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## ALL ABOUT CORN TORTILLAS



Since the earliest of times, thin cakes of corn have been deeply intertwined with the ancient civilizations of Mesoamerica. The term tortilla, derived from the Spanish words *torta*, meaning "cake," and *illa*, a diminutive signifying "little," is thought to have originated when a resourceful Mayan peasant crafted them for a famished king. The earliest documented instances of corn-based tortillas can be traced back to approximately 10,000 BC, marking a significant culinary legacy that has stood the test of time.

Emerging in the heartland of Mexico, corn, or maize, was domesticated by cultures such as the Maya and Aztecs thousands of years ago. Within these indigenous communities, the groundbreaking technique of nixtamalization was unveiled—a process of soaking corn in an alkaline solution. This process not only elevated the nutritional profile and flavor but also rendered the maize more responsive to grinding into a malleable dough. This dough, known as masa, became the foundation for crafting corn tortillas. The Mesoamerican people skillfully pressed the masa into flat, round shapes and cooked them on hot surfaces, creating the iconic corn tortilla.

Traditional tortilla-making techniques have persisted for centuries, with families passing down methods through generations. However, the 20th century brought industrialization, ushering in mechanized processes and expanding the accessibility of tortillas. The global popularity of Mexican and Central American cuisines further propelled corn tortilla production, embracing both traditional and modern methods.

In modern tortilla production, cutting-edge machinery within expansive facilities adeptly meets global demand. An array of corn varieties, including traditional and genetically modified strains, contribute to a spectrum of flavors and textures, with specialty choices like blue corn finding an increase in favor as of recent. Amidst the drive for technological efficiency, there's also a growing enthusiasm for sustainable and small-batch production, to safeguard traditional methods and preserve authenticity in this ancient food staple's contemporary adaptation.

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## HEALTHY INGREDIENT CONTRIBUTION



**Corn vs. Flour?** Corn tortillas stand as a pantry staple in diverse cuisines, notably the tables of Mexican and Central American cuisines. Low in fat and gluten-free, corn tortillas are fashioned from masa harina, a finely ground corn flour blended with water and occasionally other ingredients. This ancient dough then undergoes a meticulous process of pressing and cooking to yield the beloved corn tortilla. Their distinguishing feature lies in the lower glycemic index compared to flour tortillas. This quality ensures a gradual impact on blood sugar levels, making them an excellent option for individuals with diabetes or those mindful of their blood sugar levels. Some of the health contributions of corn tortillas include:

**Magnesium:** Corn tortillas are a good source of magnesium which plays crucial roles in the body such as energy production and muscle and nerve function. Chronically low levels of magnesium can increase risk of high blood pressure, heart disease, type-2 diabetes and osteoporosis. A 1-ounce (avg 6"-8") corn tortilla contains 20mg, or 48% of the recommended daily value (DV), of magnesium.

**Iron:** In addition to helping hemoglobin carry oxygen from the lungs to other parts of the body, iron also helps muscles store and use oxygen, reduces tiredness and fatigue, and improves both mental and physical performance. You'll find approximately 2% of the DV of iron when consuming a 1-ounce (avg 6"-8") corn tortilla.

**Calcium:** Calcium found in corn tortillas can help build, maintain and strengthen bones in addition to helping with muscle contractions, preventing blood clots, and maintaining blood pressure. A 1-ounce (avg 6"-8") corn tortilla contains 23mg, or 2% of the DV for a 2,000-calorie diet.

**Antioxidants:** Corn tortillas made from whole-grain corn provide many antioxidants including lutein, beta carotene, and zeaxanthin. These protectant antioxidants are highly beneficial to eye health, particularly in reducing the risk of age-related macular degeneration which can lead to loss of sight.

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## TYPES AND VARIETIES

Corn tortillas come in different types, each with its own special traits influenced by what ingredients go into them, how they're prepared, and the influenced of the region they come from. From street-taco sized and beyond, tortilla size mostly depends on regional preferences and culinary applications. The presence of a particular corn tortilla variety may differ based on location and brand availability. Contributing to the diversity of options, artisanal and local tortilla producers often offer unique variations and flavors.



Varieties mainly depend on the type of corn used to produce the tortilla. Here are some of the most common varieties of corn tortillas:

- **Traditional (White/Yellow):** Made from masa harina (corn flour), water, and sometimes salt.
- **Nixtamalized:** Made from corn flour that was first soaked and cooked in an alkaline solution before being ground. The nixtamalization process enhances the nutritional content and flavor of the tortilla.
- **Blue Corn:** Masa from blue corn, a specific variety of corn, gives a distinct color and slightly nuttier flavor.
- **Organic:** Produced using organic corn grown without pesticides or fertilizers. Appeal to consumers seeking products made from sustainably sourced ingredients.
- **Non-GMO:** Specifically designed for consumers sourcing non-GMO products, these tortillas are created from corn that has gone through no form of genetic modification.
- **Whole-Grain:** Higher in fiber and other nutrients, tortillas bypassing refined corn in the production process can be considered healthier for those looking to increase whole grain intake.
- **Flavored:** Tortillas made from a masa harina dough that has been flavored with herbs, spices, or other ingredients to enhance flavor and sometimes even color.
- **Gluten-Free:** Tortillas made from 100% corn flour are naturally gluten-free unless any additives contain gluten. Some tortilla-producing companies market their corn tortillas as gluten free as an easy way to identify no additives have been utilized.

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## SELECTING AND STORING

### Selecting Corn Tortillas:

- **Freshness:** Tortillas should be pliable and have a fresh aroma. Commercially produced corn tortillas will have a freshness/best-by date. Tortillas that feel dry or brittle or those that have a stale smell should be avoided.
- **Ingredients:** The best tortillas generally are made from simple, natural ingredients such as masa harina, water, and salt. Remember to avoid tortillas that have gluten-containing additives if you must maintain a true gluten-free diet.
- **Color Variety:** Corn tortillas come naturally in white, yellow and blue color varieties but are sometimes available dyed in other color varieties. Color choice depends on the dish being prepared and personal preference.
- **Packaging:** Ensure any packaging is intact and airtight. Any packaging that is torn or damaged should be avoided to maintain and ensure freshness.



### Storing Corn Tortillas:

- **Room Temperature:** Tortillas that will be used within a few days are fine to leave at room temperature as long as it's a cool, dry place away from direct sunlight.
- **Refrigeration:** Unopened packages can be stored in the refrigerator to extend shelf life. Once opened, tortillas should be stored in a plastic bag or wrapped tightly and refrigerated to prevent drying out.
- **Freezing:** For a longer storage option, tortillas can be frozen in airtight, freezer-safe bags or containers. To prevent sticking, small pieces of parchment or wax paper can be placed between each tortilla before freezing.
- **Moisture:** Any moisture coming into contact with tortillas can lead quickly to mold, so it is important to keep tortillas dry when in storage. Any tortillas that have been refrigerated or frozen should be allowed to come to room temperature to avoid condensation.
- **Date & Storage Guidelines:** Be sure to pay attention to expiration/use-by date and follow any manufacturer storage recommendations to ensure freshness and optimal flavor.

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## CULINARY USES

Corn tortillas have a culinary repertoire that leads well beyond being used solely for tacos, quesadillas, and enchiladas. While corn tortillas are used mostly as a vehicle for other ingredients and flavors, below you will find some additional uses for corn tortillas.



**Tostadas:** Corn tortillas can be fried until crispy and then topped with various ingredients.

**Chilaquiles:** Baked or fried corn tortillas topped with sauces, cheese, and sometimes eggs and meat.

**Flautas:** Corn tortillas that are filled with meat, rolled, and then fried until crispy. Commonly served with salsa, sour cream, and/or guacamole.

**Pastel Azteca:** A casserole layered like with lasagna but with corn tortillas instead of lasagna noodles. The casserole can include ingredients such as tomato salsa, chilis, corn, onion, sour cream, cheese, and meat.

**Huevos Rancheros:** Corn tortillas topped with fried or poached eggs and then smothered with a tomato-chili sauce for a traditional Mexican breakfast.

**Soup:** Corn tortillas can be broken and added to a soup as a thickener or cut into strips and fried to use as a crispy garnish.

**Dessert:** Corn tortillas can be fried, dusted with cinnamon sugar and utilized in a variety of sweet-inspired recipes.

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## FUN FACTS



- In Mexico, corn is referred to as “el grano dulce” or the sweet grain due to its versatile nature.
- Sometimes confusing dining patrons, tortilla in Iberian Spanish can also mean a form of omelet.
- Whether they are white, yellow, or blue, tortilla chip lovers unite on February 24<sup>th</sup> in honor of National Tortilla Chip Day.
- Historically, the typical four-person family of Mexican heritage will consume approximately 2 pounds of corn tortillas per day.
- When it comes to corn tortillas, yellow corn gives tortillas a slightly sweeter taste while white corn provides a much milder taste.
- In the year 2000, it is estimated that the US consumed about 85 billion tortillas, not including the chip variety.
- Street tacos are generally served with two corn tortillas to “double bag” due to potential tearing but also provide consumers with a second tortilla to sop up any fallen ingredients or sauces.
- In 2014, Taco Bell started a petition for Unicode to add a taco emoji to their next update. After 30,000 signatures, it was added in 2015 but the jury is still out whether it’s a corn or flour tortilla.
- The US tortilla market, including flour & corn tortillas as well as their by-products, was estimated in 2021 at \$21.8 billion and poised to grow to \$47.8 billion by 2030.

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## RECIPe

### Sweet Potato & Black Bean Enchiladas

Yield: 10 Enchiladas



**Ingredients:**

- 3 C. Sweet Potatoes, Skin On, Cubed
- 1 T. Avocado Oil
- 1 T. Ground Cumin
- ½ t. Smoked Paprika
- ¼ t. Kosher Salt
- 2 C. Kale, Chopped
- 2 T. Water
- 15 Oz. Black Beans, Drained
- ¾ C. Enchilada Sauce, Divided
- 10 Corn Tortillas, Homemade Preferred
- Sliced Avocado or Guacamole, For Serving
- Chopped Cilantro, For Garnish

**Directions:**

1. Preheat the oven to 400° F and position a rack in the middle of the oven.
2. Add sweet potatoes to a large baking sheet and coat with avocado oil, cumin, paprika, and salt. Toss to combine.
3. Bake for 20-25 minutes or until the sweet potatoes are fork tender and slightly caramelized. Set sweet potatoes aside and reduce oven temperature to 350° F.
4. Heat a large skillet over medium heat with 2 T. water. Add the chopped kale, cover and steam for 4-5 minutes or until kale is slightly softened but still maintaining its vibrant green color. Uncover, season as desired and set aside until assembly.
5. In a mixing bowl, add black beans, cooked kale, roasted sweet potatoes and ¾ C. enchilada sauce. Fold gently to combine.
6. To help with pliability, place corn tortillas directly on rack in warm oven for 1-2 minutes or until softened and flexible.
7. Pour about 1 C. enchilada sauce into a baking dish. Spread to coat.
8. Lay one tortilla down in sauce and then flip to coat. Fill the tortilla with 1/3 C. filling. Roll and lay seam-side down at edge of dish. Repeat until all tortillas are filled and rolled, adding more enchilada sauce as needed to moisten tortillas.
9. Pour remaining sauce over top of the enchiladas. Bake at 350° F for 15-20 minutes or until warmed through.
10. Top with sliced avocado or guacamole and garnish with chopped cilantro.

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## QUIZ



After you read through this month’s Ingredient of the Month, take this quiz to test your knowledge. In order to earn continuing education hours (CEHs) from the American Culinary Federation (ACF), the test must be completed through the ACF’s Online Learning Center. Seventy-five percent accuracy is required to earn one hour of continuing education credits toward professional certification.

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**QUIZ**

Question #1

What is the origin of the term "tortilla"?

- A. Derived from the Aztec language
- B. Named after a famous chef in Mesoamerica
- C. Derived from the Spanish words torta and illa
- D. Originated from the name of a Mayan king



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**QUIZ**

Question #2

Nixtamalization is a process involving the soaking of corn in an acidic solution before grinding.

- A. True
- B. False



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**QUIZ**

Question #3

What health benefit(s) help distinguish corn tortillas from flour tortillas?

- A. Lower glycemic index
- B. Gluten-free
- C. Lower fat content
- D. All of the above



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**QUIZ**

Question #4



A 1-ounce corn tortilla contains approximately 48% of the recommended daily value of magnesium.

A. True  
B. False

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**QUIZ**

Question #5



What distinguishes organic tortillas from non-organic?

A. Enhanced flavor  
B. Use of genetically modified corn  
C. Production without pesticides or fertilizers  
D. Higher salt content

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**QUIZ**

Question #6



How should corn tortillas be stored to prevent drying if they will be used within a few days?

A. Refrigerated  
B. Frozen  
C. Room temperature in a cool, dry place  
D. Warmed in direct sunlight

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**QUIZ**

Question #7

With both being made with corn tortillas, how do flautas differ from tostadas?



- A. Flautas are fried until crispy and topped, while tostadas are rolled and fried.
- B. Flautas are layered like lasagna, while tostadas are not.
- C. Flautas are filled with meat and rolled, while tostadas are topped with various ingredients.
- D. Flautas are used as a thickener in soup, while tostadas are served for breakfast.

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**QUIZ**

Question #8

\_\_\_\_\_ is/are a traditional Mexican breakfast consisting of corn tortillas, fried or poached eggs, and a tomato-chili sauce.



- A. Chilaquiles
- B. Pastel Azteca
- C. Flautas
- D. Huevos Rancheros

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**QUIZ**

Question #9

Historically, the typical four-person family of Mexican heritage will consume \_\_\_\_\_ of corn tortillas per day.



- A. 1 pound
- B. 2 pounds
- C. 3 pounds
- D. 4 pounds

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**QUIZ**

Question #10



What was the estimated size of the tortilla market in the United States in 2021?

- A. \$10.5 billion
- B. \$21.8 billion
- C. \$35.5 billion
- D. \$47.8 billion

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**JOIN US NEXT MONTH!**



Stay tuned for the next ACF Ingredient of the Month! Be sure to visit the Online Learning Center (OLC) to download a copy of each month's ingredient presentation. Don't forget to take the official IOTM quiz through the OLC to earn one hour of continuing education credits toward professional certification.

For more information:

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