

A CONNOISSEUR'S GUIDE TO VINTAGE CHAMPAGNE

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FARE

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Inner Beauty

THE BEST CHRISTMAS PRESENTS FROM my Guatemalan grandmother always came wrapped in banana leaves. She would arrive at our home in Los Angeles on Christmas morning wearing a mismatched sweat suit and holding a giant stockpot of freshly steamed tamales colorados. A holiday specialty from her homeland, the tamales took the festive red color for which they're named from a recado, or sauce, of tomatoes and achiote paste (made from the pulp of annatto seeds). Inside each tamale was a pillow of masa (cornmeal) dough, red peppers, seasoned pork, and a lone green olive, which I always reserved

for the last, sublime bite. After Grandma died, in 2003, we realized with dismay that no one had bothered to learn her recipe. Like other Angelinos of Guatemalan descent who had lost their culinary matriarchs, we resorted to ordering our tamales from a local shop that sold them during Christmastime. Alas, they were nowhere near as good as Grandma's, and I resolved to unlock the secrets of real tamales colorados.

That mission led me, last spring, to the front door of María and Bartolomé Cay's modest home just outside the old colonial city of Antigua, in southern Guatemala, where I was studying the local cuisine. I'd endured

RECIPE

Tamales Colorados

(Guatemalan Tamales with Ancho Chile Sauce)

MAKES 10

These banana leaf-wrapped tamales are covered with an outer layer of foil, which ensures that they stay closed when steamed. Alternatively, the foil may be omitted and the tamales tied with kitchen twine. (Parchment paper may be substituted for the banana leaves, as well.) For a source for hard-to-find ingredients, see THE PANTRY, page 100.

- 1 cup plus 3 tbsp. canola oil
- 1 1-lb. piece boneless pork shoulder
- Kosher salt, to taste
- 4 plum tomatoes, cored and roughly chopped
- 3 cloves garlic, roughly chopped
- 2 ancho chiles, stemmed, seeded, and roughly chopped
- 1 small white onion, roughly chopped
- 1 tsp. distilled white vinegar
- 1 tsp. sugar
- 13 14" x 14" pieces fresh or frozen and thawed banana leaf, trimmed of hard edges, rinsed, and patted dry
- 1 tsp. achiote paste (ground annatto seed and spices); optional
- 2 cups masa harina (corn flour for tamales; preferably Maseca brand)
- 1 cup rice flour
- 1/4 cup capers, rinsed
- 15-20 large pitted green olives
- 1/2 red bell pepper, cored, seeded, and thinly sliced

1. Heat 2 tbsp. oil in a skillet over medium-high heat. Season pork with salt; cook, turning occasionally, until browned, 10-12 minutes. Remove from heat and let cool. Cut pork into 3"-4"-long slices about 1/2" thick and set aside.

2. To make the chile sauce: Purée tomatoes, garlic, chiles, onions, and 1/4 cup water in a blender. Heat 1 tbsp. oil in a saucepan over medium-high heat. Slowly add purée, vinegar, sugar, and salt; boil. Reduce heat to medium-low; simmer, stirring occasionally, until thick, about 40 minutes. Set sauce aside.

3. Heat a skillet over medium-high heat. Toast 10 banana leaf pieces in skillet, one at a time, turning once, 20-30 seconds. Transfer to a plate. Alternately layer banana leaves, dull side up, with 14" squares of foil; trim protruding leaves.

4. To make the corn-flour dough: Put achiote paste and 1 quart warm water into a bowl. Mash paste with your fingers to dissolve. Add masa harina, rice flour, remaining oil, and 2 tbsp. salt; whisk. Transfer mixture to a medium pot; cook over medium-high heat, whisking constantly, until dough is very thick and pulls away from sides of pot, 6-8 minutes. Transfer dough to a bowl.

5. To assemble the tamales: Place about 1/2 cup dough into middle of a banana leaf, form dough into a 4" square. Top with 2 pieces pork, 4-5 capers, 1-2 olives, 2 slices bell pepper, and about 2 tbsp. chile sauce. Fold sides of banana leaf over filling to make a snug rectangular package. Repeat process with remaining dough, pork, capers, olives, peppers, and a little chile sauce to make 10 tamales in all. (Reserve remaining chile sauce for another use.)

6. Place a large collapsible steamer inside a deep wide pot; pour in enough water for a depth of 1". Line steamer with the 3 remaining banana leaf pieces. Arrange tamales in steamer, standing them upright. Cover pot; boil. Reduce heat to medium and steam tamales, covered, until firm and cooked through, 45-50 minutes. Unwrap; serve tamales hot or at room temperature.

a bumpy rickshaw ride through the town's cobblestone streets to get there, going on a tip from a housekeeper at the hotel where I was staying. The Cays, she'd told me, have been making and selling

temala the leaves of other indigenous trees—including the sturdy mashan and the sibaque—are also used. Cay told me to shut off the heat as soon as the cornmeal thickened, which would indicate it was ready, and then brought out a pot of recado, which he'd made in advance so that the flavors would mingle. Some cooks add pumpkin seeds or tomatillos, he said, but his version was simpler (like my grandmother's), made with just tomatoes, bright achiote paste, and a few other seasonings.

We carried the pots of masa and recado outside to a long table, where Cay, his wife, and their four daughters began assembling tamales, first laying down a leaf—today they were using banana and mashan leaves—then adding some masa, a dollop of the recado, some pork, and a little more recado. (The olive-and-caper studded version, Cay explained, is reserved for holidays.) Finally, they folded the leaf around the masa, tied the tamale with twine, and added it to the pot for steaming. It took a few clumsy attempts before I got the knack of it and my tamales were declared good enough to add to the pot. I heaved a sigh of relief. I'd told everyone back home that I'd be making Guatemalan red tamales this Christmas. And now I knew I could. —Cindy Arora

FOOD FOR THOUGHT



"I aspired toward fasting and abstinence. But that alluring roast lamb is too tempting."

—Bushaaq (15th-century Persian satirist)

tamales from their kitchen for 70 years. When I explained my mission to the kindly man with salt-and-pepper hair who answered the door, he smiled, introduced himself as Bartolomé Cay, and motioned for me to follow him into the house's modest kitchen.

Cay handed me a huge wooden spoon and told me to stir a cauldron of simmering corn masa. As I did so, he explained his technique. Banana leaves are fine for wrapping the tamales, he said, but in Gua-



The author, Cindy Arora (left), learning to fold tamales colorados with Maria Cay at the Cay family's home near Antigua, Guatemala.