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Vegan Tamales

by Cecilia Peterson

When it comes to throwing a party, one tried and true formula has been perfected by Latinos everywhere. To us, throwing a party means inviting everyone you know, making sure everyone leaves stuffed and happy (eventually!), and managing to do all of this without breaking the bank. How is this possible? One solution is serving tamales.

This popular Latin American dish is everything you need in a party food. You can make an enormous quantity at one time, make them days ahead, and still manage to please everyone's taste buds and dietary preferences because tamales can be easily made vegan and lowfat, not to mention wheat-free.

Tamales are also extremely versatile; both the *masa* (dough) and filling have infinite possible variations and combinations. Serving a variety of different tamales ensures that everyone will be satisfied, and you don't have to worry about what to serve with them.

Tamales are the perfect make-ahead dish as well. Take advantage of the facts that you can prepare many at once and that tamales freeze perfectly and can be reheated any time you crave homemade food. If you are planning to reheat a large quantity, it is best to defrost them completely and re-steam them for 30-45 minutes with some extra cornhusks. If you reheat the tamales in the microwave, they will dry out slightly.

Once you get the hang of this basic *masa harina masa* and these simple fillings, don't hesitate to experiment by adding herbs, spices, or other ingredients to the dough or creating your own unique fillings. Anything is possible.

Essential Materials

1. **Large pot with steamer basket or a tamale steamer bucket** — Though you can make a fair amount of tamales in a Dutch oven-sized pot, it might be a good idea to invest \$15-20 in a tamale steamer bucket. This way, you can make dozens of tamales at once, convenient if you're throwing a party or planning to freeze them for later use. You can find a tamale steamer bucket at any Latino grocery store or online through specialty retailers.
2. **Dried cornhusks** — These are used to wrap the tamales while they cook. They give the tamales a more intense corn flavor. Find these at any Latino grocery store, in the international foods aisle in

a well-stocked supermarket, or online.

3. **Dry *masa harina* flour** — This ingredient is essential and cannot be replaced with cornmeal. Find this flour at a Latino grocery store, in the international foods aisle or the baking needs aisle in a well-stocked supermarket, or online.
4. **Time** — Making tamales can save a lot of things—materials, money, stress, and even time spent preparing future meals. However, the actual process of assembling and cooking them is quite tedious. Set aside an entire day to make your tamales. Don't let this commitment discourage you, though; tamales are really quite easy to make, despite the time it takes to make them.

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Making the *Masa*

The first step to making tamales is to follow a basic recipe for *Masa Harina Masa*, or dough made from dry *masa harina* flour.

Masa Harina Masa

(Makes dough for approximately 30 tamales)

8 cups vegetable stock
12 cups dry *masa harina* flour
1-1/2 Tablespoons salt
Additional stock or water, as needed
1-3/4 cups olive oil

Heat the stock on the stove until it is warm.

Place the stock, flour, and salt into a very large bowl and use your hands to combine the ingredients well. The dough is not sticky, so it is easy to work with. Plus, an electric mixer ends up spitting flour everywhere. The dough should be moist enough to be kneaded into a ball. If the dough is crumbly, add more stock or water. Add approximately 1/4 cup of oil at a time, kneading each addition into the dough until well-combined. The finished dough should have a soft paste consistency.

Total calories per serving: 293	Fat: 15 grams
Carbohydrates: 39 grams	Protein: 5 grams
Sodium: 224 milligrams	Fiber: 4 grams

Two Party-Perfect Tamale Fillings

Colorful, flavorful, and unique, you'll be asked for the recipe for these many times over.

Tomatillo-Cilantro Sauce with Black Refried Beans

(Makes filling for 36 tamales)

Tomatillos are green, tomato-like fruits that come in husks. They are available in Latino markets. They bring the sauce together to create a surprisingly delicious combination of sweet, tangy, and spicy flavors.

Sauce

1 medium onion, thinly sliced
1/2 cup water
3 garlic cloves, crushed
Dash cayenne pepper
1 pound tomatillos, husked
1/4 cup vegetable stock
1 jalapeño pepper, seeded and minced
1 poblano pepper, seeded and minced
Salt to taste
1/4 cup chopped cilantro
1/4 cup toasted pine nuts

In a medium-sized saucepan, combine the onions, water, garlic, and cayenne. Bring to a boil, then simmer, covered, until onions are soft, approximately 5-8 minutes. Add tomatillos whole, along with vegetable stock and peppers. Simmer, covered, until tomatillos release their juices, approximately 10 minutes.

Pour contents of pot into a food processor or blender. Add salt, cilantro, and pine nuts. Purée until smooth.

Beans

2 garlic cloves, crushed
Olive oil to sauté garlic
One 28-ounce can black beans, drained
1 medium-sized onion, roughly chopped
1 teaspoon salt
Additional olive oil to cover bottom of large skillet completely

Sauté the garlic for the beans in a little bit of olive oil.

Pour beans, onions, sautéed garlic, and salt into a food processor or blender and purée until smooth.

Heat oil in a large skillet on high until oil is aromatic. Pour bean purée into skillet and stir constantly over medium-high heat for 8-10 minutes.

Place the beans in a different bowl than the sauce and set both aside (or refrigerate) until you are ready to roll the tamales.

Total calories per serving: 35 Fat: 2 grams

Carbohydrates: 5 grams

Protein: 1 gram

Sodium: 155 milligrams

Fiber: 1 gram

Sweet and Smokey Chipotle Sauce with Sweet Potato Mash

(Makes filling for 36 tamales)

Though this tomato-based sauce is quite spicy, there is sweet relief in the sweet potatoes and molasses.

Sauce

One 28-ounce can crushed tomatoes

2-3 chipotle peppers in *adobo* sauce (available in the international foods aisle of many supermarkets), minced

2 teaspoons leftover *adobo* sauce

2 Tablespoons molasses

1/4 cup orange juice

Olive oil to cover bottom of medium-sized skillet

1 medium-sized onion, preferably a sweet variety

4 garlic cloves, crushed

Salt to taste

1 teaspoon cumin

1 Tablespoon chopped cilantro

In a large saucepan, combine crushed tomatoes, peppers, *adobo* sauce, molasses, and orange juice. Bring to a boil, then lower heat to simmer.

While the tomato sauce is simmering, pour oil into a medium-sized pan and sauté onions, garlic, and salt. When onions are slightly brown, add the pan's contents to the tomato sauce. Add cumin and cilantro and continue to simmer for another 15 minutes or so, stirring occasionally.

Pour sauce into a food processor or blender and purée until smooth.

Sweet Potato Mash

2 large sweet potatoes

Salt to taste

Preheat oven to 450 degrees.

Bake potatoes until completely soft, approximately 45 minutes. Once baked, cut potatoes in half while still warm and scoop out flesh into a medium-sized mixing bowl, discarding the peel. Add salt and mash with a potato masher until completely smooth.

Place the potatoes in a different bowl than the sauce and set both aside (or refrigerate) until you are ready to roll the tamales.

Total calories per serving: 28	Fat: 1 gram
Carbohydrates: 5 grams	Protein: 1 gram
Sodium: 43 milligrams	Fiber: 1 gram

Assembling and Steaming the Tamales

Before you begin assembling the tamales, set aside at least 30 minutes to soak the dried cornhusks in hot water. Keep them submerged with a plate or another heavy object. Once they are soft and easy to work with, rinse off the dirt and the corn silk. You are now ready to start putting the tamales together!

Although there are many different ways to assemble a tamale, the following way is the easiest and the best for beginners.

1. The first thing to remember is to always spread the *masa* on the smooth side of the cornhusks. Granted, both sides have ridges, but one side is significantly smoother than the other.
2. With the tapered end of the cornhusk pointing towards you, spread a little less than a 1/2 cup of *masa* across the top half of the cornhusk. You may use the back of a spoon to do this, but clean fingers work even better.
3. Spread approximately 1 Tablespoon of sauce on the *masa* and 1 Tablespoon of filling. If you find you can add more of each without them leaking out of either end, feel free to do so.
4. Fold the right and left sides of the cornhusk together so that they overlap slightly. Then, fold the tapered end up.
5. Secure the tamale by tying a 1/4-inch strip of cornhusk around it. Tie two together if it doesn't fit around completely.
6. Place the tamale upright in the steamer, open end up.
7. Once you fill the bottom of the steamer with tamales, cover them completely with more cornhusks, and begin another level in the same fashion as before. Cover that level with cornhusks as well.

Depending on how big your steamer is, add as many levels as you'd like, but always cover the last level with more cornhusks. This not only ensures that the tamales will remain very moist, but it will add to the earthy-corn taste of the *masa*.

8. Steam the tamales for approximately an hour and a half. Don't be afraid to go over this time if you are unsure that the tamales are done. They will not overcook if you leave them in for a few hours.
9. Test if the tamales are done by removing one from the top and carefully peeling back part of the cornhusks. If they peel off very easily, you know that the tamales are done.

Serving and Storing

Once the tamales are done steaming, gently remove them with tongs and place them on platters if serving fresh. Make sure that your guests wait to remove their husks until right before they eat, as the husks keep the tamales warm and moist. Set out the leftover sauce for people to pour over their tamales.

If you plan to freeze the tamales, place them on cooling racks until cooled completely, then place them in freezer bags and into the freezer.

With your first bite of your homemade tamales, you'll immediately realize they were worth every minute of the work you've put into them. Sit back, relax, and take comfort in the notion that you have just accomplished a dish that many are too afraid to attempt.

Cecilia Peterson wrote this article while doing an internship with The Vegetarian Resource Group.

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