



Tamales Made Simple For the Holidays

By Kelly Jameson Photography by Russell Bamert and Marty Snortum Studio



Socorro Baeza

As traditional as Santa Claus and presents, eating tamales at Christmastime is just something we New Mexicans do. My poor sister-in-law has made so many over the years that she won't - under any circumstances - eat them now, which I think is a complete violation of Mexican Food Lover Law. At any rate, whether you make them or buy them, tamales are a staple in our part of the world, and you won't find too many people (like my sister-in-law) that don't enjoy a good tamale, no matter what time of year it is.

No one really knows for sure which culture first started making these little corn-husk flavor cocoons, but there is speculation that tamales were created simultaneously by all pre-Columbian cultures.

Aztec women were taken into battle as army cooks, and needed to find a way to send portable food into battle to keep fighting soldiers fed. Tamales, at the time, were small bundles of meat-filled corn dough that were reheated on a comal. Today, they have evolved into diverse varieties: green chile chicken, cinnamon raisin, beef, chile and cheese, vegetable, and the traditional red chile pork.

Socorro Baeza has been making tamales since she was a little girl, standing alongside her mother in the kitchen. It's a culinary artform she says "takes practice. My mother never really sat down to explain to (my sisters and I) how to make them. We just watched her,



and after putting them together year after year, you get better.” Indeed, it can be a daunting and intimidating task, but with some help and some preparation, anyone can be stuffing and wrapping like they’ve done it for years.

The first step to a good tamale is in the masa. You can buy already prepared masa locally at La Cocina in Mesilla Park, or at Roberto’s in Las Cruces. Socorro makes hers from scratch, which is a tedious process that incorporates a lime-infused cornmeal, broth from the meat you will use for the filling, and lard. Unfortunately, most tamale experts will concur that the more lard (cardiologists can stop reading here), the better the masa, and the better your finished product will taste. From there, you spread the masa into a cornhusk that’s been soaked for a few hours, and then your ingredients are added. After a

few folds (see pictures at left), you’re ready to steam your tamales (see recipe by Sunny Conley pg. 12). Steaming usually takes anywhere from 45 minutes to an hour and a half, depending on how many tamales you are steaming at a time.

For the not-so-adventurous, or the time-strapped, tamales can be just as good when they come from a commercial kitchen. Some of the best have survived decades of discriminating tamale lovers, such as Gussie’s (2200 N. Piedras, El Paso) and Pepe’s Tamales (5505 Montana, El Paso), which were hand-picked by President George W. Bush to be served at the White House. In Las Cruces, locals have come to depend on favorites such as Roberto’s and Amigo’s tamales, which can be found at most grocery stores. If you plan to buy fresh tamales for the holidays, most commercial kitchens suggest calling ahead. 🌮

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RED CHILE-IOUS TAMALES
By Sunny Conley

"Tamale" [tuh-MAH-lee] comes from the Nahuatl word "tamalii." In Mexico, tamales are traditionally prepared with friends and family on Christmas Eve and then served warm on Christmas Day to callers who drop by. The singular form of "tamale" is "tamal."

Filling:

- 1 ½ lbs. pork loin, fat removed
- 1 medium white onion, chopped
- 2 cups water
- 2 T olive oil
- 2 cloves garlic, peeled and minced
- 1 T flour
- ½ cup Chimayo (red) chile powder
- ¾ tsp. salt
- ¼ tsp. cumin
- ⅛ tsp. oregano

Put pork in a Dutch oven and cover with water. Add onion. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer for about 1 hour or until meat is fork tender. Add more water if necessary. Remove pork from broth and refrigerate broth until fat solidifies on the surface. When meat has cooled, shred with two forks and set aside. Once the fat from the broth has solidified, strain over a bowl. Broth should measure 2 cups; if not, add water to make 2 cups of liquid. Reserve pork and liquid.

Heat oil in a large skillet. Add minced garlic and pork. Sprinkle flour over mixture and stir constantly for about a minute until meat begins to brown. Add ground chile, reserved broth and seasonings. Cook over medium heat until thickened and almost dry, stirring intermittently for about 30 minutes.

Tamales:

- 1 (6 oz. pkg.) dried corn husks (about 8 inches long)
- 4 ½ cups water or more as needed
- 6 cups masa harina
- 2 cups oil
- 2 T salt

Prepare corn husks according to package directions.

Put masa harina in a large bowl. Add water, stirring constantly. Add oil and salt and knead dough to the consistency of moist cookie dough. Add a small amount of water - a bit at a time - if mixture is too dry.

To assemble each tamal, spread dough with a spatula on the smooth side of the husk across the center, at least 1 inch from the flat end of the husk. Add about 2 tablespoons of filling in center of masa. Fold both sides of husk in tightly to overlap. Twist one end of the husk and tie using a strip or two of corn husk. Then twist the other end and tie. Repeat until all masa and filling is used. Add about 2 inches of water to a tamale steamer or a pot fitted with a steamer basket. Lay tamales flat in a crisscross pattern on the steamer. Place the pot on the stove over high heat until water comes to a boiling roll. Reduce heat to medium-high and cover with lid. Steam for about 1 hour or until the masa is firm and pulls away from the husk easily. Serve tamales warm. Remove husks before eating. (Makes 3 dozen tamales.)