

Sonoran Duck Tamales

This recipe makes about 12 large tamales

with Chimayo Red Chile Sauce

This is a recipe born of a passion for making things from scratch, celebrating the foods that have been farmed in the Santa Cruz river basin for centuries. It takes several days to soak the corn, and a bit of patience, but as with all twentieth century food, there are always pre-prepared options that will give you a similar result in much less time. I've included some suggestions for those that want quick results and don't have a week to prepare a meal.

While this recipe may seem daunting, if you bite it off one item at a time, you will find it is not complicated. Each piece will freeze nicely so you can make ahead and the final prep will be much quicker. You can also freeze the finished tamales for an incredibly delicious quick meal.

Timing

1. If you are making the masa from scratch, start the corn about 1-2 weeks prior to serving - Or make way ahead and freeze.

** Use Masa Harina for a short cut if you don't have the luxury of time.

2. Roast the duck a day ahead so that you can shred it when it is cool, refrigerate or make way ahead and freeze after shredding.
3. Everything else can be made the same day or ahead of time and refrigerated or frozen. Allow about an hour to make the tamales and about 1 ½ hours to cook them.

Take the effort to put all your ingredients & equipment together. It will save lots of time and make for an enjoyable cooking experience

The Masa (start this about 1-2 weeks prior to serving, or buy Masa Harina or other prepared masa)

This starts with the corn!

The Sonoran desert is blessed with many varieties of native corn. Choose a whole dry dent corn for best results. I get this from Native Seed Search, Hayden Mills or Ramona Farms. (I believe all of these companies have mail order). Or stop by the Bodega and pick-up some corn or pre-made masa using their products! You can use Masa Harina to make great tamales, but they will always have more flavor if you use the native varieties.

Ingredients and Equipment

1 ½ pounds dried corn

2 Tbsp pickling lime

2 quarts of water

A large stainless stock pot and a large sturdy plastic or ceramic tub with a lid

Food Processor

(Corn Sources: Ramona Farms, Hayden Mills, Native Seeds Search or Gallery of Food Bodega)

(Pickling lime is available at Ace Hardware and Gallery of Food Bodega)

If you want quick... We carry the wet masa in 2 pound containers, or you can get dried Masa Harina in any Mexican grocery store. If you follow the package instructions on the dry Masa Harina, you will get great tamales, but not the same flavor as using heritage varieties.

Method

1. Put the corn, water and lime in a pot and bring to a boil. Simmer for about 20 minutes and remove from the heat.
2. Place into a ceramic pot (or a sturdy plastic container) and allow to sit covered at room-temperature for 5-10 days. The longer you soak, the better the flavor. I have left the corn to soak for over two weeks, and it is still great. There are also methods that suggest boiling longer without the soaking, though I have not tried them.
3. After the corn has soaked, rinse the corn several times thoroughly to remove all the lime, and strain.
4. Place the corn in small batches in a food processor adding just enough water to the corn so that it grinds to a smooth paste in the processor. If the corn is not smooth enough, your masa will likely be a bit crunchy.
5. At this point you can freeze it or it is ready to make the masa filling.



The Duck Filling (One day prior—or earlier in the day)

We love to use Top-Knot Farms for our poultry. It makes the tamales extra rich and special, supports local agriculture, and gives us a warm fuzzy feeling! But, other meats make for equally delicious tamales.

Ingredients and Equipment

One Top-Knot Farms whole Duck (we carry these special birds with a week notice, or you can get whole duck at most Asian super markets)

If you don't want to use duck, you can use chicken, beef roast or pork roast (You'll need about a 4-5 pound bird, or about 2-3 pound boneless roast)

2 tangerines or small oranges

2 medium onions

10 cloves of garlic cloves, peeled

6-8 dried red chiles – guajillos if you like mild, chiles de arbol if you want some serious heat! I use a combo of guajillos and anchos. Remove the stems and also the seeds if you want to reduce spiciness.

Plenty of salt

½ cup water if needed (If you are using local meat, there is no water injected into the meat, so you will need to add the water to keep it from drying out.

If you are using commercial meat, you won't need any water.)

Roasting pan with tight fitting lid (use an extra piece of foil if your pan does not have a lid), parchment paper & heavy duty aluminum foil
Food Processor or blender & Large mixing bowl

Other filling ideas that are less elaborate or quicker:

Sausage: fried and tossed with any seasoning you like (I like chiles chipotles)
Great for a breakfast served with eggs!

Shredded Chicken or Beef: You can use the same method as the duck filling, but chicken and large meat roasts are definitely more readily available)

Little surprises to find in the center: pickled jalapenos, olives, cheese, etc.



Method (this is easiest made the day before)

1. Pre-heat the oven to 300 degrees.
2. Coarsely chop the onions and tangerines (with the rind!) and put in the bottom of your roasting pan. Put the meat on top, throw in the garlic, chiles and sprinkle salt on the meat generously.
3. Cover with parchment paper, then the lid and then fasten down the lid with heavy duty foil. If you don't have a lid for your roasting pan, double wrap with foil and make sure to crimp the edges tightly so moisture won't get out.
4. Roast poultry for about 3 hours, beef or pork for 4-5 hours. Test for done-ness: Poultry should fall off the bone easily. The roasts should pull apart easily and be soft. If the roasts are tough, or the poultry doesn't completely release from the bone, put it back in the oven for an hour or so. Note: Do not cook at a higher temperature, as it will make for tough meat.
5. Cool the meat. It's very hard to shred if it is too hot. You can refrigerate it overnight if you don't want to use it right away.
6. Pull the meat off the bones and shred into a large bowl. Put the bones aside to make stock later.
7. Put all the pan drippings (juices, chiles, onions, tangerines and any little fat or meat pieces that are stuck to the pan) in a blender or food processor and process until smooth and creamy. If the pan is dry, you may need to add a little water. If you have lots of liquid, strain some out (you can use that liquid in place of some of the broth in the masa filling) before processing.
8. Add to the shredded meat. You should have a thick, but wet filling. Taste for salt. Remember that masa will soak up flavors, so you want a robust flavored filling with plenty of salt. Combine in a large mixing bowl.
9. Your filling is ready for the tamales.

The Masa Filling:

Ingredients and Equipment

2 pounds (4 cups) wet masa (see above)

10 ounces (1 ¼ cup) lard or bacon fat... or a combination of both (We carry lard rendered from E&R Pork or you can get it at most grocery stores)

10-12 ounces (1 ¼-1 ½ cup) cups good tasting broth (you can make your own, or... we carry house-made stock and you can get good quality stock at some grocers. Let your taste buds decide)

1 Tbsp baking powder

Salt

A bag of corn husks (available at any Mexican grocer, or some grocery stores during the holiday season)

A stand mixer or sturdy hand mixer and a sturdy flat wooden spoon, rubber spatula

Method

1. Whip the lard in a standing mixer using the whisk attachment at high speed until about doubled in volume, white and fluffy, about 5 minutes. Scrape the bowl with a rubber spatula occasionally to make sure all of the lard is whipped. If you are using a hand mixer, this will take much longer -10 minutes or more. There is a floating test that also works. If a teaspoon of lard quickly floats on the top of a glass of cold water, it is ready.
2. Add the masa, and sprinkle the baking powder and salt over top of it. Mix in the standing mixer with the paddle attachment slowly to start incorporating the lard. Or use a sturdy wooden or kitchen spoon to mix masa into the lard.
3. Begin adding the broth slowly until everything is mixed thoroughly and you have a stiff batter. Add just a bit more broth so that it is thick and not liquidy. Your masa filling is ready.

Putting together the Tamales

Ingredients and Equipment

At least 20 nice sized corn husks –at least 6 inches across the top. (You can overlap them to make them work, but this is tricky and prone to leakage)

A large and tall stock pot with a tight fitting lid and a strainer. Size this appropriately to the number of tamales you are making. (If you don't have a strainer, use a heat-proof bowl/pan...something that fits inside the pot fairly close to the edges. You don't want the tamales to be directly on the bottom of the pot. You want to be able to put about 1 inch of water in the bottom of the pot and have the tamales sitting on something even with the water, and... have enough room at the top to get the lid sealed) ... Or you can also use a tamales steamer!

Method

1. Soak the corn husks in hot water for about 10 minutes.
2. Get the steaming pot ready for your tamales. Put the strainer or other item in the bottom of the pan, and put enough water to bring it just above (about 1/8 inch) the bottom of the strainer.
3. When the husks are pliable, drain them and lay out on a work table.
4. Using a large mixing spoon, scoop about 1/3 cup masa filling onto the upper portion of each corn husk. Use the back of the spoon to make a slight indentation in the masa.
5. Put about ¼ cup duck filling or other meat filling in the indentation.
6. Add any special treats if desired: pickled onions or jalapenos, olives... the possibilities are endless.
7. Wrap them tightly, and fold the bottom 1/3 of the husk up to keep the filling from leaking out of the bottom. (If you are really patient you can use thin strips of corn husk to tie them so the flap that you folded does not open.)
8. Tap them down lightly to get the filling to settle in.
9. Carefully place them standing up into your pot. If your pot is too big for the number of tamales you have, use pint glasses or ball jars to fill in the space (use heat-proof glass... pint glasses, jam jars, ball jars or metal)
8. When you are finished, you should have about 12 tamales.
9. Put on the stove on low heat and cover with tight fitting lid. (The water should simmer, but not boil)
10. Steam for about 1 ¼ hours checking the water level frequently. You will probably need to add water 1-3 times during the process. They will be fluffy and not batter-y when they are done.
11. They are ready to eat or freeze. If freezing them, put in a plastic sealed bag while they are hot. This will keep them from drying out. Do not put more than 6 tamales in the bag, so they cool quickly. As soon as they are not hot, you can put them in the freezer.

Chimayo Red Chile Sauce

I have memories of the sun-dried chiles from Northern New Mexico - vibrant red and rendering a sweet rich sauce. I visit there every couple years to get a fresh supply. But... There are tons of dried chiles that will make an amazing sauce. I like to start with the powder, but you can re-hydrate whole peppers and puree them in a food processor or blender and it will give you great results. The most important part is to choose peppers that are not too hot for your tastes, are fresh (old peppers will not be bad exactly, but they lose their flavor over time) and not too bitter. I have been told that the sun-drying as opposed to oven-drying make for sweeter peppers. I have not experimented enough with that to know for sure. Your taste buds are the best quality control!

This is great to do while the tamales are steaming

Ingredients and Equipment

½ cup High-quality red chile powder (or 8-10 chiles soaked in hot water until soft and pureed in a blender)

¼ cup lard, bacon fat or high-temp oil (we carry rendered lard from E&R Pork, or any grocery store will carry it)

½ finely minced onion

2 cloves garlic, finely minced or through a press

Pinch of cinnamon

½ a Pinch of clove

2-3 cups good tasting broth (we carry house-made stock, or you can get good quality stock at some grocers. Let your taste buds decide)

Salt, sugar, vinegar to taste

Large skillet & Blender if you use whole dried chiles

Method

1. Heat the lard or oil in the skillet on high heat.
2. Add the minced onion and garlic. Saute until translucent.
3. Add the chile powder and stir. Cook until aromatic. It should be a thick paste.
4. Slowly whisk in the broth until it is a bit liquidy, but not watery.
5. Simmer to reduce the liquid just a bit.
6. Season. Add just a pinch of cinnamon and even less clove. This will bring out the luscious richness of the chiles. Add salt to taste. If it is a little bitter, add just a pinch sugar. If you want a brighter flavor, add a pinch of apple cider vinegar. You can ways add more, so start small! Eat with Tamales, Posole, enchiladas... Yum!



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Bon Appétit!