Corn Tortillas

By Vanderbilt Center for Latin American Studies

Tortillas are one of the most commonly consumed foods in Mexico and Central America. While they can be made of either wheat or corn, corn tortillas hold a special place in Central American cuisine and were being made in Central America thousands of years before wheat tortillas. Corn (known as maize in Spanish) has been a staple of the Central American diet since 4300 BC; wheat was not introduced until the Spanish arrived in Mexico in 1519. The Maya, an indigenous group native to Central America, told a creation story that the first humans were made from corn. One of the first known names for tortillas is tlaxcalli and comes from the indigenous language of Nahuatl. There are over 42 different types (which are further divided into over 3000 varieties) of corn grown in Central America. They come in many colors, the most common of which are white, yellow, and blue.

To make the corn dough for tortillas, corn kernels are taken off the corn cob and soaked overnight in water with lime. After the corn kernels have been soaked, they are called nixtamal. Soaking the corn kernels in limewater is important because it enhances the flavor, unlocks the proteins and carbohydrates in the corn, and makes it easier to digest. Indigenous people discovered this process because limestone occurs naturally in many parts of Central America. Also, soaking the corn helps to loosen up the outer skin so it can be peeled off the kernels. Many people feed the kernel skins to chickens so as to not waste food. The whole peeled kernels are called hominy and are used in a traditional soup called pozole.
To make tortillas, the corn kernels are then ground; traditionally, the grinding has been done by hand using by crushing the kernels against a stone plate (*metate*) with a stone cylinder (*mano*). Water is added to the ground kernels to create a dough, called *masa*. To create a tortilla, a person takes a handful of the masa dough, rounds it out into a flat disc, and cooks it on a hot surface. Traditionally, tortillas are cooked on a terra cotta griddle called a *comal*. After flipping the tortilla over to cook both sides, it is ready to eat. Usually in Central America, women are in charge of making the tortillas. Groups of women often stand around a *comal*, making tortillas and sharing stories.

Central Americans eat corn tortillas or tamales (another corn-based food) with almost every meal. They are used to make food such as tacos and enchiladas. Tortillas are also used instead of forks to scoop up food, such as beans, rice, and meat.

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