

# Family lore wrapped in a tamale

**By Noelle Carter**  
*Los Angeles Times*

**LOS ANGELES »** “There’s a rhythm to it, the way she works the masa,” Cynthia Gonzalez says quietly. Her mother, Dora, carefully stirs a large pot of masa for tamales over the stove. It’s smooth as custard and lightly fragrant as it begins to bubble.

Salvadoran tamales are Dora’s specialty. She’s taken more than 100 requests from family and friends already this season.

They are also tradition. Along with other family specialties, the tamales have been passed down, mother to daughter, for generations until now.

Cynthia, Dora’s only daughter, had never had any interest in cooking.

“It wasn’t my passion to be in the kitchen,” she says. “Since I was little, I was told women were supposed to be in the kitchen. And I was so against that. Why can’t women do other things?”

“I loved to write.”

A poet, Cynthia has been writing and performing her work since 2006; her first book, “Suspendidos en el Tiempo,” was released in 2010. A second book is due out next year. She was raised in the Vermont Square neighborhood of South Los Angeles, and much of her work weaves imagery from a sometimes rough childhood and her Salvadoran culture.

And much of her poetry draws from the brutality of El Salvador’s civil war. Cynthia’s father was an engineering student at the start of the war. With only one semester left for him, his school was shut down, the military targeting students as guerrillas. “They were killing all the students,” she says. Her father was eventually forced to flee to the United States.

Pregnant with Cynthia, Dora stayed behind, but only for a little while. Shortly after Cynthia was born, soldiers searched the small back room in which they were living. “Does a guerrillero live here? We heard a guerrillero lived here,” they said. The soldiers would take even young kids away. You either joined the military or the guerrilleros — whoever got you first. They even took my uncle.” Cynthia shakes her head.

Dora left El Salvador with her daughter, not yet a year old, in 1980. As the bus drove away, Dora remembers seeing bodies hanging from trees along the road. “I found my safety in poetry,” Cynthia says. “Food is carrying on the legacy,” Cynthia says of her mother. “Mom doesn’t want to share her stories — it can be hard for her — but she does it her own way through tamales.”

## Salvadoran Chicken Tamales

5 hours. Makes 3½ to 5 dozen tamales

### INGREDIENTS FOR BOILED CHICKEN

1 whole (3-pound) chicken, plus 4 chicken breasts (about 2 pounds)  
4 teaspoons salt  
Lemon, halved  
1 head garlic, halved crosswise  
1 tablespoon black pepper  
1 tablespoon ground cumin  
¼ teaspoon dried oregano leaves  
2 green bell peppers, coarsely chopped  
1 bunch cilantro  
1 bay leaf  
4 stalks celery

### DIRECTIONS

Powdered chicken bouillon, preferably Knorr tomato bouillon with chicken flavor

1. Sprinkle the whole chicken and breasts evenly with the salt. Squeeze the lemon over, rubbing the juice and salt into the chicken.

2. Place the chicken in a large stock pot with enough water to cover by 2 inches. Bring to a boil over high heat, then reduce the heat to a simmer and skim any foam that accumulates on the surface of the water.

3. Continue to cook for 5 minutes, skimming any additional foam, then add the halved garlic, pepper, cumin,

oregano, bell peppers, cilantro, bay leaf and celery. Taste the broth, and add 2 tablespoons bouillon, or to taste.

4. Simmer the chicken for 20 to 25 minutes, adding water to keep the chicken submerged by 2 inches. The chicken may not be fully cooked (it will continue to cook in a sauce later in the recipe). Remove the chicken and strain the broth, discarding the spices and solids. Set the chicken aside until cool enough to handle, and save the broth (you should have at least 12 to 14 cups broth).

### SAUCE INGREDIENTS

5 cloves garlic  
4 pounds very ripe plum tomatoes  
2 green bell peppers, coarsely chopped  
1 red bell pepper, coarsely chopped  
½ teaspoon black pepper  
½ teaspoon ground cumin  
3 onions, coarsely chopped  
Prepared spices and herbs  
Prepared chicken, cooled  
Prepared chicken broth  
Powdered chicken bouillon

### DIRECTIONS

1. In a blender (this may need to be done in batches), combine the garlic, tomatoes, green and red bell peppers, black pepper, cumin and onion. Puree to form a smooth sauce, then place in a stock pot along with the prepared spices and herbs.

2. Peel the chicken meat from the bones, discarding the skin and bones. Place the meat in the pot with the sauce, thinning the sauce if desired with chicken broth. Bring the mixture to a boil, then reduce to a gentle simmer, stirring and scraping the bottom of the pot frequently to prevent the mixture from burning. Simmer until the flavors are married and the chicken is fully cooked, 10 to 20 minutes. Taste for seasoning, adding 2 tablespoons bouillon, or as desired. Remove from heat and set aside until cool enough to handle.

### SPICES AND HERBS

1 (4-ounce) packet tamale spices and herbs, preferably packaged Miravalle's Spices, Herbs & Snacks

1 dried guajillo chile

1 dried ancho chile

¼ teaspoon annato paste or powder

### DIRECTIONS

1. Open up the packaged tamale spices and remove all but 2 bay leaves (the bay leaves can be discarded or saved for another use); if the packet includes a guajillo chile, disregard adding the chile called for in the ingredients. Place the spices in a dry skillet, along with the guajillo and ancho chiles. Toast the spices until fragrant, 1 to 2 minutes.

2. Place the toasted spices and chiles, along with the annato paste, in a blender along with enough hot water to cover (about 1 cup). Soak until the spices and chiles are softened, 10 to 15 minutes, then puree the mixture. Add water if needed to puree.

3. Strain the mixture, discarding the solids, and set aside.



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Tamales are one of the holiday food traditions made for New Year's Eve in this area.

#### TAMALE INGREDIENTS

2 to 3 pounds red or white boiling potatoes  
 3 1/2 to 5 dozen banana leaf squares, approximately

8-inches square (dimensions will vary depending on the size of the tamales)

Chicken and sauce

1 (15-ounce) can garbanzo beans, drained and peeled  
 1 (4-ounce) jar capers, drained

About 1 heaping cup drained green olives (whole or pimento-stuffed)

3 1/2 to 5 dozen foil squares, approximately 10 to 12 inches square (dimensions will vary depending on the size of the tamales)

#### DIRECTIONS

1. Place the potatoes in a pot and cover with at least an inch of water. Bring to a boil and cook the potatoes until a knife pierces easily,

about 30 minutes. Drain the potatoes, still unpeeled, cutting them into long, large "steak fry"-sized pieces.

2. Prepare the banana leaves: Trim any stem from the leaves, and wash if they are dirty. To soften, pass the leaves quickly over a stove-top burner (the heat will soften the leaf, making it easier to roll and fold), or run the leaves under very hot water (dry before using).

3. Prepare the ingredients to assemble the tamales. Have the chicken and sauce handy, cutting or shredding the chicken if desired into pieces. In separate bowls, place the potatoes, garbanzo beans, capers and green olives. Place a banana

leaf (smooth side up) over each square of foil, stacking the squares to make the assembly easier.

#### MASA INGREDIENTS

About 2 1/2 pounds dried masa

Chicken broth

3 cups canola oil, more to taste

Prepared sauce

Powdered chicken bouillon

Water

Salt

#### DIRECTIONS

1. In a large pot, whisk together the masa with 10 cups chicken broth. Place a strainer over the masa, and ladle about 1 1/2 cups sauce into the strainer, whisking the strained sauce into the masa (toss any solids back in with the sauce). Whisk in the canola oil.

Taste the mixture, and add 3 tablespoons bouillon, or as desired for flavor. Continue whisking in broth to thin the texture of the masa, along with additional oil as desired for richness. The final mixture should be smooth and have a consistency similar to ketchup.

2. Bring the mixture to a boil over medium-high heat, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon. Scrape the bottom of the pan frequently to keep the masa from scorching. Taste frequently, adding additional salt, water, sauce, chicken broth or oil. The trick is to keep the masa moving constantly; never stop moving, shaking

or stirring the masa with a wooden spoon. Once the mixture comes to a boil, it is ready to use in the tamales. The mixture should be thick enough to stay in a tamale when assembling but not too thick that the tamale is difficult to fold.

#### TAMALE ASSEMBLY AND COOKING

##### INGREDIENTS

Prepared banana leaves and foil squares

Prepared masa

Chicken and sauce

Potato

Garbanzos

Capers

Olive

##### DIRECTIONS

1. Ladle a spoonful of masa (about one-half cup) onto the banana leaf about a third of the way from the edge, and top with a little chicken and a drizzle of sauce. Add a slice of potato, a few garbanzo beans, a few capers and 1 olive. Fold the banana leaf over the filling to form a tube, gently tucking in the filling and removing any air pockets. Fold over the foil, then tuck in the sides, sealing the tamale. Repeat until all of the tamales are formed.

2. Fill the steamer with boiling water up to the measured line, and line the base with a layer of banana leaves. Start laying the tamales in the steamer, first along the outer rim and

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then in the center. Repeat, stacking the tamales in the steamer. Place a few banana leaves over the top layer of tamales.

3. Cover and steam the tamales until the masa is set, 1 to 2 hours (timing will vary greatly depending on the size of the tamales and how many are stacked in each tamale pot). To check for doneness, remove a tamale and gently pull away the ba-

nana leaf; if the masa sticks, the tamale is not done. The tamales are finished when the banana leaf pulls away cleanly and the masa holds its shape.

4. Remove the tamales and cool before serving.

Calories: 179 per tamale, protein: 5 grams, carbohydrates: 11 grams, fiber: 2 grams, fat: 12 grams, saturated fat: 1 gram, cholesterol: 14 milligrams, sugar: 1 gram, sodium: 401 milligrams.

NOTE: Adapted from a recipe by Dora Gonzalez.



DORIANE RAIMAN — LOS ANGELES TIMES

Dora Gonzales, left, and her daughter, Cynthia, prepare traditional Salvadoran tamales from an ancient family recipe in Inglewood, Calif.