

Oaxaca Style Tamales – *Tamales estilo Oaxaca*

Ingredients (for approximately 8 tamales)

Banana leaves, enough to get 8 pieces,
 each approximately a 10x10" (25x25 cm) square
 3 cups nixtamalized corn flour (*masa harina*, such as
 Maseca™; not corn starch)
 3-4 cups hot water or broth (see below), as needed
 1 cup + 3 tbsp lard, at room temperature; or vegetable oil
 1 tsp salt

Fillings:

3 pieces chicken breast, preferably bone-in and skin-on

Water, as needed

¼ onion; peeled

1 cup cooked green sauce (homemade, or bottled)

½ cup red or black mole paste (homemade, or store-bought)

4 avocado leaves, if available (washed if fresh, or dried)



Prepare banana leaves: If starting with frozen leaves, place package in the fridge to thaw the night before, then allow to reach room temperature before preparing them for the tamales. To clean them, place a tall pot or colander upside-down in the centre of the kitchen sink, then set up a cutting board on top; wash the banana leaves, one by one, by placing on the cutting board, washing with running water and gently rubbing with a clean cloth, while moving and folding the leaf to wash all the surface. Flip and repeat with the other side. Extend a kitchen towel on a counter, and place the clean banana leaf on top; dry with paper towels, flip and dry the other side. Repeat with the rest of the leaves. The leaves are brittle at this point, so, to make them pliable, place a baking sheet on the stove over medium heat. Run the leaves over, one at a time, with the smooth side facing up; the surface will quickly become shinny. After a few seconds, the leaf will be pliable. Remove from heat and set aside. Do not over cook or they will burn and become brittle again. Cut banana leaves with scissors, to desired size, in this case, eight squares of approximately 10" (25cm) per side. Set squares and leftover leaves aside.

Prepare fillings: Place chicken breasts and onion in a pot, cover with water and cook, covered, for 35 minutes. Allow to cool down, discard bones and skin, then shred the meat and reserve. Strain broth through a mesh and reserve. Add one half of the shredded meat to a pot with the green sauce; bring to boil, mixing and cooking for one minute (photo left). Remove from heat and reserve. In a bowl, mix the mole paste with enough hot water or broth just to get a thick sauce consistency, not runny. Mix this thick mole with the rest of the shredded chicken (photo right). Set aside.



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Prepare dough: Place corn flour, salt, and lard in a large mixing bowl, then pour in three cups of hot water (or reserved broth). Incorporate all ingredients with a spatula, or hands, adding more hot liquid, as needed, to obtain a soft – but not too runny – smooth paste. Set aside.

Assemble tamales: Place three tablespoons of lard in a microwave-safe container; process until the lard melts. Set on a working table, along with corn paste, fillings, avocado leaves and banana leaf squares. Set one square on the table, with the shinier side down (photo below, left). Spread about one teaspoon of lard on the centre of the leaf, a 5×5" (12.5×12.5cm) area (photo below, centre). Take one eighth of the corn paste and spread with hands on top of the lard (photo below, right):



Scoop one quarter of the *mole* filling onto the centre of the corn paste square, leaving one inch around the edges of the paste without filling (photo below, left); fold and unfold the top third of the banana leaf, to separate corn paste, which will be partially covering the filling (second photo below). Place one avocado leaf on top (third photo below). Now fold the bottom third of the banana leaf over the dough and filling (photo below, right):



Fold the top third over to form a band (photo below, left). Close the packet by folding the sides towards the centre (photo below, centre). Flip to keep the sides from unfolding, to form an almost perfect square, or rectangular shape (photo below, right):



Repeat with the rest of the ingredients, to form eight packets, omitting avocado leaf for green sauce filling.

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Cook tamales: Prepare a large steamer by heating up water in the bottom pot, and lining the steaming basket with a layer of leftover banana leaves; or use a large metal colander that fits on top of a large pot. Arrange the tamales in the prepared basket (or colander), in layers, forming a pile (photo below, left). Cover with more leftover banana leaves, then with a clean kitchen towel, tucking over the tamales inside the edge of the steaming basket/colander, so the tamales will not get wet with condensation during steaming; fit lid on top, to seal (photo below, centre). Transfer basket/colander and fit on top of pot with boiling water, making sure the basket does not touch the water. Cook over high heat to make sure the water is boiling, then reduce to a rolling boil, and let the tamales steam for at least one hour. Always check the bottom of the pot halfway through, to make sure it is not drying too fast; if needed, add boiling water. Carefully open the pot and towel (photo below, right):



Remove one tamale; check doneness by unwrapping; the tamale is ready when it separates easily from the leaf; if necessary, rewrap sample, return to the basket and continue steaming at ten minute intervals. **Serve hot.**

