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› On Masa: Techniques, Recipes, and Reflections on a Timeless Staple - User Manual

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On Masa: Techniques, Recipes, and Reflections on a Timeless Staple - User Manual

Your comprehensive guide to understanding and utilizing masa.

MASA

Techniques, Recipes, and Reflections on a Timeless Staple



The official cover of the "On Masa" cookbook, featuring a stack of freshly made tortillas.

INTRODUCTION TO MASA

This manual serves as a companion to "On Masa: Techniques, Recipes, and Reflections on a Timeless Staple," providing guidance on how to best utilize the book's content to master the art of masa making and cooking. Masa, a

foundational element in many cuisines, particularly Mexican, is explored in depth within this volume, from its historical significance to modern culinary applications.

The book aims to empower home cooks with the knowledge and techniques required to create authentic, high-quality masa from scratch and integrate it into a diverse range of dishes.

SETUP: PREPARING FOR YOUR MASA JOURNEY

Before diving into the recipes, it is beneficial to familiarize yourself with the core concepts and necessary tools.

Understanding Nixtamalization

The book extensively covers nixtamalization, the ancient process of cooking and steeping corn in an alkaline solution. This process is crucial for creating true masa. Ensure you understand the principles outlined in the initial chapters.

Essential Equipment

While specific equipment is detailed in the book, general items you may need include:

- Large non-reactive pot for nixtamalization
- Food-grade lime (calcium hydroxide)
- High-quality dried corn (specific varieties recommended in the book)
- Masa grinder or a powerful blender/food processor
- Tortilla press (for tortillas)
- Comal or cast-iron skillet



Demonstration of shaping masa dough for tortillas, a fundamental technique covered in the book.

OPERATING: NAVIGATING RECIPES AND TECHNIQUES

The book is structured to guide you through various masa applications. Each recipe includes detailed instructions, ingredient lists, and often tips for success.

Recipe Structure

Recipes typically follow a standard format:

1. **Ingredients:** Precise measurements for all components.
2. **Instructions:** Step-by-step guidance for preparation and cooking.
3. **Yield:** Expected quantity of the finished dish.
4. **Notes/Tips:** Additional advice, variations, or storage recommendations.



Chalupa

An oblong, ridged masa vessel

ROOTS: Mexico (Estado de México, Puebla, Guerrero)

FORMAT: Topper

COOKING METHOD: Comal, fried

In Mexico, the translation of *chalupa* is “small canoe.” Thus, one version of the chalupa (pictured) is a more literal canoe-shaped piece of masa, meant for filling a log with a long depression along the top. Another flatter version seems less strictly inspired by the canoe shape, often resembling a cross between a *sope* (page 199) and a *huarache* (page 177) or a *tlacoyo* (page 205).

So, the chalupa shape is quite varied and a bit tricky to pin down. One version from Puebla, *chalupas poblanas*, are essentially fried *tostadas* smothered with salsas and meats. In nearby Guerrero, *chalupitas* or “little chalupas” are little hand-shaped bowls of fried masa. And then there’s the infamous Taco Bell chalupa, which more closely resembles the puffy taco shells of San Antonio, Texas (page 187).

INSTRUCTIONS

Preheat the comal to medium-high heat. Roll a 1 to 2 in [2.5 to 5 cm] ball of Table Tortilla Masa (page 114) and then roll it into a log shape, 4 to 6 in [10 to 15 cm] long. Using the tip of your finger, create an indentation across the top length of the log. This ensures that your chalupa retains sauces and additional toppings later on.

Lower the comal heat to medium. Cook the ridged side of the chalupa for about 2 minutes. Flip over and let the second side cook for another 2 to 3 minutes. Flip the chalupa back to the ridged side for another 2 minutes. Continue cooking until cooked through to the center but still soft, about 6 minutes total.

For the best fried chalupa results, I recommend that you par-cook the chalupa on a comal for 2 minutes per side, then fry to golden brown in oil at 350°F [180°C]. These are best served warm.

For the chalupa *poblana*, refer to the *Tostada* recipe (Fried subsection) on page 213.

Storage: Enjoy immediately, or, if planning to use within the next 6 to 12 hours, let rest wrapped in a kitchen towel at room temperature. Cooked chalupas (without toppings) should store for up to 7 days in the refrigerator or 1 year frozen. Prior to reheating with a comal, a little bit of water rubbed on either side of the chalupa will help replenish any moisture lost during storage.

An example recipe page from the book, illustrating the clear layout for preparing dishes like Chalupa.



This masa tempura batter is the key to Empellón's fried fish taco, one of the restaurant's most popular dishes. The batter can be used on just about any host, from fish and shrimp to vegetables and tofu. Alex's secret to getting an even, flaky consistency from this masa batter is to run it through a cream whipper. Cream whippers work by using compressed nitrous oxide to aerate the liquid inside through a nozzle at the top. If you don't have one of these lying around, you can get pretty close by whisking or blending the batter for a bit longer, as you might to whip cream, for 2 to 3 minutes, until smooth and even.

Masa Tempura Batter

MAKES 4 SERVINGS (2¼ CUPS [540 ML] TEMPURA BATTER)

1 to 2 qt [1 to 2 L] vegetable oil, for frying
 2 cups [475 ml] cold water
 1 cup [125 g] masa harina, plus more for dredging
 ½ tsp fine salt, plus more for seasoning
 1 lb [455 g] shrimp, fish, or tofu, or 4 cups [about 480 g] thinly sliced vegetables
 Freshly ground black pepper

Fill a deep fryer or pot with at least 2 in [5 cm] of oil and heat to 350°F [180°C].

In a blender, combine the water, masa harina, and salt and blend on high speed until smooth. (If you're not using a cream whipper, blend for 2 to 3 minutes more.) Strain the batter through a fine-mesh sieve into a bowl and refrigerate until cold. If using a cream whipper, pour the batter into the cream whipper and express the batter through the nozzle into a bowl.

Season the shrimp or other tempura-dipping ingredients with salt and pepper. Pour extra masa harina for dredging into a bowl. Dredge the shrimp in the masa harina, shaking off the excess. Next, dip the shrimp into the chilled batter until fully coated and then carefully lower into the hot oil, making sure not to overcrowd them in the pot. Fry in batches, flipping halfway through, until golden brown, 3 to 5 minutes. Strain on a wire rack or paper towel-lined plate, season with more salt, and serve hot.

Another recipe page, demonstrating the versatility of masa in dishes such as tempura batter.

Key Techniques

Pay close attention to sections detailing fundamental techniques such as:

- Proper hydration of masa dough
- Kneading and resting times
- Cooking temperatures for various masa products (e.g., tortillas, tamales)
- Storage of masa and finished products

MAINTENANCE: CARING FOR YOUR COOKBOOK

To ensure the longevity of your "On Masa" cookbook:

- Store the book in a dry place, away from direct sunlight and excessive humidity.
- Avoid exposing pages to food spills; consider using a cookbook stand or protecting pages with plastic covers during cooking.
- Handle pages gently to prevent tearing or creasing.

TROUBLESHOOTING COMMON MASA ISSUES

Even experienced cooks may encounter challenges when working with masa. Here are some common issues and potential solutions:

Issue	Possible Cause	Solution
Masa is too dry/crumblly	Insufficient water; over-processing in grinder/blender.	Gradually add small amounts of warm water and knead until desired consistency is reached.
Masa is too sticky/wet	Too much water; insufficient kneading.	Add small amounts of masa harina (if available) or knead longer to develop gluten and absorb moisture.
Tortillas crack at edges	Masa is too dry; not kneaded enough; pressing too thin.	Add more water to masa; knead thoroughly; ensure even pressure when pressing.
Tortillas don't puff	Comal not hot enough; masa consistency incorrect; over-kneading.	Ensure comal is at proper temperature; adjust masa hydration; avoid over-kneading.

SPECIFICATIONS

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