

TAMALES

COMFORTING CONTRABAND

STORY AND PHOTO BY ANGELA KNIPPLE



You can find them at dress shops and in the back of convenience stores. Around the country, they are sold from street carts wheeled around neighborhoods. They are not usually paired with a health department license. Whether Delta-style or Mexican-style, acquiring good tamales is a little like shopping on the black market. You have to know the secret places to find them or you have to make them yourself.

In the South, most of us are familiar with Mississippi Delta-style tamales—thin tubes of cornmeal and seasoned finely ground meat wrapped in paper and boiled in a mysterious liquid of the tamale maker's choice. We grew up with these tamales, and for me, they're one of the comfort foods that remind me of my childhood.

While I love Delta tamales, they only bear a slight resemblance to the Mexican tamales that inspired them. These tamales are an ancient food. They show up in Mexican history as far back as 5000 BC when they were the ultimate one-dish meal-on-the-go for warring peoples, providing a nutritionally balanced meal that was both portable and versatile. Over the years, tamales have evolved from a custom of necessity to a food associated with the celebrations of life and death. And they're not so easy to find.

Tamales are not typically the provenance of fine dining. They're a special occasion food with cultural rules that govern when and how they're prepared and served. They're the food of home and family. Making tamales pulls families together in the kitchen. The people

who are willing to perform this labor of love are what truly make tamales special. Antonio is one of these people.

Antonio works by day as a butcher at a local Mexican market, but outside of his job, he's a wonderful cook with a staggering knowledge of Mexican cuisine. Starting as a dishwasher in a resort hotel in the culinary capital of Oaxaca, he worked his way up to kitchen supervisor, learning to cook from the women in the kitchen in his spare time. One of the first things he learned to make was tamales. The resort served 1500 tamales to guests every day.

Tamales are a must at any party, but they are a Christmas tradition throughout Mexico. During the Christmas season, both savory and sweet tamales abound. Families make large batches to share at dinner parties and to give as gifts. These tamales are a source of pride and sharing them is an important part of the holiday tradition.

Tamales dulces (sweet tamales) are traditionally served at weddings, baptisms, children's birthday parties, First Communions and Christmas. These sugared tamales may be flavored with fruits, berries, raisins, sweet potatoes, or spices like anise or cinnamon. They are typically made smaller than savory tamales and are served alongside the savory dishes, not as a dessert.

Tamales are a way for a Mexican family to show pride and respect. Antonio tells about the tradition of the *tamal de muerto*. "It's the tradition for the family to come together to make these tamales on the

SWEET POTATO TAMALES WITH ANCHO-HONEY SAUCE

½ cup butter
2 tablespoon cane syrup
1 tablespoon ground cinnamon
3 lbs medium sweet potatoes, scrubbed
½ cup lard
2 ½ cups masa
2 teaspoons salt
¼ cup cane syrup
2 tablespoons baking powder
½ cup raw sugar
30 dried corn husks, soaked in water
½ cup butter
½ cup honey
1 tablespoon ancho chile powder

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Wrap sweet potatoes in foil and bake for 1 hour or until soft. Scoop flesh from potatoes and mash with a fork.

Heat butter in a large skillet over medium heat until butter starts to brown and smells nutty. Reduce heat to low and add sweet potatoes to skillet and stir in browned butter. Add cinnamon and 2 tablespoons cane syrup and continue cooking for 5 minutes. Remove from heat.

Whip lard to aerate. In a large mixing bowl, combine masa with 2 teaspoons of salt and baking powder. Add lard, sweet potatoes and additional ¼ cup of cane syrup. Work with hands until a thick paste is formed.

Tear 4 husks into long strips. Place a large husk on a flat surface. Spread ⅓ cup of masa mixture on husk, starting on edge of one long side to cover ¾ of husk and leaving 2 inches of bottom of husk exposed.

Sprinkle ¼ teaspoon of sugar in line down center of masa. Roll masa from spread edge to cover sugar. Fold bottom of husk up and roll the rest of the tamale tightly. Tie securely with strip of husk.

Steam tightly covered over boiling water for 1 hour, adding more boiling water, as needed. Allow tamales to rest for 10 minutes before serving.

While tamales are resting, melt ½ cup of butter in medium saucepan over medium heat. Add honey and ancho powder and bring to a rolling boil. Remove from heat and drizzle over tamales to serve.

day someone dies to serve to the guests who come to the home.” The family will make hundreds of these tamales of coarse black corn masa (*papallaste*) and beef, cooking them in a huge pot over an outdoor fire. They are traditionally wrapped in a banana leaf that’s been heated over the open flame to make it pliable for wrapping. The beef is cooked simply in water with salt and avocado leaf then shredded to fill the tamales. The more tamales the family makes and the larger they are, the more respect is shown for the departed family member.

Tamales are an important part of *Dia de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) celebrations. Every November 1st and 2nd, Mexican families prepare food and flowers and gather in graveyards to celebrate the memories of their deceased relatives and to remind themselves of the continuity of both life and death. Graves are decorated with flowers and candles, as well as with food, always including tamales. Unlike the specific recipe for the *tamal de muerto*, the tamales for *Dia de los Muertos* can be any variety, typically the favorite of the relative being honored. According to Antonio, the quantity of tamales left on a grave is a direct correlation with the respect of the family.

Mexican tamales are often specific to the region of the maker. In coastal Mexico, fish or shrimp are often used as fillings. “Even the poorest people make tamales,” says Antonio. “Even if they only have beans to put in them or *chipilín* (a native wild plant), they still make them.” Corn husks are used to wrap tamales throughout Mexico, with banana or plantain leaves also used commonly as wrappers in southern Mexico. *Guajolote* (turkey) tamales are common in Mexico City where they are served with salsa picante on a sandwich roll (a *torta de tamal*). In other parts of Mexico, salsa may be served on the side, but the tamales are intended to be eaten without it.

Of course, you can’t have tamales at all without masa. But what is masa? To make masa, corn is soaked in quick lime to plump the kernels. Then it’s rinsed repeatedly, hulled and ground into a paste. This process is called nixtamalization, and it allows the release of important dietary nutrients otherwise unavailable from the corn.

The masa is blended with salt, lard and water or broth to form a thick paste. Yes, lard. Other fats can be used, but the tamales will be drier and be more apt to break without the magic of lard. Keep in mind that tamales aren’t an everyday food. A little splurge of lard won’t hurt you unless you turn tamales into a habit.

And that’s the problem. It’s very hard to develop a serious tamale habit around here. You really have to go looking for them because they’re made at home more often than in restaurants since even the simplest recipes take more time to prepare than most restaurant kitchens can allow. Unlike Delta tamales that are most often made with a machine (which doesn’t make them any less delicious), Mexican tamales are always handmade. After each tamale is rolled, they are steamed for 90 minutes. This is a serious labor of love.

So where can you find tamales? Well, it helps if you know someone like Antonio who can make them for you. And then you get to have that special zing that you only get from eating black market food. Try shopping at one of our local Mexican markets. Pay attention to what other people have in their carts. If you see someone with masa, lard

and corn shucks or banana leaves, ask them. Not only will you meet someone new, you'll be surprised at how the people who make tamales love to participate in the tradition of sharing them.

Of course, you can make tamales yourself. Open your kitchen to friends or get the whole family involved. The more hands you can get in the mix, the better. Masa is available at most grocery stores and Mexican markets or you can get locally ground masa from Delta Grind. Ask for lard from the butcher at a Mexican market—you want the refrigerated lard that they keep behind the counter. Shelf-stable lard is not only much worse for you nutritionally, but it also tends to change the flavor of the masa. You'll also need leaves for wrapping—traditional corn shucks or banana leaves—or be adventurous and wrap your tamales in edible leaves like Swiss chard or *hoja santa* (a Mexican herb).

Then, there are the fillings. Use a simple filling such as chicken and salsa, or you can make a complex filling like mole—Antonio's favorite

and the dish that he says best represents the flavors and traditions of Mexico. Cheese, peppers and other vegetables are all fair game. Go spicy, mild or sweet. As Antonio says, "Once you have your leaf and your masa, the rest is up to your imagination." *eM*

Angela Knipple loves to talk to people about food almost as much as she loves to get in the kitchen and play with it. You can find more of her culinary experiments at Squirrel Squad Squeeks, squirrel-squad.blogspot.com

The **Southern Foodways Alliance's Tamale Trail** provides a great list of places to find Delta-style tamales along with a great look at the rich history of what is truly a Southern specialty.
www.tamaletail.com

Go to www.ediblememphis.com/recipes.html to download Antonio's recipe for Tamales Mole Negro

CAFE
Society
casual elegance
for any occasion

LUNCH M-F
11:30-2:00

DINNER 7 DAYS A WEEK
FROM 5:00 PM

PRIVATE PARTY ROOMS
FOR 10-40 PEOPLE

GIFT CERTIFICATES
BAR MENU • PATIO

212 N EVERGREEN
901-722-2177

FORTY CARROTS

Gadgets | Bakeware | Cutlery | Whole Bean Coffee
Whole Leaf Tea | Gourmet Food | Cooking Classes

Forty Carrots • 5121 Sandalwood Ave. • 901-683-5187

Great Gifts
for Cooks

Mon - Thu 9-6
Fri - Sat 10-5

THE INN AT HUNT PHELAN
an oasis in downtown memphis

DINING • LODGING • SPECIAL EVENTS

—FEATURING LOCAL PURVEYORS—
Delta Grind, Whitten Farms, Nooka Beef and Delta Peas

DINNER • TUESDAY - SATURDAY 5 PM - 11 PM
LUNCH • FRIDAY - SATURDAY 11 AM - 2 PM
SUNDAY DINING • 11 AM - 8 PM

533 BEALE STREET • 901-525-8225
HUNTPHELAN.COM

CHARLIE'S MEAT MARKET

a real butcher shop
with high quality meats
at reasonable prices

Monday-Saturday
8 AM - 6 PM

Let us help you
with your
holiday needs!

4790 Summer Avenue • 901-683-1192