

One Tamal, Two Tamales

By Michele McMurry

A TASTE OF SAN ANTONIO CULTURE

As the calendar turns December 1, many San Antonians are a good two months in on the annual making of tamales.

Just as 5000 B.C. women pre-made the nutritious, portable meal for Aztec, Mayan and Incan warriors to sustain them on their journeys, modern-day aficionados begin as early as fall, churning out dozens and dozens in advance of holiday celebrations.

Some accounts claim that the Aztecs also offered tamales to their conquerors, and so such goodwill lives on today through gift-giving at holiday time. During the late 19th to early 20th centuries, charming "Chili Queens" served tamales and other Mexican American delicacies to visiting writers such as Stephan Crane, author of "Red Badge of Courage," and short story author William Sidney Porter (O. Henry), from dusk until dawn at various San Antonio plazas.

Tamales are then, as told, part of South Texas vernacular. Those sadly unfamiliar with the packets of warm, steamy goodness, should also know that tamales are much more than a holiday dish (or, during other times of the year, an afterthought on a combination plate.) The tamal symbolizes Latino culture, its journey and history.

The seventh annual Tamales! Holiday Festival celebrates the cultural food icon on December 3 at the Historic Pearl, when some forty restauranteurs will showcase the tamal in its vast variations. In its sixth year, the family friendly festival centers around San Antonio's tradition with tamales, culture and music.

Depending on its country of origin, the tamal starts with a banana leaf or corn husk, that is spread with masa (corn flour dough), topped with fillings such as chiles, shredded meat and beans, and then rolled and steamed. Techniques



differ between Latin American cultures, with the ingredients varying just as much. In Mexico, for instance, the variance is evidenced even between towns and villages. In "Oaxaca al Gusto," Mexican cuisine legend and author Diana Kennedy writes about 16 unique recipes from the state of Oaxaca alone. Corn, domesticated from teozintle, originated here, and when transformed into masa, it becomes the essence of the tamal that then gains character and flavor from a smattering of chiles local to each region.

Truly a labor of love, tamales are without question time-consuming to prepare; but that's part of the allure. Not unlike a fellars' fishing trip being more about camaraderie than bait, the annual tamalada - a gathering of friends and family during the holiday season to make and enjoy tamales - brings together young and old, seasoned and new relationships, to bid the closing year adieu and usher in the new. It's a family reunion, a chance to soak up abuela lore.

Albeit, less ardent cooks have taken to ordering from local restaurants and factories, and perhaps there is argument to be made for the tradition of standing in line at one's favorite tamalera for the holiday supply. But the true tamal experience

happens when rolling up the sleeves to re-create a place and time when generations first united to feast from the land.

The Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center captures this authenticity during its annual La Gran Tamalada, taking place at the Guadalupe Theater on December 10. Here, the community comes together to preserve the time-honored tradition. Promoting cultural pride and lifelong learning, the event encourages adults and children to share in the hands-on process that is as much about the making as the eating.

The quintessential tamalada remembers the meticulous care that goes into the operation of creating a tamal. Each member plays a role, forming a ritualistic assembly line of sorts, that is inspired by Spanish guitar, whispered prayer and positive conversation (lest bad luck ensue).

The Cortez family, trailblazers of San Antonio's Mexican food culture and proprietors of four downtown restaurants, act as narrators and storytellers at the Guadalupe tamalada. They are fitting messengers, having first served tamales in 1941 from a three-table café, now Mi Tierra Café Y Panderia.

Also on December 10, the Witte Museum hosts La Tamalada workshop, kicked off by Comadre Gloria Solis, who shares her family culinary history. Participants will learn the art of making tamales, and prepare their own half dozen to enjoy on site or take home.

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THE GREAT TAMALE INCIDENT

As reported by the San Antonio Express-News in 1976, then Nebraska-native President Gerald Ford, in town for a visit, was given a tour of the Alamo at a reception held for him by the Daughters of the Republic of Texas. While there, he noticed a plate of tamales, took one and began to eat it, shuck and all. He also took it in good humor when someone stopped him, removing the corn wrapper.

