

Facts Page

Let these food and cultural facts enhance your lesson.

Tamales are tasty *masa* (cornmeal) pockets made with either pork or beef. They are wrapped in corn-husks, steamed, then served on your plate with hot chile or salsa on the side. At first glance, they may look confusing to eat. The tamale's outer layer is usually corn husk, and that is definitely NOT eaten. It's there to hold the inner ingredients in place. *Tamale* comes from the Nahuatl word "tamali." The tamale's history dates back to at least the Aztecs in Mexico, long before the Spanish arrived. Tamales are traditionally served on special holidays, including Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and New Year's, as well as birthdays and weddings.

Tamales get a bad rap from some of us as being too time-consuming to make. However, today we can buy the parts ready to prepare, and that makes the process less work and more fun! Although the basic tamale recipe calls for minced meat in a masa dough steamed in a wrapping of corn husk. In some regions, the wrapper is a banana leaf or avocado leaf. There are over 80 varieties of tamales, ranging in size from three inches to three feet!

Encourage a community volunteer to demonstrate tamale making to your group, if possible. A short demonstration and taste-sharing might be a great way to widen the class's cultural understanding. But if tamale-making is not a possibility for the time you are allowed, how about making tortillas with the children? Here are just a few tortilla facts:



- Tortillas are a flat bread, made from corn or wheat.
- In Mexico, tortillas are often cooked on a thin, circular griddle called a *comal*. It is made of unglazed pottery and placed over the fire to cook the tortillas.
- The tortilla is very versatile – it can be warmed in the oven, steamed, grilled, fried, heated in a microwave or baked in the oven! Among native Mexicans, tortillas are commonly used as eating utensils. In the Old West, cowpokes used tortillas filled with meat or other foods as a convenient way to eat around the campfire. Today's popular wraps use flavored tortillas to hold in the widely varied "insides." Tortillas are more popular in the U.S. than all other ethnic breads, including bagels, English muffins and pita bread.

Support Information:

The Kids' Multicultural Cookbook: Food & fun around the world
by Deanna F. Cook.