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Food Memoir - Tortilla Panamenas

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Stephany Contreras
This fried corn delight is best eaten with cheddar cheese on top, pan fried steak and a nice black cup of coffee.
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The tortilla is commonly known as a type of flatbread used in the Mexican style dish, tacos. Like most Latino/Hispanic dishes, each country has a different variation of the same meal. Since my family is from Panama, the only variation I grew up making and eating was our version.

I have always been fascinated with my culture and I am eternally grateful to my family, for never letting this little Canadian stray from her roots. In order for you my reader, to understand why this deep-fried, crispy, mouth-watering, golden delicacy fills my heart with emoji smiles and the side of my mouth with drool, I have to share a bit of backstory.

The tale of the tricky tortilla

My mother has always shared the stories of struggle, my family endured when they first immigrated to Canada in the ‘80s. Having entered in Montreal, Quebec; and being a Latina of colour, she felt the sting of racism as she grew and swore to never let her children identify with her culture so that they would not have to go through the same
thing she did. She gave my brother and me, the most generic names and only spoke to us in English and sometimes French. I remember I always wanted to learn how to speak Spanish and I would get so frustrated that at school I would have to identify as ‘just Canadian’ when I knew that in blood ran fierce Latino blood. My Grandmother (Grama) did not agree, she made sure to only speak to us in Spanish so we could understand our mother tongue, and during the holidays and special occasions she would cook up a great big Panamanian breakfast, with all the foods from Panama laid out buffet style for our family and friends to enjoy. It was only then that I would eat my favourite golden salty treat but as soon as I reached for seconds

*poof!* the platter was empty. I would have to wait until the next holiday so I could eat it again. When I got a bit older, my Grama finally let me in on the secret recipe and methods to making Panamanian food. I loved the time I got to spend with her in her element, but little did I know the surprise she had waiting for me. One day I asked her to teach me how to make Tortillas, Tamales and Carimañolas; the food we would only eat during the holidays.

“Estas segura?” (“Are you sure?”)

She responded. “Yes, I want to learn everything,” I said. That same evening my Grama called us to come to her house. When I walked in everything was removed from her dining table and in its place were 5 giant 6L pots filled to the brim with boiled corn and one silver grinder that was attached to the dining table. My uncle called me over and told me to fill the grinder with corn and cheese while he manually turned the lever. With each turn I watched the corn and cheese become moulded together and then she guided me in making the corn cheese dough into a ball with quick hand movements, she flipped the soon to be tortilla back and forth and moulded a circle with her fingers. After making 5 pots worth of corn dough I thought we had enough. What I did not anticipate was my Grama secretly adding 5 more pots and
making us believe that we still had more to do. My brother pointed out that my Grama had a lot more pots than she usually does, we then realized she was playing us so we could make enough Tortillas for her friends and coworkers. Laughing at ourselves and my Grama’s sneaky tricks making Tortillas, Tamales, and Carimañolas became the thing that tied me a bit closer to my culture and gave my Grama and me something that we can do together. Now as adults, every year we all still meet up at my Grama’s house to make Tortillas and have a big Panamanian style breakfast, we always keep an extra eye out in the kitchen for extra corn pots, just in case Grama tries to trick us again!

2019’s Tortilla, Tamale, & Empanada Prep Day

Tortilla days paved the way for my mom to gain some self-esteem and no longer fears sharing her culture with us. She stopped letting bullies and racists have power and she was able to find comfort through making food with her family. I love to make Tortillas and I want to continue to share that love with my friends and loved ones, so much that I recently tried to impress my chef boyfriend with a meal he has never tasted before. A Panamanian breakfast! (for dinner) I do not own a magical silver table attachable corn grinder as my Grama does,
but I improvised and used a meat grinder attachment with my Kitchen-Aid Mixer. That idea went south real fast plus I did not boil the corn long enough and after frying them they came out a bit different.

Long story, short my boyfriend’s first tortillas were **very crunchy!**  
(Oops!!!) He says they tasted amazing. To me, that was a sign that he truly must love me because they did not turn out that great (I also forgot to add the cheese! Yikes)

Thanks to my grandmother, Tortillas will always be one of my most memorable foods and I cannot wait to see what other memories making tortillas will bring!

My Grama and I
## Ingredients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Ingredient</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 cup</td>
<td>Golden Hominy Corn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 oz</td>
<td>Queso Blanco (Spanish White Cheese)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 tbs</td>
<td>Unsalted butter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 tsp</td>
<td>Salt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 cups</td>
<td>Preferred frying oil</td>
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### ABUELA’S RECIPE

**How to prepare the corn:**

- Leave the corn overnight soaking in a pot filled with water, 2-3 inches above the surface of the corn.
- Rinse thoroughly the following day
- Fill the pot again with water, 2-3 inches above the surface of the corn
- Simmer the corn at medium-high heat for 50 minutes up to an hour or until the corn looks plump and thick
• Drain the water and separate the corn into parts (this is easier for the grinder)

• Let the corn dry for 1 hour

How to make Tortillas

• Add the cooked corn into the grinder with pieces of Queso Blanco (White Spanish Cheese)

• Grind the corn and cheese together and place the corn dough to the side until all the corn is made into dough

• Work the dough with your hands and add it all together

• Take approximately 1/3 cup of dough and make it into a ball with no lines!

• Flatten the ball in the palm of your hand to make a 2.5x2.5 circle tortilla, it helps to flip the tortilla between your hands to fix any lines or cracks in the tortilla (it should not crack or else it will fall apart while frying)

• Heat the stove top to medium-high heat and let the oil heat up in a medium sized pan, for 5-10 minutes

• Carefully fry the tortillas in the pan until golden

• Pat away excess oil and Bon Appetit!