

## What You Need to Know about a Flatbread called Tortilla

If the names sound familiar and lyrical—focaccia, pizza, tortilla, pita, lavash, pissaladière—it is because they live within the extraordinarily diverse world of flatbread, the oldest and most popular type of bread on earth.

Flatbread not only survives but also flourishes because of its simplicity: wheat flour and water, occasionally oil, usually salt, sometimes not. Thin in profile even when leavened, flatbread is much easier to deal with than classic high-rising yeasted bread dough. A quick roll, stretch, prod, or pat by hand, and a few blisteringly hot seconds on a baking stone, griddle, grate, or brick-oven floor, and that's it. There exists lovely symmetry in flatbread. Made and shaped by hand, it is meant to be eaten by hand. It is a quintessential hand food.

Wheat flatbread is not native to the American continents. It wasn't until the 16th century and the Spanish expansion to the Americas that conquistadors, Jesuits, and a special class of wheat for Catholic communion wafers arrived on South American shores.

On their way to what are now California and the southwestern United States, the Spanish passed through Central America. The Mexican art of preparing corn tortillas by hand bore a striking similarity to the process of making European flatbread. As the Jesuits directed companion crops of Spanish wheat into each new region of conquest, Native Americans adopted wheat flatbread as a counterpart to their own corn tortillas. Wheat tortillas were born.

But the wheat tortillas (better known as flour tortillas) that are so ubiquitous in American restaurants and grocery stores today possess none of the appealing texture and flavor that made them so popular in the first place. In an effort to reverse this phenomenon, Anson Mills last year began to grow and mill Sonora, a white wheat from colonial-era America originally used to make wafers. We now blend whole-grain Sonora with a small percentage of a South Carolina-grown flour called Red Fife Winter Wheat, a lovely, cream-colored bread flour that contributes strength and flavor. This flour blend, which we call Trigo Fuerte (Spanish for “strong flour”), produces authentic, phenomenally flavored flour tortillas as well as other exceptional flatbreads.

The Native American influence on flour tortillas also prompted us to explore the New World fats and oils used in cooking tortillas. Today, of course, flour tortillas are typically made with lard or, sadly, hydrogenated vegetable shortening. We originally developed our flour tortilla recipe with Anson Mills Trigo Fuerte and first-class leaf lard from an organic producer. The tortillas were, not surprisingly, superb. But research revealed that before pig husbandry came to Mexico, the finest native celebratory foods were cooked in handcrafted avocado oil. When we substituted avocado oil for lard in the identical recipe, we were surprised that the resulting tortillas were every bit as delicious as those made with lard. In fact, the layered taste sensation of sweet, nutty wheat combined with a subtle, smooth measure of avocado oil was truly extraordinary. Without a moment's hesitation, we moved straight to avocado oil, leaving lard behind.