

# Tamales Through Time

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Understanding the Importance of Gender, Tradition, and Culture in  
Latin American Dishes



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Personal Connection

**T**amales are symbolic of my moms family coming together for the holidays. Her parents immigrated from Mexico when they were teenagers and raised her and her 4 siblings in Los Angeles, CA. They didn't have much, but they had each other and their culture. Now that she and her siblings have their own families, we all get together for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter at the grandparents' house to help make tamales. I remember my mom and her siblings helping my grandparents when me and my cousins were little, but we never participated. As everyone's gotten older, they've stepped back and let their kids and us cousins take over. The adults hang out and supervise while we us cousins do the actual filling and folding. My grandparents set up the ingredients and pre-cook everything and we do the rest. Tamales offer something for everyone in the family; my grandparents are able to stay connected to their roots in Jalisco, Mexico, for my mom and her siblings it reminds them of the foods they were raised on in childhood, for in-laws the tradition acts like a rite of passage into the family, and for us cousins its good food and a way to spend time with family. For the friends of our family who make it to the parties, its a taste of our culture and traditions.

Origins of Tamales

Tamales are assumed to have come from the Mayans, according to archaeologists' discoveries of ceramics. There is debate about what year tamales were first consumed, with estimates ranging from 100 BCE to 5000 BCE (UofA), but they were the first to create them. There is oldest evidence that it was used among their civilization. However, as Mayan, Aztecs, and Incas began to clash with one another over territory, tamales making was spread and adapted among the 3 (Ian Mursell). Aztecs ended up utilizing tamales the most, making them traditional ceremony food, war food, and a sacred religious offering. They also became an easily transportable, protein packed meal. At first, women were taken along with troops to cook on the move. However, over time, women began to make them at home and sent them with the warriors who could reheat them over fire. Depending on the area they were in and the resources they had access to, it would change what type of tamales they would make.



## My Grandparent's Family Tamale Recipe

\*Specific to Jalisco, Mexico\*

## Ingredients

## Masa (makes 12)

- 4 cups masa harina (corn flour)
- 3 cups warm water \*or leftover broth from the cooked chicken/beef
- 1 cup lard melted \*see notes
- 1 tbsp baking powder
- 1.5 tsp salt

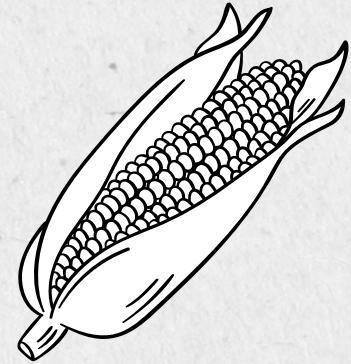
## Fillings -

## 1. Mole:

- Chile ancho secos (dry pasilla chiles) 3-4, 2-3 colorados secos (fried in oil)
- Tomatoes and tomatilloes (also fried with chiles)
- Raw onion
- 2-3 spoons of harina (flour) mixed with water
- Mexican salt, garlic salt, pepper,
- Shredded pork

## 2. Green chile and cheese (rajas verdes con queso)

## 3. Chicken (pollo)



## Assembly

- Grab your presoaked corn husks and dry the excess water off. Take a few tablespoons of masa and spread it on the wide end of the corn husk, leaving the bottom ½ inch of the edge empty. Depending on the husk size, you might need more or less masa. It should look like a rectangle on the wide half of the husk.
- Take your filling and drop about 2 tablespoons in the center of the rectangle in a vertical line.
- \* For the chile and cheese filling, drop some chiles in and then sprinkle the cheeses over.
- Fold the sides over the filling, making a cone shape. Then, fold the pointy end down to keep the husk wrapped up.
- Add water to a steamer so it fills the pot but isn't touching the insert. Fill the insert with a base layer of corn husks to prevent water seeping in. Get the water boiling then reduce the heat.
- Add tamales in, open end up. Cover with the lid and bring it back up to boil. Leave to boil for 20 minutes then reduce to medium heat.
- Leave them at medium heat for 25-40 minutes, keeping an eye on them. Test to see if they're finished at 25 minutes by seeing if the husk will peel from the masa cleanly. If there is any sticking, keep them in the pot on medium heat until the masa is fully cooked.

*As I was putting together research and calling my grandparents for their recipe, I debated whether assessing gender roles was going to be a significant enough theme to focus on. After talking through the recipe with them and getting ready to hang up the phone, my grandpa said, "now you're ready to get married and start cooking" - confirming that gender plays a large part in traditional Latin cooking!*

Walking into the house, you can smell the mole simmering on the stovetop as soon as you walk through the doorway. The air is thick with the smell of spices and meat that has been marinating all morning. Spices and dried peppers straight from the Mexican market that we only associate with christmas tamale making sit on the counter. My grandpa sits at the dining table waiting for us to pull up around him - my grandma still in the kitchen stirring away, pouring out bowls, and preparing the assembly line. The nativity scene sits by the fireplace, the mariachi music humming in the background. The younger cousins chase each other around the house while the aunts are helping set up the table. The uncles chatter and sip on Modelo outside. The tequila sits on the counter saved for later, “a reward for after we conclude a day of hard work”, says my grandpa. When its time, everyone piles into the kitchen. My grandpa demonstrates how to make a tamale - as if we don't do this every year - and then lists what numbers he wants to see at the end. For some reason, he's very particular about batch sizes. Everyone picks a station, the guys standing back to hang out while the moms, aunts, and cousins sit at the table. Within this simple annual event, its clear how important culture is to my grandparents and the role that tradition and gender play in our family tamale making.

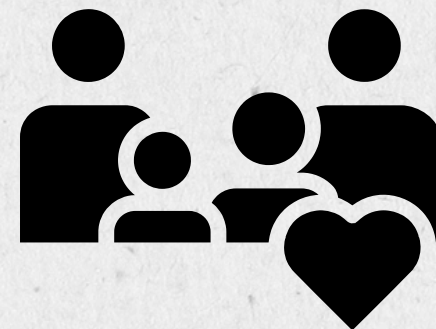
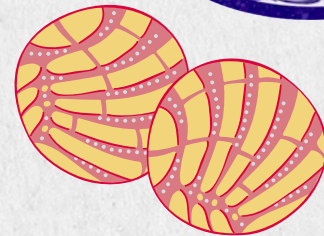




### Global Connections

At a personal level, my interactions with tamales have been centered around our holiday gatherings. It has become a comfort food, a tradition, and part of my half Mexican identity. At a community level, tamales are representative of family and culture, because they are a dish that my family makes when we are together. For us, tamales go hand in hand with laughter, smiles, and Christmas music (or if my grandpa gets it his way, mariachi music). However, on a more global scale, tamales represent movement. They have travelled to places and been spread to cultures and places that didn't originally consume them. Oaxaca now makes sweet tamales, Veracruz continues to make traditional pork filled tamales, and El Salvador has created a spinoff dish called tamales pisques (instead of corn husk they use banana leaves, instead of meat filling they use beans). Each place has adapted them to fit their dietary needs, favored flavor profiles, and resource access (Womack). Almost all the countries in Latin America make some variation of tamales. Whether it be a side, a main dish, or even a sweet, dessert-type tamale, they all have tamales in common (Womack).

## The Identity Wheel



### My Identity and Tamales

Depending on who in my family you ask, Mexican identity can mean many different things. I am not what I would consider the most accurate representation either, as I am a little distanced from a traditional first generation Mexican household. However, small things such as the annual tamale making help my family and I preserve the cultural identity that we do have. As our family has spread across the West Coast of the US, we all hold similar values and traditions as one another. We take the tamales that we've learned from our grandparents and parents, adapt it to fit ourselves and our families, and will continue to pass it on. Like many other immigrant households, food plays a large part in staying connected to your roots. Families move away and technology changes, but traditions remain the same.

## Poem Excerpt from This River Here: Poems of San Antonio

“Feeding You”, by Carmen Tafolla (a bilingual English-Spanish poet)

“I have ground the earth of these Américas in my molcajete  
until it became a fine and piquant spice  
sprinkled it surely into each spoonful of food  
that would have to expand to fit your soul...

Dear Mijo, Dear Mija,

Dear Corn Chile Cilantro Mijos

This

is your herencia

This

is what is yours

This

is what your mother fed you

to keep you

alive“

<https://www.carmentafolla.net/exerpt-this-river-here>

As Tafolla echoes, many cultures - not just Hispanics - preserve cultural identity through meals. The processes that create those dishes are a way for families to pass on identity, tradition, and gender roles. Although they evolve over time, it allows for new generations to enrich themselves with personal cultural history. For me, my family, and others, tamales and other dishes reinforce and remind us of our ancestors' journey to where we are today. Tamales can also help us understand the exchange of power and knowledge between Europeans and indigenous Mesoamericans that took place many years ago. When the Spanish arrived to colonize Mesoamerica, tamale making processes were changed. With the introduction of improved technology, such as metal cookware rather than ceramics, they were able to create the process of steaming tamales that is still used today. Originally, tamales were just placed over an open flame. There was also the introduction of new ingredients, such as lard, pork, and different corn variations (Olivares). Although tamales don't have dairy in them, dairy products were also new to Mesoamericans and side dish often used dairy (Kirk, UW). Much of this new knowledge ended up sticking, as we see with my grandparents tamale recipe. Lard is still used to infuse the masa dough with more flavor, pork and chicken fillings are very popular, and the cooking technique is still around today.

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## Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank my team for all their help editing my zine throughout the quarter! Torin, you read the roughest draft version I made and still gave encouraging feedback. Diana, you always created good conversation and interesting discussion questions in section that contributed to my zine's theme connections. Carter, you gave me some good ideas on how to organize my zine to make it more cohesive. And Marley, your editing helped get my project to the final version I have today!

Will's grading comments also were very encouraging and always gave good advice for how to improve each draft. Professor Sneegas, without your lecture content, this zine would not have been possible!

