

How do you make tamales?

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When it comes to gastronomy in Belize, there isn't much debate about which Belizean dish ranks the highest on the popularity chart. Renowned as Belize's Sunday twelve o'clock meal, "rice-and-beans-chicken-and-salad" is the unofficial national Belizean dish. However, one quickly learns that some restrictions do apply and that this title is subject to change depending on geographic location, ethnic group, and day of the year.

The Mestizos, product of Mayan and Spanish intermarriage, arrived in Belize in the mid-1800s bringing with them their sacred corn or maize, foods and other items made from corn. Though there are several corn-based Mestizo meals, the corn bollo, a.k.a. tamale, has climbed the popularity scale to take its place as a Belizean favorite, making regular appearances on restaurant menus, in the mobile iceboxes of cart vendors, and at important events such as weddings, quinceañeros, and the Christmas table.

Differences in recipes and ingredients may exist, but the final product essentially looks the same. Well-seasoned meat, usually chicken in a spicy, orange-colored sauce called col is surrounded by a straw-colored masa made from ground corn. Ingredients are then wrapped and cooked in banana leaves -- or the modern day shortcut of aluminum paper.

That's why the dare had seemed pretty easy. All I had to do was prepare a tamale meal to win the bet. So what if my cooking experience was limited to anything canned, boxed, or frozen? I am a "survivalist". We survivalists don't fold to challenges. Did I mention that I'm a struggling student? Besides, how difficult could it be to prepare a banana-leaf wrapped corn burrito or variation of such?

Just a few days earlier learning to make tamales had seemed like an adventure. Even though Mrs. Vasquez, the medium-built frame of a sixty-five year old body, clad in genetically-tanned skin, had tried to dissuade me, I had insisted that I wanted to learn.

Right now, five hours into the "hard work", I was realizing that ignoring her disclaimers about tamales making being an all-day strenuous activity may not have been so wise after all. The excitement had long worn off, leaving desperation in its place. My only inspiration for seeing this scheme through was the guaranteed boasting rights, sheer determination, and the thought of those crisp bills adorning my currently empty wallet.

Since I had already garnered a few skills unto my almost-bare wall of culinary accomplishments, I had purposely shown up four hours late – long after the chicken had been bought, cleaned, seasoned, and cooked. Thinking that one had only to find a banana tree, denude it of its leaves, and wrap them around

the tamale's ingredients, I was shocked to be greeted by a large pot of banana leaves upon my arrival at Mrs. Vasquez's. It was then that she explained the process of preparing the leaves, removing them from their veins, cutting them into small squares, leaving an equal amount of larger leaves. When Mrs. Vasquez removed the steaming leaves from the fire, an aroma I had only before associated with tamales arose and enveloped me as did the novelty of discovery.

"This gives the tamales its flavor," I had cried out enthusiastically.

She confirmed, adding that the banana leaves also give the tamale its consistency, preserving the moisture and insulating the heat as it cooks.

"So where do I start?"

That question led to her cozy little kitchen where laid out on the table for my cutting pleasure were yellow onions, green bell peppers, juicy baby tomatoes, a celery stick, and garlic. Mrs. Vasquez busied herself, preparing a blender with salsa, seasoned hydrated noodles, an ochre-red seasoning called achiote or anato in honor of the plant from which it is prepared, cumin, and a few other ingredients. While she had welcomed me and a camera into her kitchen to document this historical coming-of-age event of my attempting a cooking activity not involving a microwave, rice cooker, or slow cooker, I had been forewarned that trade secrets must be preserved. After all, Mrs. Vasquez had learnt these skills in the kitchen of her family home in the Western town of Benque Viejo Del Carmen and had honed her recipe to perfection over a 50-year period of making tamales. Respecting her boundaries, I resisted the urge to turn around when she headed toward the stove or reached into a jar that hadn't been placed on the table.

Turning her attention to a football-sized masa soaked in water, Mrs. Vasquez started massaging the ground corn and forming a thick smooth paste to which she added her blend of savory spices. The resulting orange-tinted yellow sauce then took up temporary residence on the fire.

I stood next to the outdoor fire hearth, demonstrating the best stirring I could muster and squinting my eyes occasionally to avoid the puff of smoke caused by the light afternoon breeze. As proud as I felt about my circular motions with the paddle-looking wooden ladle, she gently shooed me aside. One hand gripped the distal part of the ladle, the other crept proximally towards the pot; simultaneously and effortlessly, Mrs. Vasquez's ripples traveled circularly, first in a clockwise direction, then in an anti-clockwise direction. Satisfied with her demonstration, she handed me the ladle. In my attempt to imitate her movements, one hand reached for the part of the ladle submerged in the pot but the warm air that arose from the heated col, sent both hands searching for safety at the opposite end. Two seconds later, the flame under the pot hissed in protest as I tried frantically to return the brown sauce oozing down the pot's sides back into the pot.

"It'll take some time but I'll learn", I consoled her sheepishly.

Back in the kitchen sometime later, I watched Mrs. Vasquez's nimble hands massaging the remaining masa, which she had softened with oils drained from the cooked chicken. While she concentrated on converting the grainy mass into a smoother mix, Mrs. Vasquez capitalized on the only skill I had brought to her kitchen. I bent over a cutting board, knife in hand, slicing a bunch of aromatic cilantro that would be added to the col.

Before long it was time for the highly-anticipated wrapping. The ingredients set on or near the kitchen table, I strategically placed myself near the banana wraps, but a short interview by Mrs. Vasquez revealed that I had no experience for this highly-specialized skill. Instead I was demoted to the position of "masa masher". My job responsibilities included placing balls of masa, the size of large eggs, between a small handkerchief-sized banana wrap and a plastic wrap, and flattening to what I believed was my heart's content. After a few messy attempts that resulted in the masa overflowing the borders of the iron "masher", Mrs. Vasquez patiently demonstrated the technique.

Reminiscent of working in a factory, we worked quietly. I flattened masa onto small banana leaves and passed them to Mrs. Vasquez. She placed the smaller banana leaf into a larger one, added meat and the seasoned col, then dexterously wrapped the ingredients in a larger leaf.

Two hours later, my biceps complaining, I announced that I had mastered the "masa mashing" and was ready to attempt the wrapping. By then only a few were left, but Mrs. Vasquez humored my clumsy fingers.

Cooking the corn tamales yielded its own surprises. I had thought that once wrapped, tamales were dumped into a pot of water and left to their own devices. Watching Mrs. Vasquez prepare the bottom of the pot with whole banana leaves and stacks of their fibrous veins inspired another "Aha!" moment. To the pot she added an unusually small quantity of water, more stacks of veins, and a final layer of large banana leaves. Then she carefully fitted the tamales in layers, filling the pot.

"It's the steam!," I energetically bellowed in my eureka moment, "The water boils and the steam cooks the tamales."

Her smile confirmed my sentiments. I had graduated, earning my bragging rights: Me survivalist. Put that on your hearth and let it steam!

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