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That's A Wrap! Tamales are the season's ultimate comfort food.

As promised in our December 2014 Taste Food department, here are more delicious, festive tamale recipes from our friendly neighborhood tamale makers. For important tips, see "Tamale How-To" on page 96 of the issue.

VEGETARIAN SWEET TAMALES WITH BUTTERNUT SQUASH, CHOCOLATE, AND PECANS

Makes 24

The creator of this recipe, Nancy Zaslavsky, is an instructor at the Westlake Culinary Institute, where she shares her tamale-making skills with students. Zaslavsky has authored two books on Mexican cuisine and leads south-of-the-border culinary tours; visit nancyzaslavsky.com.

- ½ cup shortening (preferably trans-fat free type, such as Spectrum Naturals)**
- 2½ cups cooked butternut squash puree (2½ to 3 pounds fresh squash, roasted until soft and pureed)**
- 2½ cups (about 1½ pounds) fresh masa for tamales or 2½ cups masa made from 2¼ cups dried masa harina for tamales, reconstituted with 1 ¾ cups hot water**
- 1 cup dark brown sugar**
- 1 tablespoon baking powder**
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt**
- 1 eight-ounce package dried corn husks, softened in hot water and patted dry**
- ½ cup large, toasted pecan pieces**
- 1½ cups Mexican chocolate broken into ½-inch pieces**

In the bowl of a heavy-duty mixer, beat the shortening until fluffy, 3 minutes. Add squash puree, masa, brown sugar, baking powder, and salt. Beat 5 minutes at high speed for a pancake batterlike consistency.

Choose 24 large, softened husks, at least 6 inches wide (or overlap smaller husks to make larger surfaces). On a work surface spread ⅓ cup masa in the center of each husk, leaving a 2-inch border. Top masa with a few pecan pieces and a piece of chocolate. Fold one long side of each husk over the filling, then roll each tamale lengthwise. Tie both ends closed. Lay tamales flat, overlapping loosely in husk-lined steamer. Top with layer of husks. Steam for 1¼ hours, adding more boiling water as needed. After 1 hour remove one tamale to check for doneness. Steam longer if needed.



EASY CHOCOLATE TAMALES

Makes 24

This dessert tamale recipe by Chef Martin Ledesma, owner of Events by CP Catering, won the first Oxnard Tamale Festival competition for sweet tamales. The filling, batter, and finished tamales can be made several days ahead, covered well and refrigerated or frozen. Defrost frozen tamales in the refrigerator overnight. Re-steam or microwave refrigerated tamales to serve.

1½ cups unsalted butter, rich-tasting pork lard, or vegetable shortening

⅓ cup sugar

1 teaspoon salt

4 cups fresh coarse-ground corn masa for tamales or 3½ cups dried masa harina for tamales mixed with 2¼ cups hot water

10 ounces chocolate syrup

½ of a 1-pound package of chocolate brownie mix

18 ounce package dried corn husks, softened in hot water and patted dry

4 tablespoons chocolate chips or raisins

Fresh berries, caramel sauce, vanilla ice cream, for serving, optional

Using an electric mixer on medium-high speed, beat together butter, sugar, and salt in a bowl until light and fluffy, about 3 minutes. Continue beating and add the masa (fresh or reconstituted) in three additions. Reduce mixer speed to medium-low and add chocolate syrup. Continue beating for another minute, until a ½ teaspoon dollop of the batter will float in a cup of cold water. Beat in a little additional water if needed to give the mixture the consistency of soft (not runny) cake batter that holds its shape in a spoon. For the lightest textured tamales, refrigerate the batter for an hour. Beat in the chocolate brownie mix.

Select 24 large softened husks, at least 6 inches square, or overlap smaller ones to make a large enough surface to spread on the batter. On a work surface, lay the corn husks with tapering ends toward you. Spread about ¼ cup of batter into a 4-inch square, leaving at 1½-inch border on the side nearest you and a ¾-inch border along the other sides (with large husks, borders will be bigger). Sprinkle a few chocolate pieces down the center of the batter. Bring together the two long sides of the husk. If the borders of the two long sides are narrow, tuck one side under the other; if wide, then roll both sides in the same direction around the tamale. Fold up the empty 1 ½-inch section of the husk to form a tightly closed bottom, leaving the top open.

Stand the 24 husk-wrapped tamales on their bottoms in steamer. If necessary, fill open spaces in the steamer with loosely wadded aluminum foil to keep tamales from falling over. Put the lid on tightly and steam over a constant medium heat for about 1¼ hours, adding boiling water as needed. Test for doneness. When tamales are done, let them stand in the steamer off the heat for a few minutes to firm up. For the best texture, let tamales cool completely, then re-steam about 15 minutes to heat through. Serve tamales opened up on a plate with a sprinkling of fresh berries, a spoonful of ice cream, and a drizzle of caramel sauce, if desired.



TOMATILLO SALSA

Makes 2 quarts

“This salsa is a favorite among my customers,” says Richard Lambert, owner of Santa Barbara Tamales-to-Go (sbtamalestogo.com). “Tomatillos have a note of citrus, which creates a perfect counterpoint to the chiles and spices in the recipe. When you combine this salsa with chicken in a tamale or enchilada, you’ve got yourself a flavor fiesta.” Note: Some tomatillo salsa recipes also call for avocado. If you like the flavor, you might try adding avocado to the fire-roasted ingredients before blending.

- 2 white onions, quartered**
- 5 cloves garlic, in skins**
- 3 serrano chiles**
- 3 pounds (22 to 25) tomatillos**
- 5 poblano chiles**
- 3 teaspoons cumin seeds**
- 2 teaspoons coriander seeds**
- 2 teaspoons Mexican oregano**
- 2 tablespoons lard**
- Chicken broth as needed**
- Salt to taste**
- Avocado, optional**

On a hot griddle, fire-roast onions, garlic, and serrano chiles for 10 to 15 minutes, turning several times to char all sides. Under a broiler, fire-roast tomatillos and poblano chiles, turning several times to char on all sides. Place the roasted poblanos in a plastic bag for 15 minutes to steam, then peel away the outer skin, and remove the seeds and stem. Peel the garlic and place all fire-roasted ingredients in a blender for 20 to 30 seconds.

In a sauté pan over medium heat, toast cumin and coriander seeds for several minutes, stirring constantly. Combine toasted spices in a spice grinder with Mexican oregano and grind for 8 to 10 seconds. Melt lard over medium-high heat in large skillet, then add spice mixture and fry for a few minutes. Pour in fire-roasted ingredients from the blender. Use caution as the mixture will “spit” when it touches the hot oil. After a minute, reduce heat to medium and simmer for 5 minutes. If needed, add chicken broth to thin the salsa as desired. Add salt to taste. Salsa will keep in the refrigerator for up to 5 days or in the freezer for several months.