

Deep Braise Beef Barbacoa

A slow-braised chuck roast built on chipotle, dark beer, and dark chocolate

SERVES

10–12

ACTIVE TIME

~1 hour

SLOW COOK

8–9 hours

TOTAL TIME

~10 hours



This is a low-effort, high-payoff braise: a chuck roast married to chipotle, dark beer, and a square of dark chocolate, then slow-cooked overnight until it falls apart. A finishing reduction concentrates the sauce into something glossy and rich, and the dish only gets better after a night in the fridge — so plan on making it a day ahead if you can. Best served in street taco-sized flour tortillas with Cotija, red onion, cilantro, and lime, but just as good in burritos, bowls, or over rice.

INGREDIENTS

For the beef

- 3–4 lbs beef chuck roast, cut into 2–3 inch chunks
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 2 tbsp neutral oil (canola or avocado)

Aromatics

- 1 large yellow onion, diced
- 8 cloves garlic, smashed
- 5–6 chipotle peppers in adobo, chopped, plus 1–2 tbsp adobo sauce (reserve extra from the can for tasting)
- 1 tbsp tomato paste

Spices

- 1 tbsp ground cumin
- 1 tbsp ancho chili powder
- 1 tsp smoked paprika
- 1 tsp Mexican oregano (regular works)
- 1 cinnamon stick

Braising liquid

- 1 cup Coca-Cola
- 1 bottle (12 oz) dark or amber beer (see notes)
- 1 cup beef broth
- ½ cup brown sugar
- 1 (4 oz) can diced green chiles
- 1 (10 oz) can mild red enchilada sauce

To finish

- Juice of 2 limes
- 1 oz dark chocolate (or 1 tsp cocoa powder)
- 1 tbsp additional adobo sauce, reserved (optional but recommended)
- ½ cup chopped fresh cilantro
- Kosher salt, to taste

METHOD

1. SEAR THE BEEF

Pat the beef dry and season generously on all sides with kosher salt and black pepper. Heat the oil in a large skillet or Dutch oven over high heat until shimmering. Working in batches to avoid crowding the pan, sear the beef until deeply browned on all sides, about 3–4 minutes per side. Transfer to the slow cooker.

2. BUILD THE AROMATIC BASE

Reduce the heat to medium. Add the diced onion to the same pan and cook until softened, about 4–5 minutes. Stir in the garlic, chipotles with their adobo, and tomato paste. Cook for 2 minutes, until the paste darkens to a brick red. Add the cumin, ancho, smoked paprika, and oregano and toast for 30 seconds, just until fragrant.

3. DEGLAZE THE PAN

Pour in the Coca-Cola and beer, scraping up all the browned bits from the bottom of the pan. Let bubble for 1 minute, then pour everything into the slow cooker over the beef.

4. SLOW COOK

Add the beef broth, brown sugar, green chiles, enchilada sauce, and cinnamon stick to the slow cooker. Stir to combine. Cover and cook on LOW for 8–9 hours (or HIGH for 5, if pressed for time). The beef is done when it shreds easily with a fork.

5. SHRED AND REDUCE

Transfer the beef to a bowl. Discard the cinnamon stick. Strain the braising liquid into a saucepan, skim off the surface fat, and simmer over medium-high heat for 10–15 minutes, until reduced by about a third and slightly syrupy — it should coat the back of a spoon. While the liquid reduces, shred the beef with two forks.

6. FINISH AND REST

Off the heat, stir the dark chocolate into the reduced sauce until melted. Add the lime juice and the reserved tablespoon of adobo sauce. Taste and adjust for salt. Return the shredded beef to the slow cooker, pour the sauce over the top, and stir to combine. Let it rest on the WARM setting for at least 20 minutes so the meat reabsorbs the sauce. Stir in the chopped cilantro just before serving.

COOK'S NOTES

Make ahead. This dish improves dramatically overnight. After the slow cook, refrigerate the meat and unreduced liquid separately — the fat solidifies into a clean disc on top of the liquid and lifts off easily the next day, giving a cleaner reduction. Reduce, finish, and combine in the morning; leftovers keep 4–5 days in the fridge and reheat beautifully in the microwave.

Don't skip the sear. This is the single biggest flavor upgrade in the recipe. A wet, unseared piece of meat in a slow cooker is a missed opportunity.

Low vs. high. Cooking on LOW yields a silkier, more cohesive texture as collagen breaks down at a gentler temperature. Use HIGH only when time is tight.

On the spice level. 5–6 chipotles plus 2–3 tablespoons of adobo sauce is a calibrated baseline — warm and smoky, but broadly friendly to people who don't seek out heat. Spice-lovers can push to 7–8 chipotles or add cayenne. The extra tablespoon of adobo stirred in during the finish is where a lot of the noticeable heat lives, since fresh-added chile reads hotter than chile that's been braised for nine hours.

Tasting during reduction. Concentrated reduced sauce will taste noticeably hotter and less sweet than the final dish. Meat is neutral — it amplifies sweetness and mutes heat and spice once it goes back into the sauce. To gauge accurately, spoon a small bit of shredded beef into a bowl, add a proportional spoonful of sauce, and taste that combination. Adjust the main pot based on what the meat-and-sauce test tells you, not the pure sauce.

Beer alternatives. Any dark or amber beer works: Modelo Negra, Dos Equis Ambar, Bohemia, brown ales, porters, and stouts (Guinness Draught is excellent — its roasty notes lean directly into the chocolate). Avoid IPAs and light lagers — hoppy bitterness turns aggressive when reduced, and light lagers add nothing. To skip beer entirely, substitute ½ cup brewed coffee plus ½ cup additional beef broth for similar roasty depth.

For extra richness. Substitute 1 lb of the chuck with boneless beef short ribs. The dish becomes noticeably more luxurious without changing the technique.

Serving. The best presentation: warm street taco-sized flour tortillas (lightly toasted on a dry skillet or seared over an open flame) topped with the shredded beef, crumbled Cotija cheese, diced red onion, chopped cilantro, and a squeeze of fresh lime. Also great in burritos, bowls over cilantro-lime rice, or piled onto nachos.