

Tortillas

Around the time my tip toes allowed me to peek over the stove, I began cooking. I'd run into the kitchen and pray that that day would be the day I would finally get to make my own batch of tortillas.

"Watch carefully," my grandma would urge. Then, she would grab a wooden bowl and her ingredients, smiling as I hopped around trying to get a better sight. Most days she'd carry me onto the counter top while I watched her knead the corn dough. She'd pay particular attention to the portions, heat her water and then allow it to cool until it was just right. The earthy smell of her dough and salted water would mix with the sweet corn to fill the house with its blended fragrance. The ticks of the stove heating up announced to everyone that a batch of grandma's warm and tasty tortillas were on their way. There was something about being in a kitchen with my grandmother and watching her cook. Something so personal about standing beside my grandma, rolling small balls of dough between my tiny hands, passing them over her as she placed them into the tortilla press.

Her tortilla press was essentially only wood, steel hinges, and bolts. The large, varnished press was made up of no more than 5 large slabs of mesquite wood. The base was a, chocolate colored square. Nature had decorated the slabs of wood with tree rings and swirls so enticing I would often trace my pinky over them while she turned her back. Above that, lay a smaller slab of wood that, once flipped on over the base, would press the tortillas down. The crank that was used to flatten the tortillas was simply held up with a hinge and bolt. It wasn't beautiful handiwork, but my family cherished its value.

“Now for the last ingredi-“

“Love!”

She smiled, “That’s right, a dash of love. Now put a kiss in there.”

By the time I was in middle school, I had developed an immense curiosity towards the culture I saw all around me. When I’d visit the Hispanic exhibits in museums, I’d notice a pattern. Painting after painting, artist after artist, the men were shown bulking with muscles, half naked, and adorn with a headdress, feathers, beads and weapon. These men who had conquered, and were ready to re-conquer the world, clustered the walls. They were always allowed to be the warriors, *the sole warriors*, I thought. They were strong, courageous, and noble, but the women, the women were different. Instead, they were cooking, always cooking, hunched over their tortilla presses. Often their faces were omitted. If in the rare painting their face was present, they were almost exclusively unhappy, and morose. *Well that’s easy to decipher*, I’d think to myself, *they’re unhappy that this is how they are being represented. This is the extent of their strength to the world. This is all they’ll ever be*. For years, I was haunted by what I’d come to understand of Hispanic women through their representation in art. If this is how the men fight their battles in life, how do the women do the same? How do the women carry on through a battle, where is their strength, where is their courage?

When my grandmother passed away, initially my mom didn’t shed a tear. After returning from the funeral service, my dad took us aside and explained to us that she was much like our grandma. He told us that she would probably not show her emotions and to not be

worried, she was not being cold, she was coping the only way she knew how, the way her mother had taught her.

“Your mom is going to be very sad for a while, okay? She’s going to be quiet but she’s trying to stay strong. We have to do whatever we can do to help her stay strong.” We nodded.

When we went back inside, my mother was standing over the stove, palms pressed on either side of the burners, sobbing. We had lost our grandmother and that hurt more than words could explain, but she had lost her mother and I understood her pain was immensely deeper. For weeks we had tortillas every meal. Some days they were topped with colorful sauces and savory cheeses, other mornings they were cut into perfectly sliced rectangles and scrambled into our eggs. Even on nights where tortillas made no sense to add to a meal, they found their way onto our table. Lasagna, tortillas, hotdogs, tortillas, pasta, tortillas. The tortillas were getting exhausting, and frankly a bit out of control, but they seemed to bring her a peace none of us could offer. An unspoken bond through her, the tortilla press, and the memory of my grandma that was within that press helped her. She didn’t cry as often and we all came to attribute it to that tortilla press. Eventually though, on a night we were eating soup, my mom brought no tortillas to the table and we ate the rest of our meals in silence. The next morning she washed my grandmother’s tortilla press and decided to retire it. From then on, it became more of a decoration, a piece of furniture that taught my mother strength now only rested on our shelf.

When my aunt passed away, my cousin told me that the funeral service had more plates of food than a buffet. He said the tables were covered in pots, pans, and baking dishes. Each, woman walked in delicately holding their dish, all the while their tear stained faces mourning.

The meals were diverse, and had been garnished as if chefs and professional caterers had made them. But among all of the diversity, lay one thing- tortillas. Every wife, mother, sister, aunt, and cousin, brought their own colorful towel, stuffed with a batch of fresh, hot tortillas. They say home is where the heart is, and as for the women in my family, their hearts are in their recipes.

Somewhere along the line, I learned that cooking meals has become a way to culturally heal wounds. Now tortillas have been around since 1519. Hispanic cooking can hardly be traced back to its origin. But pain, pain is essentially impossible to date. At someplace in time the three have braided their way into a cultural remedy. My family found a way to cope. Much like the women in the paintings hunched over their presses, my aunts and mother found the same peace in tortillas.

See this is how the women battle. This is how they are warriors. They don't climb mountains or vanquish enemies, and so they are not painted this way. They deal with loss, and pain and excruciating disappointments in life, but they carry on. They never allow their strength to be boastful or even ever obvious. Instead, they nurture their pain, they feed their children, they cry over stoves, and they make their tortillas. The women in my life have worked through their troubles in the same way all of the Hispanic women throughout history have. However, not all women have put their pain into their tortillas, many- like my grandmother are among the women who have taught us that it's okay to do so. It's possible that my grandmother cooked her tortillas to bring herself peace, but it's also possible she taught us to make them so we could have a way to relieve ourselves of pain. So whether we've found ourselves to be a

warrior or a teacher, tortillas taught me that family ties, and unity- whether that be in bringing the same plate to a funeral, or adding a dash of love- are the utmost important.