

# TAMALES

A TRADITION WRAPPED WITH LOVE

For centuries, tamales have been a symbol of familial unity across Mexico, especially during the holiday season. We sat down with one Waco family who brought this tradition stateside and learned how their time-honored tamales cultivate community, one batch at a time.

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ASK NORA GUERRA AND NORMA SANCHEZ, AND THEY'LL SAY THERE'S NO BETTER WAY TO SPEND THE SEASON OF TOGETHERNESS THAN STANDING SHOULDER TO SHOULDER WITH FAMILY IN THE KITCHEN MAKING TAMALES. THIS ANNUAL TRADITION CALLS FOR MORE THAN A RECIPE. **IT'S THE RITUAL THAT STANDS THE TEST OF TIME, HONORING A LEGACY WHILE SHOWING YOUNG HANDS HOW TO CARRY IT FORWARD.**

Family-owned tortilla factory Tortilleria Santana was established in 2012 by the Gonzalez brothers. They wanted to bring a piece of their home, Santiago, Mexico, to Waco, Texas. When the fresh tortillas quickly gained a good reputation around town, the four brothers recruited Nora and Norma (their aunts) to help them expand. Shortly after the pair stepped in, the menu expanded from fresh corn tortillas to a whole sprawl of homegrown dishes: burritos, corn cakes, empanadas, and, of course, tamales.

Nora leads the cooking and often finds herself lost in the rhythms of ritual. Fond memories flow as her hands mix masa harina into a subtly sweet dough that encases her unrivaled pork and chicken tamale fillings. Her mind wanders back to the place she first learned the trade of intuitive cooking, a home kitchen in the mountains of Santiago. She, along with her eight siblings, spent hours a day watching their *mamá* and *abuela* use muscle memory to transform a medley of ingredients into an experience worth remembering. "My mom would always tell me to taste everything," Nora says. "I try every filling I make three times. My tongue tells me when it's good enough."

Her recipe isn't written on a note card or filed away inside a recipe box. It's preserved through one thing: time together in the kitchen. "When the process begins, we start telling stories and making memories," Nora says. "Making tamales is pretty much the number one way to bring family together."





**“CUANDO COMIENZA EL PROCESO, EMPEZAMOS A CONTAR HISTORIAS Y HACER RECUERDOS. HACER TAMALES ES PRÁCTICAMENTE LA FORMA NÚMERO UNO DE UNIR A LA FAMILIA.”**

**—NORA GUERRA**

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## **TRY TAMALES FOR BRUNCH, THE NORA & NORMA WAY!**

**BUY TAMALES FROM A LOCAL SHOP AND REHEAT ON A CAST-IRON SKILLET ON LOW FOR 15-20 MINUTES, JUST UNTIL THE CORN HUSK GETS CHARRED AND SLIGHTLY SMOKY. THEN, ENJOY WITH A FRESH CUP OF BLACK COFFEE AND A SIDE OF SALSA VERDE.**



Although Norma didn't have much experience in the kitchen before joining the family business, she has a knack for process and procedure. Together, she and Nora work in harmony—and lead the other six (sometimes more) family members they share the kitchen with on any given day. “I’ve learned so much from Nora—more than I already knew. I didn’t come from a background where I knew much about this kind of business, but I’ve learned everything I know about the kitchen here with her,” Norma says.

Every month is a busy one at Tortilleria Santana, but the weeks leading up to Christmas are peak season. Last December, the family cooked and assembled more than 500 dozen—or 6,000 individual—tamales. This is where Norma thrives. She’s driven by deadlines and customer satisfaction. “I love when we’re all together, and the clock is ticking,” Norma says. “As long as the customers keep coming, we will have the door open.”

And they do keep coming. Many have even adopted the tradition as their own and bring tamales across state lines to share with loved ones during the holidays. But, even when the phone is ringing off the hook with orders and a line is out the

door, the process goes unchanged. “One of the things I’ve had to teach my family is not to turn up the heat on the stove just because you want the tamales to get done faster,” Nora says. “They’re not going to be good if you try to do it too fast and on extra-high heat. Life is very similar: You can’t do everything at once. It’s a process. You have to be patient.”

Of all of the components that make tamales at Tortilleria Santana worth coming back for, the force that makes them inimitable is love. It’s seen on the faces at the front counter and tasted in each dish from first to final bite.

Because, in the words of Aunt Nora, “If you don’t do things with love, nothing comes out right.”

