



The Miracle of the Tamale Masa

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It was December 15, the day to make tamales for Christmas. My daughter Maya and I have made them for the last seven years, usually with my mother watching to make sure that we were doing it right. Before that, my mother would make them. This year we would experience the miracle of the *masa* by my mother who died a year ago.

The short version of the story is that our *masa* must float in cold water to be fluffy and light for tamales. In making *masa* for tamales for the first time at the 7500 feet altitude of Santa Fe, our little balls of *masa* sank like a rock. After trying with new *masa* and failing again, we finally asked my mother for help, and the little balls of *masa* floated up to the top of the glass of cold water. The long version of the story follows.

Making tamales is an annual ritual. We always made them before December 18, my son Nico's birthday, so that he could have them for his birthday dinner, and we gave them as Christmas gifts. This year we will mail them next-day for his birthday party because we are in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and he is in southern California. Years ago, I said that "tamales don't fly" when my ex-husband wanted some sent to him in Texas. For Nico, tamales fly anywhere.

My mother wrote the two-page tamale recipe in an old notebook that I treasure. The recipe is long, and the work arduous, with a day of preparation, and a day to make them. For us, making tamales is a time to recount memories, tell family stories, read old letters and writings from my mother and grandmother, watch old movies such as *The Bishop's Wife* or *One Touch of Venus* or *Milagro Beanfield War*, and listen to beautiful winter solstice and Christmas music.

When I was growing up, I wanted to someday have a "tamale kitchen" with large cooking units on the stove for the many big, old, family pots and pans, a big table to sit around and spread the *masa* on the *hojas*, and counter space to lay

them out before and after they are cooked. I wanted a fireplace to warm us, and windows looking out into a garden. I eventually had such a beautiful kitchen, including blue cobalt tile counters and a corner fireplace, lost it in a divorce, and spent the next 12 years making tamales in a variety of different kitchens. My mother's small senior apartment kitchen was the scene for many joyful family tamale-making memories. My mother watched and instructed us on the making of tamales, waiting to taste the first one out of the pressure cooker – after it rested, and declare it perfect. Later when she lived in an assisted living home, Maya and I would make tamales in my tiny beach kitchen, cleared of everything in order to use the limited counter space and a card-table, and call my mother with any questions or problems that occurred. She would always have the answer, and a family story to add. It was a joy to watch her eat tamales, savoring the tastes, and remembering Christmas past. The lesson I learned is that it wasn't the kitchen that was important, but the love of family making and eating tamales.

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We have to make 200 tamales, as my mother's recipe is for 200. Her recipe also calls for *masa* from a specific Mexican market in southern California – she wrote the name in the recipe, and we always bought it *sin preparada* because we added our own home made broth and spices. This year we would buy the *masa* in Santa Fe, along with the 10 pounds of beef roast, 10 pounds of pork meat, 10 bags of soft dry red *chilis*, and all the other ingredients. It costs a lot to make tamales, and for years my mother would put \$20.00 a month in a Christmas fund so that she could pay for the tamales. It was her gift to all of us.

I ordered 40 pounds of *masa sin preparada* from a Hispano *tortilleria* that makes excellent corn and four tortillas, and picked it up early in the morning. The *masa* looked different, somewhat gooey, but I thought it was the altitude of 7500 feet that affected the texture, and that the added broth and ingredients would soon make it fluffy and light.

My mother's *masa* must float. Every year we whip the *masa* until a small ball of rolled *masa* floats in a glass of cold water. Maya has accomplished that on the first try in the last few years. This year, the balls of *masa* sank straight to the bottom like a rock. Regardless of what we added to the *masa*, and Maya whipping it continuously, when we tested it, the balls sank. Thinking this must be Santa Fe high altitude *masa*, we made some tamales, cooked them, and waited to taste them. They tasted ok but the *masa* was not fluffy and light, more like thick and gluey. Batch after batch of them came out of the pressure cooker a disappointment. I was frustrated. Nico wouldn't have tamales for his birthday, and we had spent so much time and money without any tamales for Christmas eating or gifts.

They had made more for “*la senora de California*” making tamales for Christmas.

Thinking that I should have ordered *masa preparada* because of the altitude, I called the *tortilleria*, told them my problem, and they confirmed that *masa preparada* is best. I felt so dumb, as I should have realized I was in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and not Laguna Beach, California making tamales. It was late in the afternoon now, and they would close soon, so I ordered the last of their *masa preparada* made for the day – 12 pounds, and rushed to pick it up.

When I got there they had 20 pounds of *masa preparada*. They had made more for “*la senora de California*” making tamales for Christmas. They told me that in Santa Fe most people buy tamales already made year-round, as the Christmas specialties to make are *posole* and *Green Chile Stew*.

We started over again making tamales. Maya whipped the *masa preparada*, adding our broth and ingredients to make it fluffy and light. When tested, each of the 5 little balls of dough sank, slowly this time, but they still did not float. Maya asked, “What would Ma do?” We both simultaneously said, “Ma/Mom help us.”

We decided to continue making tamales, hoping that they would taste fine without *masa* that floats. As Maya began to spread the *new masa* on the *hojas*, I glanced at the glass of water.

The five little balls of *masa* were now floating at the top of the water. I asked Maya to look at the glass of water with the 5 little balls of floating *masa*. Looking at each other, we both acknowledged that my mother was with us. She was still instructing us on the making of tamales.

The 5 little balls of *masa* stayed floating in the glass of cold water for two days. Nico received his next-day delivery of tamales for his birthday party, and we told him the story of the *masa*. We all know that my mother really wanted him to have tamales on his birthday. Maya and I are grateful that my mother is with us, and we now have another story to tell next year when we make tamales for Christmas.