

Pre-Columbian Uchepos for Modern Day Eating  
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For Mountain Democrat Publication Date July 14, 2021

Most Mexicans identify themselves as mestizos whose ancestry was largely made up of Spaniards, native people, and African slaves. Mexico's popular dishes are rooted in the best ingredients and cooking techniques that those cultures forged into what we know today as Mexican cuisine. However, there are lesser-known Mexican dishes like the uchepo which are of 100% native Indian origin. These dishes have been made for thousands of years and are the secret recipes of Mexican families. These tasty delights are never found in restaurant menus, not even on the secret menus and yet they are as Mexican as tequila and mariachi music.

So what is it? Tamal Dulce (uchepo) is a traditional pre-Hispanic corn-based dish attributed to the Purepecha people of the State of Michoacan, Mexico. Different regions of Mexico call the uchepos by different names. In the Mexican state of Jalisco they are referred to as tamales dulces and are sold by street vendors out of steamer pots. Some may call them tamales but they are not the same. Prior to the arrival of the Spanish conquistadores in 1519 Mexico had thousands of thriving tribal communities. The Aztec capital of Tenochitlan alone had a population of over 350,000! The region of Los Altos de Jalisco, Mexico where "my peoples" originate was populated by the Coca and the Tecuexe tribes. Although the Cocas and the Tecuexes are no more, the cultural traditions, the heirloom seeds that are passed down generations, and the preparation of authentic indigenous dishes continue to reverberate among their mestizo descendants.

Food preservation was vital for the survival of the ancient tribal communities. Two primary methods used for food preservation were dehydration and fermentation. Those two methods along with other food preservation methods are still practiced today. The UCCE Master Food Preservers of El Dorado County provide free classes where people learn how to preserve their food through the application of safe food preservation methods. As we saw last year during the Covid-19 pandemic, food scarcity became very real very quickly. Knowing how to preserve food will serve you well when times get difficult and food is hard to come by.

I grew up eating uchepos every summer. I knew uchepo season was upon us when my five siblings and I, sitting in the back of my parents' avocado green Gran Torino station wagon (you know the one, the one with no air conditioning in the middle of July) drove down I-5 watching the ears of corn being harvested. Making the delicacy was a communal event where several families gathered and each brought sacks of corn for the feast! It took everyone pitching in to shuck the corn, separate the corn silk from the green husks, and cut the corn off the cobs. The boys ground the corn for the masa dough, while the women assembled and steamed the tender tamales dulces. They are made of fresh corn wrapped in its tender green husk leaves with no fillings. You can eat them by themselves or topped with a dollop of tomatillo salsa and a dab of butter with a sprinkling of Cotija cheese.

Today's lifestyles do not lend themselves to the long hours of food preparation but that doesn't mean you should go without. I have found that looking at dishes that require an entire army of relatives to make can be made by you if you approach the recipe as meal prepping for the week. In this case you prepare it in stages during your week. A week say you? Yes, but sometimes less depending on the recipe! As the saying goes, "Something worth waiting for is worth the wait."

When planning food preparation for tamal dulce I keep in mind that I am using all parts of the ears of corn so there are additional steps that I take that are outside of preparing my main dish. When shucking corn, I select the green leaves to be used for wrapping, set the corn silk aside to dehydrate for corn silk tea, save the corn cobs in the freezer to make corncob jelly at a later date, and the corn juice that drains from the raw uchepos is collected and cooked down to make corn pudding. The recipe that I came up with has some short cuts but works well enough that my biggest critics don't notice the changes to the recipe.

Our special uchepos can be frozen for later use. A 4 mil plastic bag or safe freezer container can be used. Cool

before placing in freezer to avoid ice crystals. Your freezer should be at 0 degrees for safest storage. A freezer thermometer is useful to check accuracy. For the two recipes from the National Center below which are canned, however, be sure to follow exactly in order to prevent spoilage and/or sickness/ death.

Here's the link to the National Center for Food Preservation's corncob jelly recipe. (What does it taste like? It tastes like honey with a hint of corn). [https://nchfp.uga.edu/how/can\\_07/corncob\\_jelly.html](https://nchfp.uga.edu/how/can_07/corncob_jelly.html)

Interested in tomatillo salsa? Here's a link to a tested recipe. <http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu/files/282326.pdf>

Last but not least, here's my recipe.

### **Silvia's Jalisco Style Tamal Dulce (uchepo) shortcut Recipe**

Makes 36 medium size tamal dulce.

#### **Ingredients:**

10 large or 12 medium size ears of corn with the green leaves  
3 cups of Maseca masa for tamales  
2 ½ cups butter, softened  
½ to ¾ cup of regular sugar  
2 tsp baking powder

#### **Notes:**

1. Make sure that the tender leaves below the husk are green and fresh, otherwise corn is too old to use. The leaves are used as wrapping material.
2. The recipe lists Maseca brand Masa for Tamales. For my personal preference, it gave the best results, but this is an example of a brand, not an endorsement.
3. The quantity of sugar varies depending on the variety of corn used. If the corn is very sweet you can eliminate the sugar altogether.

#### **Day 1**

1. Remove outer corn husk leaves until you get to first layer of tender green leaves.
2. With sharp knife cut off the stem part of the ear of corn at the point where it begins to curve. Slowly remove the leaves while separating the cornsilk from the leaves. Roll up the leaves and place them in a storage bag or container with a damp paper towel to keep the leaves hydrated.
3. Put the cleaned ears of corn in the fridge.

#### **Day 2**

1. With sharp knife cut the corn kernels off the cobs without cutting any of the cob material into the corn.
2. Place corn kernels into a food processor and pulse until corn has a coarse texture.
3. Store corn mixture in a container and refrigerate overnight.

#### **Day 3**

1. In a large mixing bowl mix all of the ingredients except for the butter and baking powder.
2. Place mixture in a storage container and refrigerate.

#### **Day 4**

1. Soften butter and mix into the masa dough along with the baking powder until dough is fluffy.
2. Place dough in container and refrigerate overnight.

#### **Day 5**

1. Masa dough should be the consistency of cookie dough.
2. Take a green corn leaf and place ¼ cup of masa dough then wrap in the same way as a traditional tamale. (There

are many YouTube videos for correct wrapping method.)

3. Place in freezer or refrigerator until ready to cook.

**Day 6**

1. Place a clean piece of metal the consistency of a coin (mom used a couple of quarters) and place in the center of the pot. The metal pieces will rattle with the boiling water. They will stop rattling if you run out of water. Worse thing to happen is to run out of water! Add enough water to the pot the depth of your thumb.
2. Place a layer of leftover green leaves on the bottom of the steamer plate or rack.
3. One at a time, place the tamales vertically with the open part of the uchepo pointing up.
4. When done placing them in the pot cover them with at least one layer of green leaves followed by a kitchen towel. They should not be packed in. If you have too many then steam two batches.

It will take about 1 hr to 1hr 15 min to cook. It is best to use the tried-and-true method of checking by removing one from the pot and try opening it by pulling the leaf wrapper apart. If the dough doesn't pull away from the leaf, then it is not fully cooked.

Serve as desired.