

THE DISH

In the kitchen para La Navidad



Tamales wrap up spirit of holidays

By Maryjo Faith Morgan
The Surveyor

There are many reasons to look forward to the Christmas holidays — the significance of the season, countless opportunities to gather with family, friends and business associates, and even the chance to sample flavors that have become time-honored traditions.

Often it is the aroma of Christmas that evokes the strongest memories, giving us the deep satisfaction that life is, indeed, very good.

Just after Thanksgiving is a good time to call friends and plan a tamale assembly by setting a date, choosing which flavors to make and who should buy what.

While tamale-making may seem complicated to the uninitiated, there are only 10 steps that novices need to follow to “get” the process: Begin by enlisting some helping hands — friends, family, anyone who’s eager to have some fun tagging along on an exciting culinary adventure — then in earnest: Make the filling, make the sauce, prepare the masa, prepare the wrappings and ties, spread the masa on the wrappings, fill the tamales, wrap and tie the tamales, steam the tamales, set the tamales, and enjoy. Serve, store, freeze or reheat your tamales.

For my dear friend Alice, Christmas means lots of tamales — enough for her family and to share with friends.

She enjoys them so much, in fact, she wrote a book to encourage and enable anyone to make fluffy, mouth-watering tamales themselves.

There’s a lot of enjoyment to be had in the process amid friendly chatter and the easy camaraderie of busy hands making short shrift of such a substantial project.

Alice Guadalupe Tapp’s step-by-step cookbook “Tamales 101” has an astonishing array with many varieties of meat tamales and also vegetarian, vegan and wondrously flavorful dessert tamales. The book is available through local booksellers, including The Book Rack of Loveland, which can be reached at 970-667-0118 (ordering takes a week). The Berthoud Public Library also has a copy to lend.



Alice Guadalupe Tapp, above, offers various tips for making scrumptious tamales in her book titled “Tamales 101.”

Tapp suggests that using unprepared masa is the best way to go; it consistently makes for fluffy, tasty, moist masa.

Although lard has been used traditionally, she says she prefers butter for its taste and texture but also uses margarine.

She even employs a “float test” to ensure that enough air has been whipped into the masa. Here are the components for what Alice describes as the most popular of traditional tamales:

Red Chile Pork Tamales

- 4 fi to 5 pounds boneless pork butt
- 1 large onion, quartered
- 3 large cloves of garlic
- 2 fi teaspoons salt

- 10 cups red pork chile sauce
- 30 cups basic fresh masa
- 48 to 60 dried corn husks, soaked, washed, and drained
- 2 (14 oz.) cans pitted whole black olives

Place the pork, onion and garlic in a large pot and cover with water. Over high heat, bring to a boil. Decrease the heat to medium. Cover and let simmer for two hours, checking after one hour and adding more water if necessary to cover meat. Add the salt and simmer for 30 minutes to an hour more until tender. Carefully remove the meat from the pot and place on a large platter to cool. Cover the stock and refrigerate or freeze for 20 minutes, or until the fat has solidified. Skim the fat from the stock and discard. Reserve the stock for use in the sauce and the masa. Cut the pork butt

into 1-inch cubes. Prepare the sauce and then prepare the masa.

To assemble the tamales, spread 1/3 to 1/2 cup masa on the smooth side of the corn husk (see diagram). Place four or five cubes of pork in the center of the masa and top with 2 heaping tablespoons of the sauce and one or two olives.

Using the fold-over method, wrap tamales; steam tamales for 1 hour.

Makes 4-5 dozen tamales.

Basic Fresh Masa

- 1 2/3 cups butter
- 6 tablespoons margarine
- 5 pounds unprepared fresh masa
- 2-3 cups chicken, pork, beef, or vegetable stock
- 2 tablespoons salt

In the bowl of a heavy-duty mixer, combine butter and margarine. With the paddle attachment on high speed, whip the butter for two minutes or until fluffy.

Lower the speed to medium and add the fresh masa alternately with 2 cups of the stock, then add the salt. Beat until well mixed. Return the mixer to high speed and whip for 3-5 minutes until the masa resembles the consistency of spackle. If necessary, add additional stock/cup at a time until the correct consistency is attained.

Drop fi teaspoon of masa into a cup of cold water. If the masa floats, it is ready; if it sinks, continue whipping the masa for another minute.

Repeat this “float test” until the sample masa floats. Makes 30 cups or masa for 5 dozen tamales.

Red Pork Chile Sauce

- 10 ancho (dried poblano) chiles
- 4 dried California chiles
- 4 onions, quartered
- 8 cloves garlic
- 2 tablespoons olive or vegetable oil
- 3 teaspoons ground cumin
- 2-4 cups pork, chicken, or vegetable stock
- 1 (28 oz.) can tomato puree or crushed tomatoes
- 2 tablespoons sugar, plus more to taste
- 1 tablespoon salt, plus more to taste

Seed the chiles, rinse, and set aside. **Note:** Some cooks brown the chiles in oil or roast them until papery-dry before soaking or boiling them, but this is not necessary.

Bring 4 cups of water to a boil. Remove the water from heat and add the chiles, pushing them down with a spoon so they are fully submerged. Cover and let stand for 30 minutes. Meanwhile, in a saucepan over medium heat, boil the onions for 25 minutes until soft.

Remove the soaked chiles from the

water, reserving 2 cups of the liquid. In a food processor, blend the chiles, onions, and garlic.

In a saucepan over medium heat, heat the oil.

Stir the cumin into the hot oil, being careful not to burn the cumin. Add the chile mixture and simmer for three minutes. Add 1 cup of the stock, 1 cup of the reserved liquid, and the tomatoes. Add just enough additional stock and reserved liquid to make saucy.

Add the sugar and salt and cook for 10 minutes longer, stirring occasionally until the sauce is the consistency of a thin gravy. Taste and add additional salt and sugar if needed. Set aside to cool.

Store in an airtight container in the refrigerator for 4-5 days or in the freezer for 2-3 months.

Makes 10 cups.

Note: Ingredients, including husks, and prepared and unprepared masa are available locally at Tortilleria La Authentica, 510 E. Fourth St. in Loveland, which is open seven days a week. (Call one day ahead for masa).

Partners in the business Luis Gomez and Christine Sanchez serve up fresh tamales every Friday, just in case you want the taste without the task of home preparation: 970-663-9114.

Maryjo Faith Morgan became “hooked” on tamales when she resided in Los Angeles. Although she wishes that Alice’s tamale restaurant “Tamaras’s Tamales” in Marina Del Rey, Calif., were still around the corner, she loves being back in Colorado.



Photo special to the Surveyor



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Red pork chili tamales, pictured above, are just one of many recipes Tapp offers in her cookbook. Tamales are a traditional Mexican dish very popular during the holiday season.

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