

— AMERICA'S —
TEST KITCHEN

Tamales

WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS

Tamales are small, moist corn cakes that can be stuffed with a variety of fillings—usually shredded chicken, pork, or beef, or a combination of cheese and chiles. The filled corn cakes are wrapped in corn husks and steamed. On the Mexican table, they can either be served as breakfast or as the main course at dinner, served alongside beans and other hearty dishes like roasted meat or poultry. Often served during the holidays, tamales are time-consuming to prepare, with families gathering together in the kitchen to pitch in. We wanted to simplify the process while staying true to the tamales' subtle but hearty flavor and light texture.

We started with the corn dough that comprises the bulk of the tamale. Although masa dough (made from corn kernels that have been cooked with slaked lime, ground to a flour, and mixed with water) is traditional, it can be difficult to find in many parts of the United States. Instead, we turned to widely available masa harina, but found that when used alone, it was too fine-textured and the corn flavor was bland. We tried adding both cornmeal and grits to supplement flavor and texture. Although cornmeal had great corn flavor, the texture of the tamales made with it reminded tasters of corn muffins. Grits, on the other hand, had a more granular texture similar to authentic tamales and didn't sacrifice any of the flavor. Fresh corn is a common addition in many tamale recipes, and we thought it would reinforce the corn flavor and provide textural contrast. We experimented with varying amounts and landed on 1 1/2



cups of kernels. We also tested tamales made with frozen corn; tasters couldn't distinguish the difference between frozen and fresh kernels, so we opted to call for frozen since they are available year-round and are easy to prepare (no cutting kernels off of cobs).

For the fat in the dough, we tried several options: vegetable shortening, vegetable oil, butter, and lard. In the end, the vegetable shortening and vegetable oil gave the tamales an unpleasant, artificial flavor. We preferred the traditional combination of lard supplemented with butter for richness and flavor. To prevent the dough from cooking up with a hard, dense texture, we added baking powder and used a food-processor mixing method to incorporate some air into the dough.

Traditional Mexican tamales are usually wrapped in dried and soaked corn husks, although in some regions, banana leaves are the common choice. We chose to work with widely available corn husks, and soaked a few extras to make up for any that were cracked or too small. When it came time to fold the tamales, most of the recipes we found required tying each one closed, a process we found we could do without by simply folding the tamales and placing them with the seam sides facing the edges of the steamer basket.

With our dough and cooking method settled, we turned our attention to creating flavorful fillings: a rich red chile chicken filling and a smoky-spicy chipotle beef filling.

INGREDIENTS	INSTRUCTIONS	MAKES 18
<div>1 cup plus 2 tablespoons quick grits</div>	<div>If you're short on time, you can make a simple tamale filling by combining 12 ounces of shredded Monterey Jack and 3 tablespoons of minced pickled jalapeños. We found it easiest</div>	

- 1 ½** cups boiling water
- 1** cup (4 ounces) plus 2 tablespoons masa harina
- 20** large dried corn husks
- 1 ½** cups frozen corn, thawed
- 6** tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into 1/2-inch cubes and softened
- 6** tablespoons lard, softened
- 1** tablespoon sugar
- 2 ¼** teaspoons baking powder
- ¾** teaspoon salt
- 1** recipe Red Chile Chicken Filling

to use large corn husks that measure about 8 inches long by 6 inches wide; if the husks are small, you may need to use two per tamale and shingle them as needed to hold all of the filling. You can substitute butter for the lard if desired, but the tamales will have a distinctive buttery flavor. Steamed tamales can be cooled completely, wrapped individually in plastic wrap, and frozen for up to 3 months. To reheat six or fewer tamales, place them on a large plate with 1 tablespoon water, cover with damp paper towels, then wrap with plastic wrap; microwave at 50 percent power until the tamales are hot throughout, about 4 minutes. If reheating a large batch of tamales, re-steam them as directed in step 4 until hot throughout, 15 to 20 minutes. Be sure to use quick, not instant, grits in this recipe. For an accurate measurement of boiling water, bring a full kettle of water to a boil and then measure out the desired amount.

1. Place grits in medium bowl, whisk in boiling water, and let stand until water is mostly absorbed, about 10 minutes. Stir in masa harina, cover, and let cool to room temperature, about 20 minutes. Meanwhile, place husks in large bowl, cover with hot water, and let soak until pliable, about 30 minutes.

2. Process masa dough, corn, butter, lard, sugar, baking powder, and salt together in food processor until mixture is light, sticky, and very smooth, about 1 minute, scraping down sides as necessary. Remove husks from water and pat dry with dish towel.

3. Working with 1 husk at a time, lay on counter, cupped side up, with long side facing you and wide end on right side. Spread ¼ cup tamale dough into 4-inch square over bottom right-hand corner, pushing it flush to bottom edge but leaving ¼-inch border at wide edge. Mound 2 scant tablespoons filling in line across center of dough, parallel to bottom edge. Roll husk away from you and over filling, so

that dough surrounds filling and forms cylinder. Fold up tapered end, leaving top open, and transfer seam side down to platter.

4. Fit large pot or Dutch oven with steamer basket, removing feet from steamer basket if pot is short. Fill pot with water until it just touches bottom of basket and bring to boil. Gently lay tamales in basket with open ends facing up and seam sides facing out. Cover and steam, checking water level often and adding additional water as needed, until tamales easily come free from husks, about 1 hour. Transfer tamales to large platter. Reheat remaining sauce from filling in covered bowl in microwave, about 30 seconds, and serve with tamales.