they have to be so resourceful, it is a pleasure to brainstorm recipes with them. I recently collaborated with chefs Alain Rivas and Yoan Maderas for a private dinner at their *paladar*, El Litoral, located on the famed Cuban boardwalk, *El Malecón*. A couple days before the event, we met up at El Litoral to plan the menu. Below is the exchange that took place between us as we developed this octopus dish, which we served as the evening's appetizer.

Serves 4

Charcoal-Infused Oil

4 cups grapeseed oil

1 (3-inch) piece natural hardwood charcoal (see Note)

Octopus

3 bay leaves

3 tablespoons kosher salt

1 (2-pound) octopus

2–3 tablespoons vegetable oil

1 teaspoon sea salt

2 teaspoons sweet paprika

1 cup watercress leaves

1 lemon

Prepare the charcoal-infused oil: Set the oil in a heavy-bottomed pot. Place the charcoal in an outdoor grill, light it, and allow the charcoal to burn until it turns white. Using tongs, transfer the hot white coal to the oil and immediately cover the pot. It will begin to smoke; do not open the lid. Once the smoke subsides, after about 10 minutes, uncover the pot and allow the oil to cool.

Place the grapeseed oil and charcoal in a blender and puree until well blended. Strain the blended oil through a fine sieve, discarding the solids. Transfer the charcoal-infused oil to a jar and secure it with a tight lid. The oil keeps for about one week in an airtight container.

Prepare the octopus: Bring a large pot of water to a boil and add the bay leaves and salt. Grab the octopus by the head and dunk it in the water three times before setting it in the water. This tempering is done to keep the tentacles from curling up too much. Reduce the heat to a simmer and cook, covered, for 40 minutes, or until a skewer inserted into the thickest part of the tentacles pierces it with very little resistance.

Once the octopus is cooked and tender, remove it from the water and allow it to cool. Cut off all the tentacles; discard the head or save it for another use. When the tentacles are cool enough to handle, insert a 6-inch wooden skewer into the thickest end of a tentacle and slide the tentacle down lengthwise onto the skewer. Repeat with the remaining tentacles.

Drizzle the vegetable oil onto a plancha or into a large sauté pan and heat over medium-high. Season the skewered tentacles with the salt and paprika. Working in batches, sear the tentacles in the oil until they begin to char on one side, about 3 minutes, then flip them over and char the other side. Transfer to a serving dish and repeat until all the octopus is charred.

Garnish the octopus skewers with the watercress leaves. Finish with a generous squeeze of lemon juice and a drizzle of the charcoal-infused oil.

Note: Remember to use hardwood charcoal and not briquettes. Also called lump charcoal, it is pure wood—free of binders or petroleum-based accelerants you do not want in your food.

