

Bringing Steak Tacos Indoors

Who says that a great steak taco has to begin on the grill? We wanted a way to cook juicy, flavorful steak indoors so we could enjoy beefy tacos all year long.

BY KEITH DRESSER

Beef tacos made indoors are typically the pedestrian ground-beef kind, stuffed into a crisp corn tortilla and loaded with cheese and shredded lettuce. More upscale steak tacos, modeled after authentic Mexican *carne asada*, are generally reserved for the grill. Here a thin cut of beef, typically skirt or flank steak, is marinated, then grilled, cut into pieces, and served in a soft corn tortilla with simple garnishes. Done properly, the meat has rich, grilled flavor and the tacos themselves are simple to throw together.

Given the choice, I'd almost always prefer the beefier (and let's face it—better) flavors of a steak taco over a ground beef one, but what about those times when cooking outdoors isn't possible? I wanted to develop a method for bringing steak tacos indoors that would yield meat as tender, juicy, and rich-tasting as the grilled kind. I also wanted the technique to have the same success rate as grilling, without some of the common problems of cooking indoors: weak burners, poor ventilation, or a tendency to turn down the heat too soon so that by the time a crust develops, the center of the steak is overcooked.

Staking Out the Steak

My first task was to choose the right cut of meat. I decided from the outset to shy away from steaks like rib eye and top loin—though both are exceptionally beefy and tender, paying \$15 to \$20 for meat that you are just going to wrap up in a tortilla seemed a waste. Traditional Mexican recipes typically call for skirt or flank steak for taco meat, both of which come from the belly of the cow. I also wanted to try two other inexpensive cuts: blade steak, which comes from the shoulder, and steak tips (also called flap meat), from the sirloin of the animal. I pan-seared each type to determine which would work best. Tasters liked the well-marbled steak tips and skirt steak, but I found that availability of these cuts was spotty. The flavor of the blade steak was great, but it contained too much internal gristle. Flank steak proved to be the best

SHOPPING: Corn Tortillas for Tacos

The rule of thumb when buying tortillas is to buy a brand made with nothing more than ground corn treated with lime (an alkali that removes the germ and hull) and water. Look for brands sold in the refrigerator case of the supermarket, as these have few, if any, preservatives and tend to be more moist and flavorful.



The beefy flavor of flank steak proved best for these soft tacos.

choice all around. It had a nice beefy flavor and, when sliced thinly against the grain, was very tender.

Unadorned, the flank steak was good, but I wondered if I could render the meat even juicier. Referring back to our recipe for Grilled Flank Steak (May/June 2005), I found that sprinkling the meat with a liberal dose of salt and allowing it to sit for an hour markedly boosted juiciness, similar to brining. I was able to reduce that time to just 30 minutes by poking holes into the steak with a fork, which allowed the salt to sink more quickly into the meat's interior.

Given that the grill was the inspiration for this recipe, I wanted to try to mimic the browned exterior and crisp, brittle edges of grilled meat as much as possible. I figured that the intense heat of the oven's broiler would most closely resemble that of a grill and decided to start there. But after several tests, I knew the oven would never work with a thin cut like flank steak. While the broiler was able to brown the exterior of the meat, this didn't occur until the 3/4-inch steak was way overcooked.

Pan-searing proved to be a much more promising method that allowed me to achieve some decent browning. But I wanted more. I tried increasing the surface area by laying the steak flat on the cutting board and slicing it in half, parallel to the board—a technique known as butterflying—but this was a tedious process that didn't yield significantly better results. Next I experimented with cutting the steak lengthwise with the grain into four long strips about 2½ inches wide and 1 inch thick. The results were great. Because the strips were relatively thick, I could brown them on four sides instead of two, which gave me even more exposed edges that became crisp and super-flavorful. I had two more tricks up my sleeve to promote caramelization and boost flavor even further: I sprinkled the steak pieces with a little sugar before browning and increased the oil I was cooking them in from 2 teaspoons to 2 tablespoons. Thanks to the salting and to the fact that the meat was in the skillet only briefly, the steak never dried out.

Marinades and Other Matters

With a successful cooking method squared away, I now looked at adding some other flavor dimensions to the steak. Reviewing my recipe, my first thought was to incorporate a dry spice rub when I salted the meat, which would not only add flavor, but might also help with the surface texture of the meat. But after a couple of tests I found that the spice rub just tasted dusty and raw. A wet rub or paste, provided it was removed before cooking so it wouldn't impede browning, seemed a better option. After looking into traditional marinades, I settled on a combination of cilantro, scallions, garlic, and jalapeño. Processed into a pestolike paste with some oil, this marinade added fresh flavors to the steak. And when coupled with the salt, the oil-based marinade was pulled into the steak, flavoring it throughout. I reserved some of the marinade to toss with the steak

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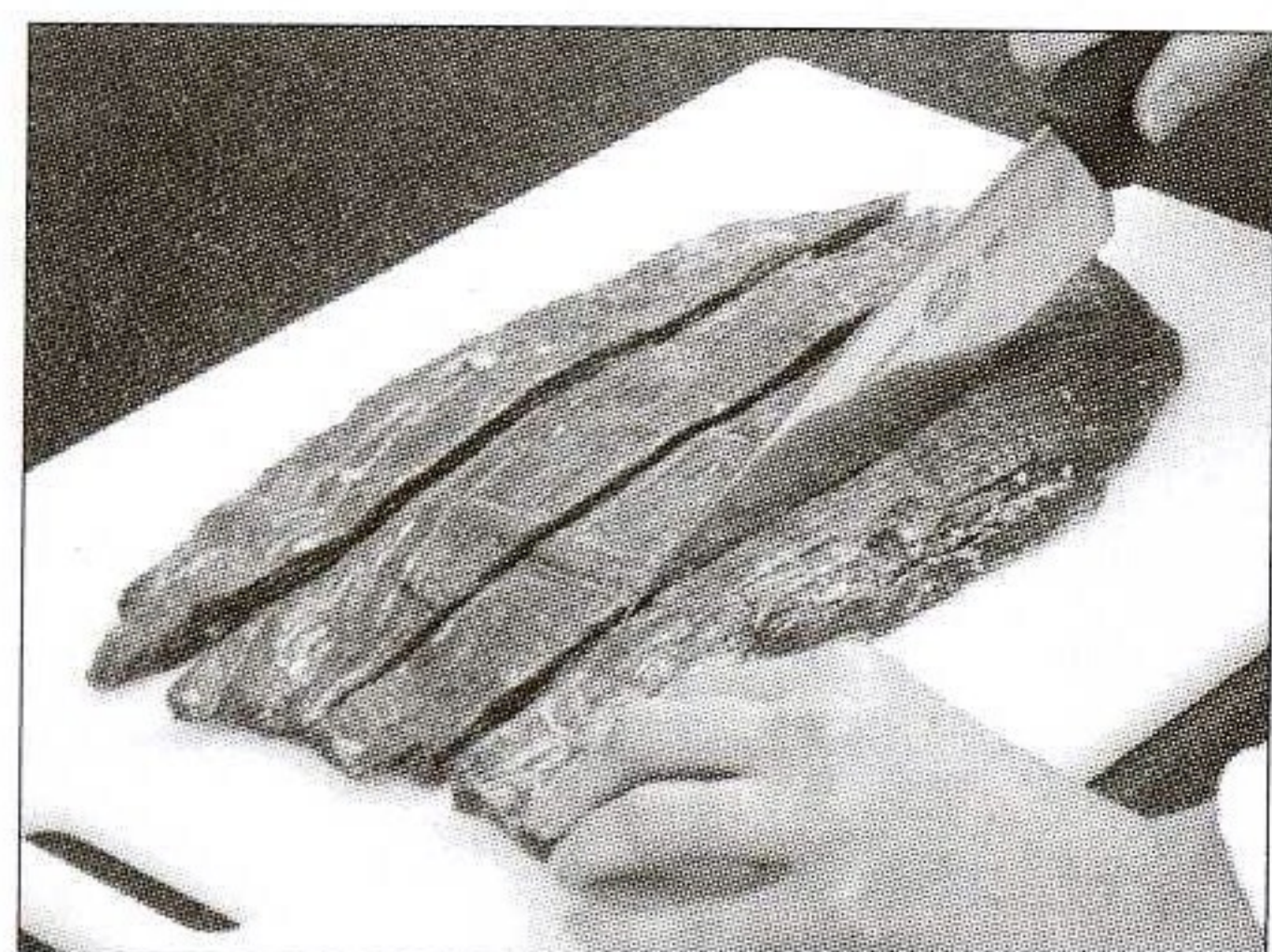
HOW TO MAKE

- Steak Tacos
- Sweet and Spicy Pickled Onions

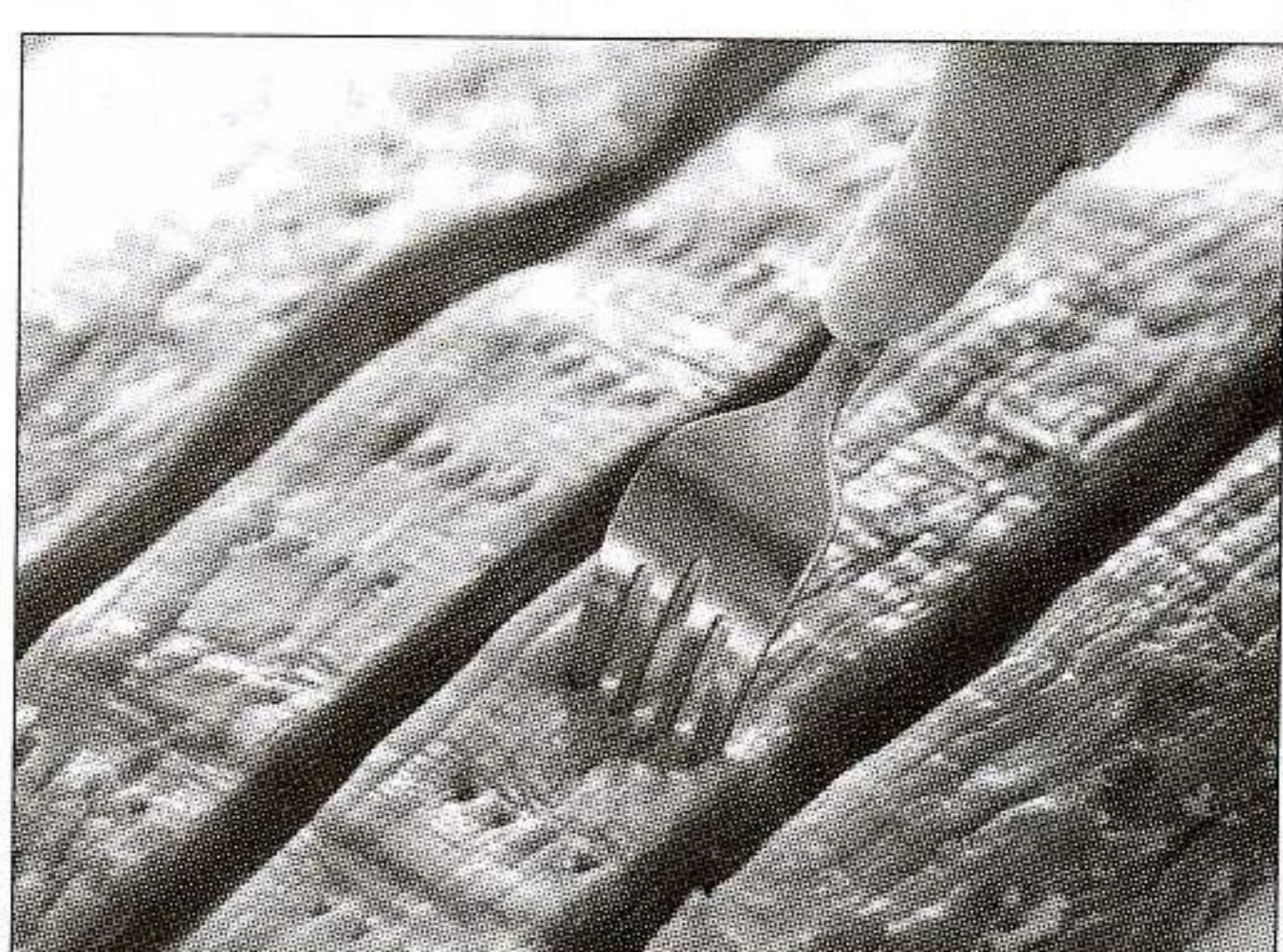
VIDEO TIP

- How to warm tortillas

STEP-BY-STEP | KEYS TO TENDER, FLAVORFUL BEEF



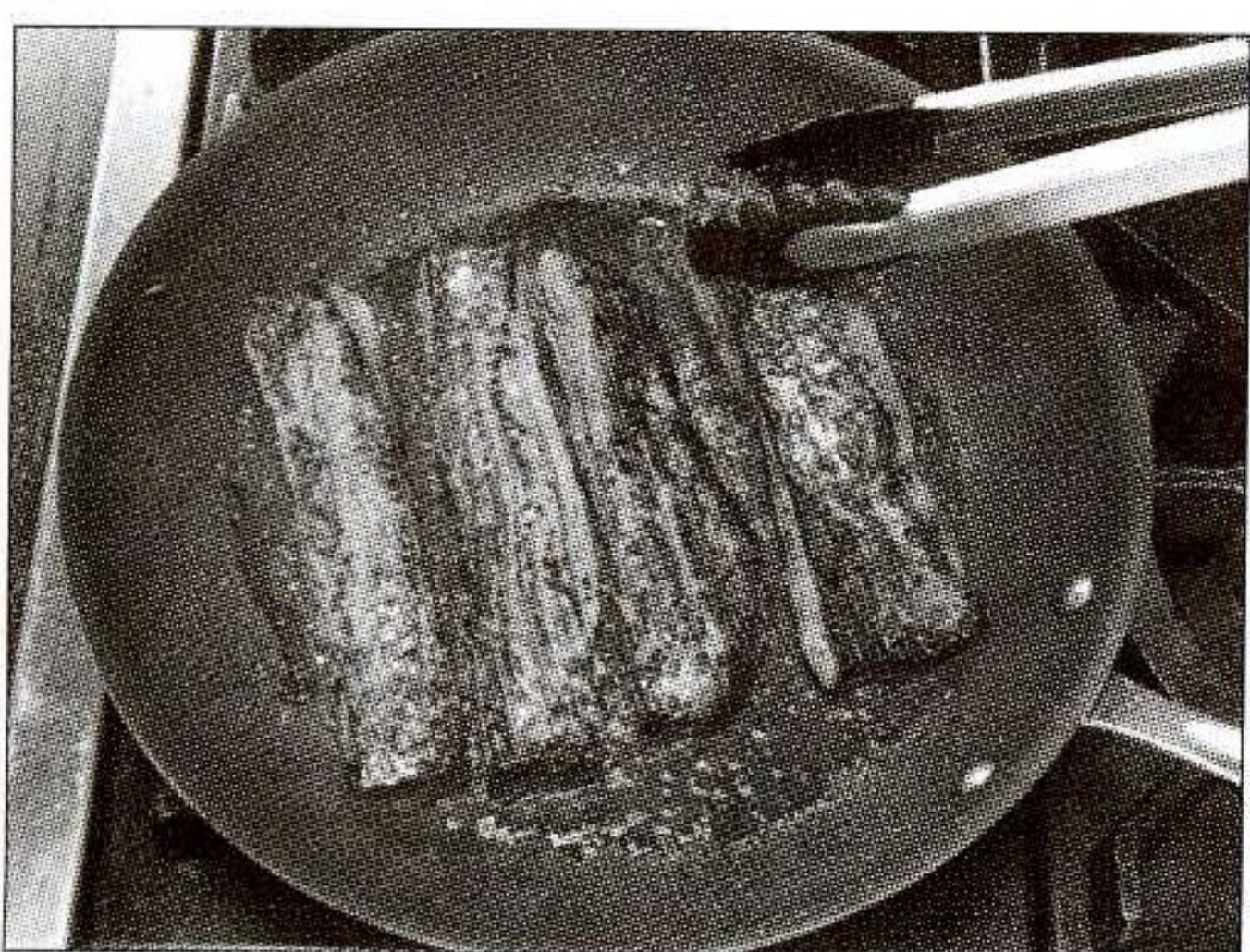
1. CUT Slice flank steak into strips that can be browned on all sides.



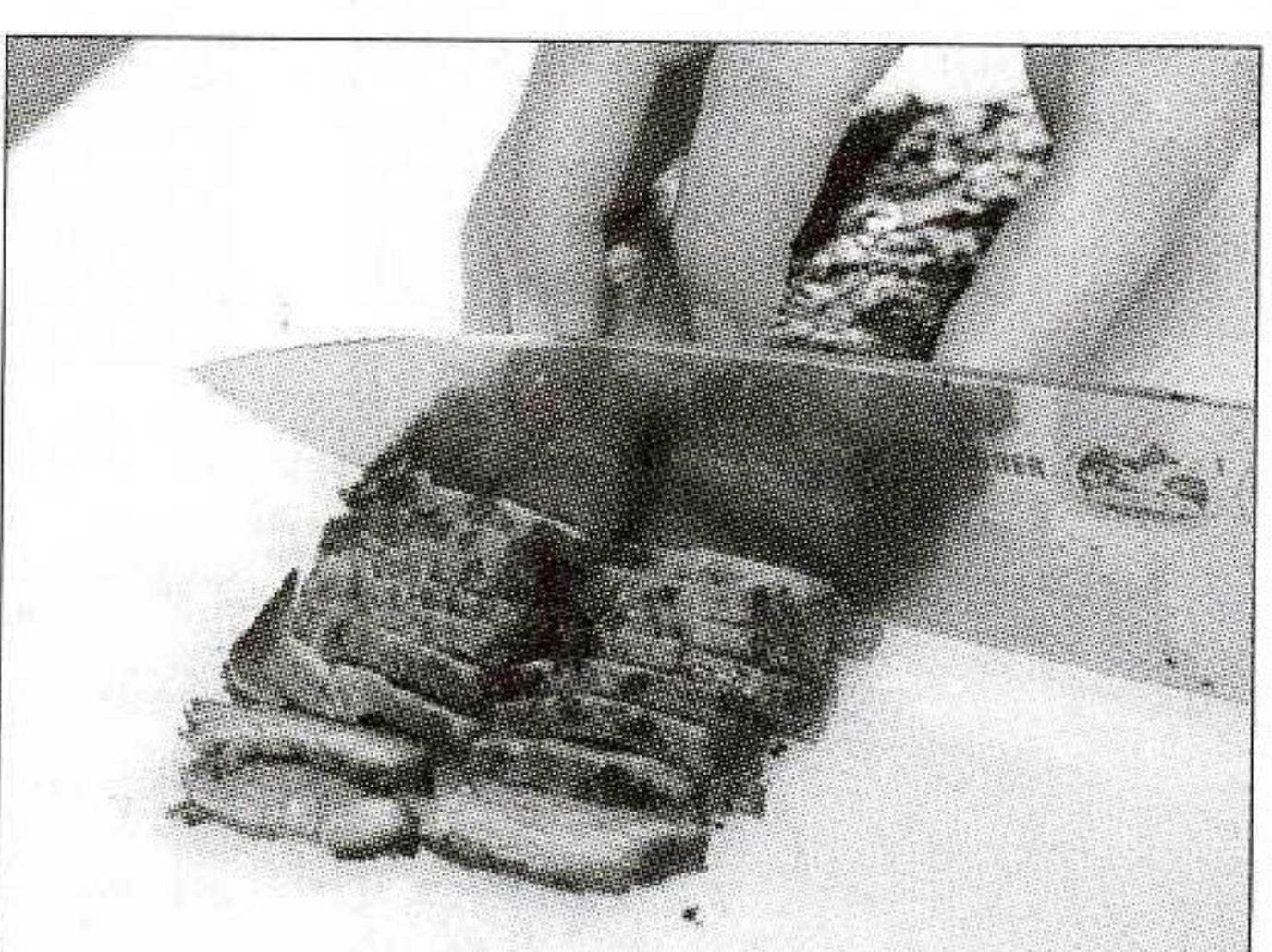
2. POKE Pierce steak pieces with fork to allow herb paste to penetrate.



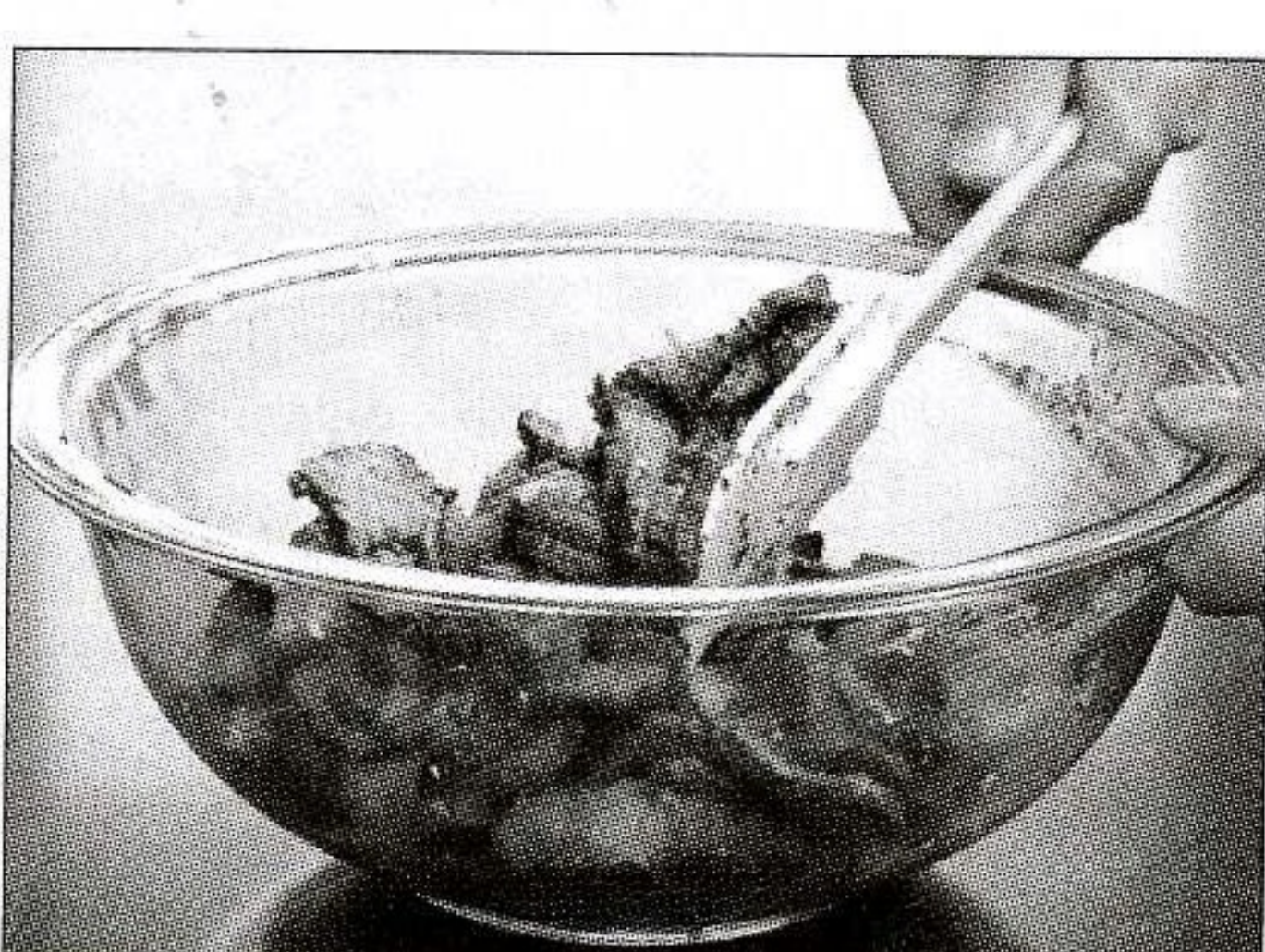
3. SALT Season meat and coat with herb paste; let stand at least 30 minutes.



4. SEAR Cook steak in generous 2 tablespoons oil to promote browning.



5. SLICE Cut steak thinly across grain to ensure tenderness.



6. TOSS Mix steak with more herb paste and lime juice to brighten flavors.

after it was sliced. This brightened the flavor and presentation considerably.

For garnishes, I chose raw onion, cilantro leaves, and lime wedges—all of which echoed the flavors in my marinade. Tasters also liked thinly sliced radishes and cucumber for the contrast in texture they provided to the steak. Lastly, I experimented with making some quick pickled vegetables, which I

loosely based on *curtido* (a relish commonly served in Latin America). Tasters loved onions I “pickled” in a mixture of sugar and red wine vinegar enlivened by a couple of jalapeños. I now had a great-tasting alternative to the ubiquitous ground beef taco—one that could even be made in the middle of winter and in no time at all.

STEAK TACOS

SERVES 4 TO 6

For a less spicy dish, remove some or all of the ribs and seeds from the jalapeños before chopping them for the marinade. In addition to the toppings suggested below, try serving the tacos with Sweet and Spicy Pickled Onions (recipe follows), thinly sliced radishes or cucumber, or salsa.

Herb Paste

- ½ cup packed fresh cilantro leaves
- 3 medium garlic cloves, roughly chopped
- 3 medium scallions, roughly chopped (about ⅓ cup)
- 1 medium jalapeño chile, stemmed and roughly chopped (see note)
- ½ teaspoon ground cumin
- ¼ cup vegetable oil
- 1 tablespoon juice from 1 lime

Steak

- 1 flank steak (1½ to 1¾ pounds), trimmed of excess fat and cut lengthwise (with grain) into 4 equal pieces (see photo above)
- 1 tablespoon kosher salt or 1½ teaspoons table salt
- ½ teaspoon sugar
- ½ teaspoon ground black pepper
- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil

Tacos

- 12 (6-inch) corn tortillas, warmed (see photo below)
- Fresh cilantro leaves
- Minced white onion
- Lime wedges

1. FOR THE HERB PASTE: Pulse cilantro, garlic, scallions, jalapeño, and cumin in food processor until finely chopped, ten to twelve 1-second pulses, scraping down sides as necessary. Add oil and process until mixture is smooth and resembles pesto, about 15 seconds, scraping down sides of workbowl as necessary. Transfer 2 tablespoons herb paste to medium bowl; whisk in lime juice and set aside.

2. FOR THE STEAK: Using dinner fork, poke each piece of steak 10 to 12 times on each side. Place in large baking dish; rub all sides of steak pieces evenly with salt and then coat with remaining herb paste. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate at least 30 minutes or up to 1 hour.

3. Scrape herb paste off steak and sprinkle all sides of pieces evenly with sugar and pepper. Heat oil in 12-inch heavy-bottomed nonstick skillet over medium-high heat until smoking. Place steak in skillet and cook until well browned, about 3 minutes. Flip steak and sear until second side is well browned, 2 to 3 minutes. Using tongs, stand each piece on a cut side and cook, turning as necessary, until all cut sides are well browned and internal temperature registers 125 to 130 degrees on an instant-read thermometer, 2 to 7 minutes. Transfer steak to cutting board and let rest 5 minutes.

4. FOR THE TACOS: Using sharp chef's knife or carving knife, slice steak pieces across grain into ⅛-inch-thick pieces. Transfer sliced steak to bowl with herb paste–lime juice mixture and toss to coat. Season with salt. Spoon small amount of sliced steak into center of each warm tortilla and serve immediately, passing toppings separately.

SWEET AND SPICY PICKLED ONIONS

MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS

The pickled onions can be refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 1 week.

- 1 medium red onion, halved and sliced thin (about 1½ cups)
- 1 cup red wine vinegar
- ⅓ cup sugar
- 2 jalapeños, stemmed, seeded, and cut into thin rings
- ¼ teaspoon table salt

Place onions in medium heat-resistant bowl. Bring vinegar, sugar, jalapeños, and salt to simmer in small saucepan over medium-high heat, stirring occasionally, until sugar dissolves. Pour vinegar mixture over onions, cover loosely, and let cool to room temperature, about 30 minutes. Once cool, drain and discard liquid.

TECHNIQUE

HOW TO WARM TORTILLAS



Our preferred method for warming tortillas is to place each one over the medium flame of a gas burner until slightly charred, about 30 seconds per side. We also like toasting them in a dry skillet over medium-high heat until softened and speckled with brown spots, 20 to 30 seconds per side. You can also use the oven: Divide the tortillas into 2 stacks and wrap each stack in foil. Heat the tortillas on the middle rack of a 350-degree oven for 5 minutes.

Keep the warmed tortillas wrapped in foil or a kitchen towel until ready to use or they will dry out. (If your tortillas are very dry, pat each with a little water before warming.)