

ELISABETH LAMBERT ORTIZ
THE FLAVOUR OF
LATIN AMERICA
RECIPES AND STORIES

Prose and poetry selected by Nick Caistor

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Day of splendour
day of plenty
the harvest weighs
heavy on my lap.

Open doors my friends
doors and windows
invite everyone
into my home.

Give them all bread,
shelter.
Don't scare away the doves
if they fly down.

ROSARIO CASTELLANOS

CORN



CORN



When Christopher Columbus arrived in the Americas, he found not only an unknown continent but a whole world of food totally new to Europeans. Here, no one ate bread. There was no wheat; instead there was a plant which the Indians of what is now the Dominican Republic called *mahis*. This has come down to us as maize, or corn. Its botanical name is *Zea mays* and it is believed to have been developed by the ancient Aztecs about 5,000 years ago from a wild Mexican grass called *teocinle*.

Maize was more than just food to the ancient peoples of America. It was the focal point of religion which was built around the Gods of corn. For the Maya, whose empire stretched from Western Honduras in Central America and into Yucatán and Chiapas in Mexico, language, ritual, and the calendar were all based on corn. The greatest of the corn gods was Quetzalcoatl. He was a descendant of the great god, Kukulcan, who is said to have founded the city of Chichen Itzá in Yucatán, the ruins of which can still be visited today. One of his emblems was sprouting maize. Even today, maize is still important to Mayan culture in Guatemala.

Over time, maize spread from its Mexican and Central American homeland across North America and into South America, arriving in the Inca Empire (now modern Peru) by 1500 BC. Here, a different type of corn from the Aztec-Maya type was cultivated, with large, starchy kernels. It was the Incas who invented popcorn!

Much of the history of maize is unknown but we do know that when the Pilgrim Fathers landed in what is now Massachusetts in the 1620s, their survival was partly dependent on local Indians who were cultivating maize of many kinds, including sweetcorn. One of the dishes to which the settlers were introduced for the first Thanksgiving was *succotash*, a Narragansett Indian word. This is a mixture of sweetcorn and lima beans and is still one of the traditional dishes in the Thanksgiving meal.

Today, there are many types of corn to choose from. Yellow and white corn make the familiar ground maize meal, while Peru has a purple corn which, when boiled, gives the water a delicious lemony, flowery taste, marvellous when making desserts. There is also black, red and blue corn. Blue corn from New Mexico, famous today for the exotic colour of its tortillas, was sacred to the Indians who first cultivated it.

AZTEC KITCHEN

North American corn dishes owe a great deal to the Aztecs. In the Aztec *Nahuatl* language, corn was called *tlaoll* and from ground, unleavened *tlaoll*, the Aztecs made a flat, round pancake which they called *tatonqui tlaxcalli tlacuelpacholli*. In the interests of simplicity, the Spanish renamed the pancakes *tortillas* (little cakes) which is also their word for omelettes. This causes some confusion but less than using the Aztec name.

Tortillas have the distinction of being the only bread made from cooked flour or *masa harina* in Spanish. The dry corn is first soaked with lime then boiled to soften it and remove the skins from the corn kernels, which are then drained and ground. The soft, moist dough produced is patted out into flat pancakes by hand. The Spanish simplified the process by inventing the tortilla press, consisting of two circles of wood hinged together with a handle to enable the tortilla maker to flatten a small ball of dough between the plates. Many Mexicans and Central Americans still make tortillas by hand, but it is an art I never mastered. I have, and use, an old-fashioned hand press made of cast iron and a more modern one made of aluminium. *Masa harina* or ground, cooked maize is now readily available in the supermarket, so tortillas are relatively easy to make these days. They can also be bought ready-made.

In the Aztec kitchen, there were no starters, appetizers or hors d'oeuvre as we know them, but Spanish writers of the early Conquest period, like Bernal Díaz del Castillo, an Army Captain with Hernán Cortés, and Father Bernadino de Sahagún, a Spanish priest who arrived in 1529, discovered numerous tortilla-based foods in the market that could be eaten by hand. The Spanish gave these the imaginative name of *antojitos* which means little whims or fancies.

The immense number of savoury nibbles that can be created from the simple tortilla is quite astonishing. *Tacos*, for example, are tortillas stuffed with a meat, poultry, seafood or vegetable mixture that can be mild or made fiery hot by chilli sauce, according to taste. Fresh hot tortillas are either rolled around a filling, or stuffed and secured with a toothpick and then fried in oil or lard until golden all over. Once their excess oil has been soaked up on paper towels, the tacos must be served immediately. Tacos are Mexico's universal snack food, available in a thousand and one varieties in the many *taquería* bars. They are now spreading all over the world, often mispronounced as 'tarcos' when they should be 'tackos'.

Tortillas are never wasted. Stale ones are used to make *chiliquiles*, which involves cutting tortillas into strips and frying them, then heating them through in a sauce of one's choice. This is essentially a left-over dish and is good for breakfast with eggs, a light lunch, or supper. In addition, there are many tortilla-based regional specialities in Mexico. There are *quesadillas* which are unbaked tortillas stuffed and folded over into a turnover shape, and pressed so that they stay shut in cooking before being fried in oil or lard, or toasted. The filling may be simple or elaborate and two of the most famous are *quesadillas de flor*, made with a stuffing of sautéed squash blossoms, and *quesadillas de huitlacoche*, using the corn fungus which has a marvellous flavour.

Quesadillas de flor were the first tortilla dish I learned to make when, shortly after I was married, my husband was transferred to Mexico from the UN headquarters in New York. I knew almost no Spanish but I was eager to learn about the food so I took to the famous San Juan market and somehow conveyed

to one of the women market sellers my need for instruction. With a combination of sign language, and who knows what else, I secured both a recipe and the ingredients and carried them off to my mother-in-law's where I made authentic quesadillas de flor, rather to everyone's astonishment.

A lunch favourite are *tostadas*, tortillas that have been fried in oil or lard until golden brown and crisp, then spread with combinations of meats, fish and vegetables such as beans, lettuce, chillies, sauces and so on. The combinations depend on individual tastes as in all pre-Columbian Mexican cooking. There are other tortilla shapes such as *sopes* - boat shaped tortillas - and *panuchos* from Yucatán in which the top layer of the tortilla is thicker than usual, spread with mashed beans, topped with a layer of hard-cooked egg and put back in place before the tortilla is fried and garnished. The Yucatán kitchen has also produced *papatzules*, tortillas with pumpkin seed sauce. Finally there are the aristocrats of tortilla dishes, the *enchiladas* in which tortillas are dipped in sauce then fried, stuffed, rolled, put in a baking dish, masked with the sauce and heated through. Enchiladas make a great light luncheon dish. There are also a number of casseroles made with tortillas, soups and the curiously named dry soups.

TAMALES: FESTIVE FOOD

Tamales, as popular as tacos, made from the slightly different masa-type dough, are stuffed, wrapped in a dried corn husk and steamed. Here again there are a great many variations on a theme. It has been said that there are as many types of *tamal* as there are cooks! Tamales made with fresh corn cut off the cob called *uchepos* are a favourite in the Mexican state of Michoacán. It is said that the Emperor Moctezuma, before conquest, had a favourite sweet tamal, stuffed with strawberries and sweetened with honey. In the state of Oaxaca, tamales are steamed in plantain or banana leaves; in Peru, they are boiled in banana leaves, rather than steamed; in the southwest of the United States they are either big, fat affairs or tiny for serving with drinks. Brazil boasts sweetcorn and coconut tamales; Guatemala has *tamales negros* (black tamales) coloured with chocolate and eaten on holidays. In Nicaragua, tacos are often called *nacatmal* which means 'bad food'. This is a joke because the tamales are so good that one is apt to eat too much of them. The list could go on.

In Mexico, the tamal is festive food. When the family lived in Durango, my husband's grandmother, Doña Carmelita Sarabia de Tinoco was famous for her *tamaladas*, or tamal parties. Neighbours would help with the tamal preparation for three days beforehand. The party (any excuse would do: a wedding, an engagement, a birthday) would be held in the garden, which was large, with chairs and long tables set out buffet fashion, on which tamales were served, along with sauces, salads, bottles of tequila, quartered limes, soft drinks, beer and wine, fruits and sweetmeats. Maids with long plaits, dressed in long full skirts of printed cotton and embroidered blouses would carry in platters of fresh, hot



tamales from the kitchen and when they were eaten, more would arrive. Sometimes there was music too, a *mariachi* band, for example. A *tamalada* was always a very joyous occasion at which everyone ate and drank too much and went to bed after a very light supper.

The tamal turns up in modern guise in the Mexican ceremonies around *El Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead or All Souls Day) on 2 November, an amalgam of the old religion absorbed into Christianity. This is not a sad day but a special holiday when Mexicans visit their family graves in love, remembrance and respect. Huge bunches of a bright orange marigold, *zempazuchitl*, are taken to decorate the graves and at the graveside picnic, there is a special round coffee cake called *pan de muertos* (bread of the dead). This is decorated with a cross made of dough, baked in the form of alternating bones and teardrops with a knob in the centre. The dead participate symbolically in the picnic-feast. All through Mexico,

in cities, towns and villages, candy skulls inscribed with the name of recipients are sold. I found it disconcerting to be given one with my name on it. Nibble on your future.

The most elaborate celebration, with strong echoes of the pre-Christian past, is on the small, Mexican island of Jantizio in Lake Pátzcuaro in Michoacán. Two days beforehand the men of the village go duckhunting, using traditional harpoons instead of guns. The women cook the meat in a chilli sauce and then stuff tamales with it. On All Souls Eve they take the tamales and bunches of marigolds and a candle for each family member who has died. With the older children, they keep a night-long vigil at the graves while the men keep vigil at home. The following day the family feasts on the tamales, with *atole* (maize gruel), coffee, *pulque* (maguey cactus beer), beer and tequila and pan de muertos for dessert. It is believed that the dead take part in the feast in a mystical way during the night of vigil.

SOUTH AMERICA

Maize dishes turn up all over South America. In the Andes, thick, doughy pancakes called *arepas* are made from maize flour, using a recipe dating back to Incan times. Still popular in Venezuela and Colombia, I have enjoyed arepas in Caracas with the doughy middle pulled out and the remaining crusty shell spread lavishly with the local cream cheese. Bolivia has a delicious chicken dish with a cooked corn topping. Brazil makes a sauce of puréed corn; in Chile there is a dish of cranberry beans, pumpkin and corn, to name a few of Latin America's regional delights.

Alongside other vegetables from the Americas, such as potatoes, yams, sweet potatoes and cassava, corn has made an important contribution to people's diets the world over. It is rightly recognized as one of the greatest gifts of the Americas to the rest of the world. In Latin America itself, corn remains an extremely popular foodstuff, not to be supplanted either by wheat or by rice which have been introduced in more recent history.



Corn Tortillas

To make tortillas you will need a tortilla press, a small plastic bag, cut open and halved to form plastic sheets for lining the press, and *masa harina*, tortilla flour, available packaged dry and ready to use.

For 16 tortillas with a diameter of 12.5cm/5"

275 g/10 oz masa harina (tortilla flour)

300 ml/11 fl oz lukewarm water

1 teaspoon salt (to taste)

In a bowl combine the masa harina, salt if using, and 225 ml/8 fluid oz of the water and mix to a soft dough. The dough should hold together and be flexible. Test a small ball on the press. If it is too moist, it will stick to the plastic used to line the press; if it is too dry it will crumble. Add more flour or water as appropriate. Scrape off and return the test dough to the bowl. It does not hurt the dough to be handled. If necessary, gradually add the rest of the water. It is impossible to specify the exact amount of water, as fresh dough needs less water and older dough more. On a rainy day, even moisture in the air can affect its consistency. But with practice it soon becomes second nature and it is easy enough to add more flour or more water. The dough is very accommodating.

When the dough is the right consistency, line the press with the plastic sheets. Divide the dough into 16 small balls each about the size of a small egg, and press, one at a time to a thin pancake 12.5cm/5" across. Peel off the top piece of plastic and put the tortilla, plastic side up, in the palm of the left hand. Peel off the plastic and flip the tortilla onto a moderately hot ungreased *comal* or griddle set over a low heat and cook until the edges begin to curl (about 1 minute). Using your fingers or a spatula, turn the tortilla over and cook for another minute. It will be lightly flecked with brown. To make the tortilla puff up, press the top lightly with a spatula or spoon when the second side is cooking. It will collapse when taken off the griddle but makes stuffing the tortilla easier for dishes such as *panuchos*.

Stack the tortillas in a cloth napkin and repeat with the rest of the dough. When all the tortillas are stacked, fold the napkin over them and wrap in aluminium foil. Put them into a warm 70°C/150°F oven where they will stay warm for hours. Or, of course eat them as soon as they are cooked. To warm cold tortillas, pat them between damp hands and put over a low direct heat, turning constantly for about 30 seconds.

For making *tostadas*, the tortillas need to be slightly larger - 15cm/6" is a more convenient size.