



SPANISH · CASTILIAN (SEGOVIA / MADRID TRADITION) · KAMADO
TRANSLATION · MAIN · CENTERPIECE · OCCASION-LEVEL DINNER · FAMILY
REUNION · CHRISTMAS / EASTER

Cochinillo al Carbón

A whole suckling pig, four to five kilos, twenty-one days old, butterflied flat and laid belly-down on the kamado grate at 140 °C for three hours — then skin-up for a fifteen-minute crackling blast at 220 °C. The Castilian classic in kamado form. At Casa Botín in Madrid they claim to have perfected it in a wood-fired oven since 1725; at your kamado you approximate the old hornos de leña with ceramic heat and smoke.

Protein Whole suckling pig (cochinillo / lechón) — 4 - 5 kg, 21-day-old milk-f

Serves 8 - 10 from a 4.5 kg cochinillo · this is a special-occasion recipe

Difficulty Advanced

Active 60 min (butcher request + butterfly + seasoning + fire tending)

Total 5 h (90 min salt rest · 3 h low smoke · 15 min crackling blast

THE STORY

The Segovian Plate-Cut Tradition — And Why Cochinillo Earns Its Myth

At Mesón de Cándido, the Segovian landmark that has been roasting cochinillo in the same wood-fired oven since 1786, the traditional plate-cut is performed tableside. The cocinero presents the whole roasted cochinillo on a ceramic platter, takes a *ceramic plate* (not a knife), holds it by the rim, and *chops the cochinillo into portions with the edge of the plate*. The plate is then smashed on the ground.

The showmanship is real but the underlying claim is also real: a properly-cooked cochinitillo should be tender enough to chop with the edge of a plate. This is the doneness test. If you need a knife, it's underdone. If the plate bounces off the skin, your crackling isn't crispy enough. If the plate shatters the pig into pieces, you nailed it.

A cochinitillo — a suckling pig, 21-28 days old, milk-fed, weighing 4-5 kg — has a fundamentally different cooking character than an older pig. The skin is thin and gelatinous (becomes glass-like crackling), the fat is sweet (cooks to clear liquid), and the muscle has not yet developed the fibrous texture of a market-weight hog. At 21 days old the animal has eaten nothing but its mother's milk, and the flavor reflects this — sweet, dairy-like, almost uncannily mild.

The traditional preparation uses a wide clay bandeja (roasting tray), two inches of water in the bottom, and a horno de leña (wood-burning brick oven) at around 180-200 °C. You own a kamado, which is not the same instrument but has the right *character*: ceramic thermal mass, live-coal ember heat, controlled vent system. The technique translates with two modifications — lower temperature (140 °C instead of 180 °C to account for direct-from-ember radiant intensity) and a split cook (low then high) to build the crackling.

Two-phase: belly-down at 140 °C for three hours (gentle render of the belly fat, the meat cooks through), then flip skin-up, crank to 220 °C, blast for fifteen minutes until the skin goes from pallid-white to amber-glass crackle. Rest fifteen minutes. Plate-cut at the table. Serve with a green salad and a Ribera del Duero. Christmas. Easter. A wedding. A fiftieth birthday. Not a casual Tuesday.

Specs

<p>PORTIONS</p> <p>4-5 kg cochinillo · serves 8-10</p>	<p>KEY TECHNIQUE</p> <p>Butterfly → low kamado smoke → crackling blast</p>	<p>PHASE 1 TEMP</p> <p>1 4 0 °C kamado (dome temp, indirect with deflector)</p>	<p>PHASE 2 TEMP</p> <p>2 2 0 °C kamado (direct after removing deflector)</p>
<p>INTERNAL TARGET</p> <p>7 4 - 7 6 °C at thickest shoulder</p>	<p>DIFFICULTY</p> <p>Advanced</p> <p>●●●●○</p>	<p>ACTIVE TIME</p> <p>60 min (butterfly + fire + finish)</p>	<p>VESSEL</p> <p>Kamado with heat deflector (phase 1) then direct (phase 2)</p>
<p>CUISINE</p> <p>Spanish Castilian — Segovia tradition, kamado translation</p>	<p>PAIRING</p> <p>Ribera del Duero Reserva · Gran Reserva Rioja · or aged Albariño</p>	<p>RULE</p> <p>Butterfly flat, belly-down phase 1, skin- up phase 2. Plate-cut at the table. No herbs — let the pig speak.</p>	<p>SOURCING</p> <p>Ask butcher 3+ weeks ahead — cochinillo is special-order meat</p>

What Changed & Why

Two tiers, shared discipline. The everyday version uses a standard American suckling pig from a specialty butcher (Ranch 45, D'Artagnan, Lobel's) — often 28-40 day old and slightly larger than true Segovian cochinitillo, but close enough. The No Limits version imports or special-orders true Castilian cochinitillo — these are rarely available in the US and require 4+ weeks lead time. Alternatives: Heritage Foods USA heritage-breed suckling pig, or the rarely-listed Elysian Fields suckling pig (same Pennsylvania heritage farm that supplies top classical-French kitchens).

CHANGE	ORIGINAL	UMAMI VERSION	WHY
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What You Need

Everyday

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No Limits

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EQUIPMENT

Your Kit

- Kamado grill (Pablo ✓) — essential

- Heat deflector plate (for phase 1 indirect) — kamado accessory

- Drip pan (sits under pig during phase 1, catches rendered fat)

- Large grill grate capable of supporting 4-5 kg butterflied pig

- Digital pit thermometer + wire probe (for pit temp monitoring)

- Instant-read thermometer (for probe-tender check at shoulder)

- Long tongs (45 cm+)

- Heat-resistant gloves

- Basting brush (for melted lard)

- Large serving platter — ceramic, round, 60+ cm if possible (for the plate-cut theater)

- Ceramic plate — a *sacrificial* plate you're willing to break (for traditional plate-cut service)

- Sharp boning knife + long slicer

- Cleaver (for spine if not butterflied cleanly)

- Chimney starter or electric lump starter

MISE EN PLACE

Before You Start

- THREE WEEKS AHEAD: Order the cochinito. Specify 'butterflied flat' (the butcher splits the pig along the spine and flattens it open). Include weight target (4-5 kg) and age spec (3-5 weeks if possible).

 - DAY BEFORE, 6 PM: Receive/unwrap pig. Pat dry with paper towels. Inspect for any stray bristle or hair (rare but possible) — singe off with a blowtorch if found.

 - DAY BEFORE, 6:30 PM: Salt the pig aggressively on all sides — both skin-side and belly-side. Aim for even coverage, a visible salt layer. Place on a rimmed sheet pan, skin-up, uncovered in the fridge for 12-16 hours (dry brine + air-dry for crackling).

 - DAY OF, 6 AM (for 1 PM service): Pull pig from fridge. Let it come to room temperature 90 minutes while you build the fire.

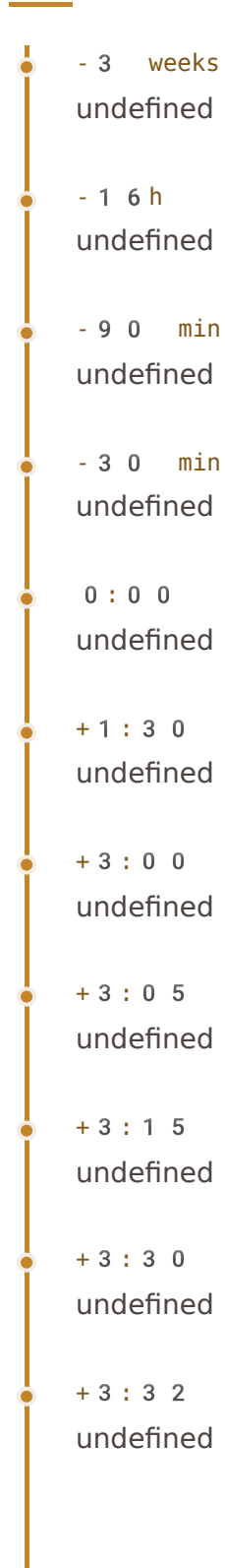
 - DAY OF, 6:30 AM: Build kamado fire. Lump charcoal + 3-4 oak/olive wood chunks mixed in. Install heat deflector. Target 140 °C dome. Let stabilize 30 min.

 - DAY OF, 7:15 AM: Drip pan with 250 ml water + 2 bay leaves under the cooking grate. Install grate.
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- DAY OF, 7:30 AM: Pig on grate — BELLY DOWN, skin up but this phase is mostly about rendering belly fat gently.

MAKE-AHEAD

Timeline



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+ 3 : 5 0
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+ 4 : 0 0
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METHOD

The Cook

1 Phase 1 — Special-Order + Dry-Brine Overnight

1. The cochinillo is not a grocery-store item. Call a specialty butcher 3-4 weeks ahead. Specify: whole suckling pig, 4-5 kg, 3-5 weeks old, **butterflied flat** (head split, spine split down the center, pig opened flat like a book).
2. If the butcher doesn't know what 'butterflied' means, they are the wrong butcher. Try Meat N' Bone (Miami), D'Artagnan (online), or Heritage Foods USA.
3. Upon receipt: pat the pig dry with paper towels. Singe off any stray bristle with a blowtorch — small hairs near the feet and ears are common.
4. **Salt aggressively.** 80 g of coarse salt across all surfaces — skin, belly, ears, feet. Work into crevices. The skin should be visibly white with salt.
5. Place on a rimmed sheet pan, **skin-up**, uncovered in the fridge for 12-16 hours. The dry-brine cures the meat and — critically — dries the skin for better crackling.

2 Phase 2 — Low Kamado Smoke (3 hours)

1. Bring the pig to room temperature 90 minutes before cooking.
2. Build the kamado fire: lump charcoal + 3-4 fist-sized oak or olive wood chunks mixed in. Light from center. Install heat deflector.
3. Dial vents for 140 °C dome temp. Let stabilize 30 minutes — ceramic kamados need patience to settle.
4. Install drip pan under the grate with 250 ml water + 2 bay leaves. The water creates humidity; the bay leaves add subtle aromatics.
5. Install the cooking grate. Place the pig on the grate **belly-down, skin-up**. This is phase 1's orientation.
6. Insert a wire probe thermometer into the thickest part of the shoulder.
7. Close the lid. Do NOT open unnecessarily — every opening costs temperature.
8. At the 90-minute mark: briefly open, glance at the drip pan water level, top off if dry. Do not touch or baste the pig.
9. At 3 hours: probe the thickest shoulder. Target 70-72 °C. This is **phase 1 complete**. The meat is cooked through; the skin is still pale and soft.

3 Phase 3 — Crackling Blast (15 min at 220 °C)

1. Briefly remove the pig to a platter (with heat gloves — it is heavy and hot).
2. **Remove the heat deflector.** This exposes the cooking grate to direct ember heat.
3. Crank the vents fully open. If the fire has calmed, add a fistful of lit lump to boost heat. Target 220 °C dome, which takes ~5-10 minutes.
4. If using apple wood chunk for phase 2 aromatics, add now.
5. When the kamado is at 220 °C, return the pig to the grate — **NOW SKIN-UP** (flipped from phase 1).
6. Brush the skin with melted lard. This adds fat for the crackling + helps the skin blister evenly.
7. Close the lid. 10-15 minutes. Watch through the vent — the skin should transform from pale-white to amber with visible bubbles.
8. At 15 min: skin should be **amber-glass, bubbled, crackling**. Internal temp should be 74-76 °C (carryover during rest will bring it to 76-78). Pull.

4 Phase 4 — Rest & Plate-Cut Service

1. Transfer the cochinillo to a warmed serving platter, **skin-up**. Do NOT cover — covering traps steam and softens the crackling.
2. Rest 15 minutes at room temperature.
3. Bring the platter to the table — part of the theater of this dish is the arrival.
4. **The plate-cut (optional theater):** Take a ceramic plate. Hold by the rim. Perform several firm chops along the spine line, quartering or eighth-ing the pig. The crackling snaps, the meat yields. Finish by smashing the plate on the ground (traditional Segovian service — use a plate you're okay with breaking).
5. Alternatively: cut into portions with a large chef's knife or cleaver. Leaner but functional.
6. Portion onto warmed plates. Each guest should get a mix of skin, meat, and fat — the crackling is part of every bite.
7. Serve with the escarole salad, country bread, and piquillos on the side. Pour the Ribera del Duero generously.

Timing Cheat Sheet

STEP	TIME	CUE
undefined	- 3 weeks	undefined
undefined	- 1 6 h	undefined
undefined	- 9 0 min	undefined
undefined	- 6 0 min	undefined
undefined	- 3 0 min	undefined
undefined	0 : 0 0	undefined
undefined	+ 1 : 3 0	undefined
undefined	+ 3 : 0 0	undefined
undefined	+ 3 : 0 5	undefined
undefined	+ 3 : 1 5	undefined
undefined	+ 3 : 3 0	undefined
undefined	+ 3 : 4 7	undefined
undefined	+ 3 : 5 0	undefined
undefined	+ 4 : 0 0	undefined

Emergency Protocols

 UNDEFINED

Call your butcher for a refund or credit — you specifically asked for butterflied. If keeping: use kitchen shears to cut down the spine from the inside, lay flat, proceed. Recovery is possible but not easy.

 UNDEFINED

Extend phase 1 by 30-45 min (total 3:30-3:45). Monitor internal temp. Use a heavier-hand salt rub. Expect slightly longer crackling phase too (18-20 min).

 UNDEFINED

Insufficient kamado heat. Crank vents fully, add more lit lump. Extend phase 2 another 10 min. Can also briefly finish over direct coals with the grate removed (5 min — watch constantly).

 UNDEFINED

Kamado was too hot for too long. Patches are cosmetic; plate the pig skin-down in those areas if they're truly burnt. Most 'too dark' crackling is actually just correctly crispy — it should look almost burnt.

 UNDEFINED

Kamado was cooler than 140 °C. Continue phase 1 another 30-45 min. Do not proceed to phase 2 until internal is 70+ °C.

 UNDEFINED

Return to kamado at 180 °C (deflector back in) for 15-20 min. Check again. Skin is already crackled so extend cautiously; crackling can burn.

 UNDEFINED

Close all kamado vents immediately to starve the fire of oxygen. Wait 2-3 minutes, then open bottom vent 1/4 and top 1/4 and monitor. Grease fires in a kamado are usually self-quenching due to ceramic's oxygen control.



UNDEFINED

Use two large metal spatulas or a sturdy pizza peel to transfer. Slide under the ENTIRE pig from one side. Lift gently. This is a known challenge for 4-5 kg butterflied pigs.

DEEP DIVES

Technique Notes

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TECHNIQUE

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PAIRING

What to Drink

Wine — Spanish Traditional

Ribera del Duero Reserva — Emilio Moro Malleolus, Pesquera Reserva, or Vega Sicilia Valbuena 5º

Ribera + cochinillo is the Castilian Sunday tradition. Tempranillo's dark fruit, smooth tannin, and oak structure handle the fat and crackling without overpowering the delicate meat flavor. Serve 16-18 °C. Reserva is the sweet spot — Gran Reserva leans too austere.

Wine — Alternative

Rioja Gran Reserva — La Rioja Alta 904 or Muga Prado Enea (5+ years on release)

Older Rioja brings tertiary leather + dried-herb notes that complement the oak-smoked skin. Pick this if the Ribera feels too big for your company or menu.

Wine — White (for Palette Change)

Aged Albariño (5+ years) — Do Ferreiro Cepas Vellas, or Fefiñanes 3 Años en Botella

For guests who don't drink red: aged Albariño has the body and complexity to pair with cochinillo. Serve cold (10 °C). Not traditional but successful — the saline minerality pairs surprisingly well with crackling.

Spirit — Post-Meal

Orujo de hierbas (Galician/Castilian herbal aguardiente) — Panizo, or Bodegas Portia

Traditional post-cochinillo digestif. 40-50% ABV, herbal, slightly sweet. Small glass, after coffee. Settles the stomach after a heavy meal.

CONTEXT

Menu Ideas

This as Centerpiece (Occasion)

Christmas, Easter, milestone birthday. Not Tuesday. This is a 'we are celebrating' dish. Plan 8-10 guests, one cochinillo, 3-hour afternoon meal.

Opener (Castilian simple)

Jamón ibérico de bellota + pan con tomate + a wedge of aged Manchego. Serve with Fino sherry while the cochinillo finishes. 45 minutes of grazing before the main event.

Side (traditional — the only side you need)

Ensalada de escarola — curly endive or escarole with a handful of walnuts, thin-sliced red onion, sherry vinegar + Arbequina. Bitter greens cut the rich pork.

Downstream — Dessert (lighter)

Helado de turrón (turrón ice cream) or cuajada (Basque sheep's milk curd) with miel de caña. Keep dessert light — the cochinillo is the main event.

Downstream — Next-Day

Pull apart any remaining cochinillo meat + mix with olive oil and eat cold with bread and piquillos. Or shred into corn tortillas for cochinita-pibil-adjacent tacos (non-traditional but incredible).

YOUR NOTES

Cook Log

Session Notes

Date: _____ · Serves: _____ · Rating: __ / 5

Use this space to record what you changed, what worked, and what you'd do differently next time. Your future self will thank you.



Stop following recipes. Start understanding food.

