Time to Make the Masa: Behind the Scenes of NYC's Tortilla Revolution

All photos by Liz Barclay (@liz_barclay)

Like the slices of bread that form a sandwich, the quality of the tortilla makes the taco. The toasted, sweet corn character of a fresh round of masa needs only a sprinkle of salt to be savored, though a pinch of grilled meat and a dab of salsa are even better accompaniments.

To build a great Mexican food culture, you need to get the foundations right—a process that has been developing for decades in New York City and has recently picked up steam with a wave of new tortilla producers hitting the scene. From chalky, pale versions that last for years in the back of the refrigerator, to golden discs with aromas so transporting they take you back to a previous century, the range of tortillas found around the city continues to develop.

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Of course, this local evolution is simply one more step in the deep history of tortilla making. Thousands of years ago, when ancient cooks recognized that a bit of ash, when it got into a simmering pot over a wood fire, made the grain insider easier to cook and to eat, *nixtamalization* was born—a big word for a relatively simple process, in which dried corn kernels are soaked in an alkaline solution that consists of water cut with a little lime (as in calcium hydroxide, not the fruit), or *cal* in Spanish. Cal makes the fibrous parts of the corn release from the hull, becoming easier to grind, way more digestible, and actually tastier. Once treated with lime, the soft, swollen kernels (if you've even eaten hominy, that's what they looked like) can be ground and formed into a *masa*, the base for tortillas.

If you've been following the progress of Mexican cuisine in NYC, you may have noticed that the tortilla scene has made leaps and bounds in the past 20 years. There are great things happening on the tortilla front, from first-generation immigrants channeling the traditions of their hometowns, to elite chefs attempting to master the foundation of the Mexican meal. Here's a look at the myriad ways tortillas are being produced in New York City today.

The Pioneers

The first large-scale tortilla operation in New York was **Piaxtla Tortilleria,** a tortilla factory

founded by Fernando Sanchez, a Mexican immigrant who named his company after the small town in Puebla where he was raised. He opened in 1986, catering to the burgeoning Mexican and Mexican-American community in central Brooklyn when finding a locally produced tortilla was more difficult than landing a ticket to the Super Bowl. Unlike the Western half of the United States, Mexican migration to NYC is a fairly recent phenomenon, characterized by explosive grown in the past two decades. (In 1990, approximately 100,000 Mexicans were recorded living in NYC; by 2000, there were more than 300,000.)

A mound of freshly made masa dough at Piaxtla Tortilleria in Brooklyn.

The neighborhoods of East Williamsburg and Bushwick became hotbeds for Mexican entrepreneurship; taquerias, Mexican groceries, import companies, and cheese factories opened in the industrial strips of the neighborhood, once dubbed the “tortilla triangle” for the cluster of tortilla factories located there.

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Miguel Carrara, the current owner of Piaxtla, recalls that the late 90s were good years for tortillerias—so much so that the industry “was called *la mina*, the mine, like gold, because it had everything you wanted. Business was strong.” At one point there were five Mexican owned and operated tortilla factories—**Tortilleria Buena Vista, Tortilleria Plaza Piaxtla, Tortilleria Chinantla, Tortilleria Mexicana Los Hermanos,** and **Tortilleria Tenochtitlan 2000**—operating within a twenty block radius, shooting out thousands of tortillas a day, the smell of toasted corn wafting through the streets.

The tortilla conveyor belt at Piaxtla Tortilleria.

Tortillerias like these, as well as others in the Bronx, Westchester, Queens, and across the river in New Jersey, use industrial scale mixers to churn corn flour and water into dough, which is then fed into large tortilla machines that flatten, cut, and cook the tortillas on long, zigzagging conveyer belts. Most of these similarly sized tortillerias get their corn flour from Maseca brand milling plants in Indiana and Texas; however, production style, preservatives, and masa-to-water ratios create different textures and flavors among local brands, distinguishing tastes for the city's increasing numbers of tortilla connoisseurs. **Their economy of scale means that a 32-ounce package of tortillas, around 30 per package, sell for $1-$2.** And while nothing beats the flavor of freshly made and cooked-to-order masa, these tortillas have paved the way for newer companies and have sustained a large consumer base. The tortillas they produce comprise the platform for the majority of the tacos eaten in NYC.

The Artisans

Aiming for something better than pre-cooked and bagged tortillas, some restaurants throughout the city are making tortillas by hand. Whether they are squashed by a manual tortilla press (there are cast-iron, cast-aluminum, or wooden models) or pressed into a round by hand, this method produces irregular circles of raw dough with varying thickness, to be draped onto the surface of a flat, hot cooking surface. The tortillas toast on one side, get flipped after a minute or two, and inflate slightly with accumulating steam. Ideally, this type of tortilla is served right then and there, though the practice of making revolving batches throughout a night's service is more common.

When made to order, these tortillas are infinitely better than any pre-cooked variety that's been re-heated on a *comal, plancha,* griddle, or flattop. Heating fresh tortillas is actually

an art in and of itself—there are all sort of factors to consider, including managing the intensity of the heat, achieving the right level of char, and using enough fat to lubricate. The dough quickly transforms from its raw state to cooked, and if it retains the rapidly dwindling heat from the original toasting process, these tortillas have incomparable flavor and texture.

Stacks on stacks on stacks on stacks.

Making each individual tortilla by hand is time consuming and labor intensive for any kitchen, no matter the scale. Flavor and texture vary depending on the type of corn flour used, as well as the cooking technique. **Most masa is fashioned from Maseca, a brand of dried pre-ground nixtamalized corn flour called *harina de maiz*—the Bisquick of the tortilla industry, ubiquitous and cheap.** It's not bad, but not ideal either. For the most part, Maseca has monopolized the market, though, so options are limited.

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Most smaller back-room bodega taquerias and Mexican family-run fondas in the outer boroughs buy stacks of locally-produced tortillas and save their in-house masa operation (mixing small batches of packaged *harina de maiz* with water by hand) for other *antojitos* like *huaraches, sopes,* and quesadillas, which also taste best with handmade, cooked-to-order masa. On occasion, you may be able to convince your tacquero to form a couple of rounds for tortillas if they are not too busy, you're smart with your Spanish, and you tip well. You can find handmade tortillas at **El Atoradero** in the Bronx, at **New Mex Deli** in Sunset Park, and occasional street **antojito stands along Roosevelt Avenue** under the 7 train in Queens.

Empellón uses a small electric rolling press to make its signature flour tortillas, while Hot Bread Almacen uses a similar machine to shape masa.

Finding better masa is the key to improving the handmade tortilla game, whether it is an artisanal harina de maiz or fresh masa dough. Taquerias like **Salvation Taco** and **Fonda** purchasing fresh masa from Tortilleria Nixtamal in Queens. **Otto's Tacos** in the East Village, blends a couple of different types of masa together to make a signature dough, which is rolled by hand into balls and slid into a tortilla machine that presses and cooks the dough simultaneously. There are also electric rolling presses—small, table-top machines that look like pasta rollers—that can smash balls of dough into uniform circles, taking some of the monotonous pressure off of the kitchen staff. **Hot Bread Almacen,** in East Harlem, are made in this manner, as are the flour tortillas at Alex Stupak's Empellón restaurants.

Corn nixtamalizing in a solution of water cut with lime (calcium hydroxide).

The Game-changers

“It’s a fucking pain in the ass and totally expensive, but worth it,” says Danny Bowien, the chef-owner of the white-hot **Mission Cantina,** of his in-house tortilla production—a two-day nixtamalization process that warrants a full-time tortilla maker on the payroll. The crew uses corn from Anson Mills, a Southern Carolina based company whose American heirloom grain products are name-checked on pedigreed menus across the city.

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The kernels are soaked in water laced with cal, cooked for three hours, then left to sit in the cooking liquid overnight. The hulls are rubbed free, the corn is rinsed, and then the kernels are ground by a *molino,* a Mexican grinder the size of a small refrigerator. The ground corn, with a little added salt, is formed into a dough and plopped onto a Lenin Tortilla Manufactura (a tabletop rolling tortilla press), which flattens and cuts the raw masa into small rounds. These are carefully transferred to the flattop nearby, where they are toasted until they puff slightly, given a quick flip, and then transferred directly into the cook’s hand to form tacos.

Fresh corn tortillas are made throughout the day at Los Tacos No. 1 in Chelsea Market.

More bakery than tortilleria, **Hot Bread Kitchen** has nixtamalized corn for its tortillas (which are sold at farmer’s markets and select retail locations) since 2007. At one point, it was using a bicycle-powered mill to grind the corn into masa but has since invested in a larger mill.

Tortilleria Nixtamal, in Queens, was the first tortilla factory to adopt a kernel-to-masa approach in NYC. Shuana Page and Fernando Ruiz searched for a decade for fresh masa in the city, something better than industrial *harina de maiz* offered in bodegas and wholesale. In 2012, they opened a small-scale tortilla factory in Corona that soaks, boils,

and grinds corn into masa for tortillas, which they both sell and use for tacos and tamales at their own taqueria inside the space. Nixtamal has raised the bar as the first local alternative to packaged mixes, creating a product that has converted a dozens of chefs at restaurants like Tacombi, Dos Toros, Empellón, and Gran Electrica (among others), who use its stacks of tortillas and fresh, raw masa. **Los Tacos No. 1** in the Chelsea Market has also nixtamalized since opening last spring. It fashions all of its doughs, both corn and flour, in house.

Corn tortillas on the griddle at Danny Bowien's Mission Cantina.

These four kitchens have breathed new life into an ancient process. Some of their machinery is manufactured in Mexico, which can be problematic if something breaks or malfunctions. Nevertheless, their tortillas capture a concentrated aroma of sweet, toasted corn, creating superior platforms for any filling. **"It's a true a labor of love,"** says Bowien —admirable toil that has reinvigorated the tortilla game.

Steam rising off a stack of fresh tortillas at Tortilleria Nixtamal.