

Spring Water Masa Tortillas**

Time: about 1 hour, not including the time it takes to prepare and cook the hominy

In our opinion, you haven't really lived until you've eaten real corn tortillas. And by *real*, we don't mean "soft" or "fresh" or "handmade." We mean the vanishing food-way whereby fresh hominy is ground into masa and pressed into tortillas. We rarely see tortillas made truly from scratch in eastern regions of the United States anymore, and we never encounter authentic fresh masa to make them. Today, virtually all soft corn tortillas are made by stirring hot water into instant limed corn flour, alias instant masa flour. Instant masa flour is to fresh masa what instant mashed potatoes are to steamed whole russets mashed with butter; what bouillon cubes are to slow-simmered chicken stock; what Nestea powder is to freshly brewed tea; what refrigerator pie crust sticks are to a buttery *pâte brisée*. In other words, not even close. And no wonder: the process by which fresh corn becomes instant masa flour is far from elegant. The corn is run through an industrial liming solution, ground up wet, dried, and milled to a powder. The process is so caustic it suppresses whatever fresh corn flavor the kernels originally possessed. And if the kernels were originally yellow, the process blanches them too. Tortillas made from instant masa flour carry a generic "tortilla" aroma with faint, residual scents of the liming process; a bland, slightly sweet flavor; and absolutely no character.

Making authentic masa flatbread—aka corn tortillas—from scratch used to involve hand grinding, hand kneading, and hand forming the masa before a lightning-quick dry griddling on a hot stone slab or, later, an iron *comal*. Today, a food processor and well-seasoned griddle can make this proposition much less laborious.

Tortillas produced at home from scratch masa made from real hominy corn steeped and then slowly cooked in gentle limewater are multidimensional in flavor. They are daily food and do not keep well, but their appealing textural grip, delicately moist interiors, and boundless flavor is worth the effort. Really.

**You might wonder why this recipe is called Spring Water Masa Tortillas when the recipe itself contains no water. The title emanates from our semi-fanciful rendering of the first hominy corn produced by Native Americans involving spring water and ashes (see Fresh Whole Hominy—link).

Cooking Notes

A food processor isn't going to grind cooked hominy into masa with a texture as fine as that made from instant masa flour. But you do want it to be as fine as possible—it shouldn't show a corn mosaic when you press it into tortillas. It must also be wet enough to produce steam and, thus, air pockets. If your masa is the proper consistency and the griddle temperature is right, you will be able to press and griddle the tortillas at a surprisingly effortless pace..

Initially, we rolled out the tortillas by hand between sheets of heavy plastic. It's not difficult—the flour tortillas we developed recently, for instance, are trickier to roll. But after making the recipe multiple times, we broke down and ordered a tortilla press. There was no looking back.

The addition of fresh corn solids and corn milk came to us as a way of introducing a mild sweetness into the tortillas, along with some moisture. You may opt to skip the fresh corn and use hot water instead. Lime makes the starches in the corn extremely sticky. After you transfer the final batch of warm masa from the food proces-

Equipment Mise en Place

For this recipe you will need a box grater; a fine mesh strainer; a food processor; a rubber spatula; a medium mixing bowl; and a well-seasoned 10-inch square or round griddle (preferably cast-iron) or a heavy-bottomed 10-inch nonstick skillet. You will also need a tortilla press and a quart-size zipper-lock bag or a rolling pin and a gallon-size zipper-lock bag; a pair of scissors; a digital scale; a pastry brush; and a long metal spatula for flipping the tortillas. To keep the tortillas supple as they come off the griddle, you will need a plate lined with a damp clean kitchen towel.

Ingredients

1 ear fresh sweet corn, shucked, *or* 4 teaspoons hot water

1 recipe Fresh Whole Hominy, link just cooked, flushed of pericarp, and *still hot*

1/2 teaspoon fine sea salt

Vegetable oil

Directions

1. If using fresh corn, grate the ear of corn on the large holes of a box grater set over a plate to catch the pulp. Strain the pulp through a fine mesh strainer set over a small bowl. Set the solids in the strainer and the corn milk aside.
2. Add half of the hot hominy and 1/4 teaspoon salt to a food processor and process until very fine. Stop the food processor at intervals, and, using a rubber spatula, scrape up the more finely processed dough, now called masa, from the bottom of the bowl and push down the coarser masa near the top of the bowl. Repeat the stop-and-start processing, using a rubber spatula to manipulate the masa, until the masa begins to chase itself around the bowl. The idea is to get the masa as fine as possible. Uncover the food processor and feel the masa; it should be stiff and sticky. Add 1 tablespoon corn solids from the strainer and 2 teaspoons corn milk (or hot water if you're not using fresh corn) and process until combined. Feel the masa again; it should feel slightly wetter. Dampen your hands and very carefully scrape the masa out of the food-processor bowl into a medium mixing bowl. Remove the blade and, using the rubber spatula, scrape the masa clinging to it and to the inside of the food-processor bowl into the mixing bowl. Repeat with the remaining hominy, salt, and fresh corn solids and milk (or hot water), adding the resulting masa to the mixing bowl. Knead the masa lightly in the bowl to combine the 2 batches. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap and let the masa rest and hydrate for about 15 minutes. Meanwhile, soak the food-processor bowl and parts in cold water in the sink.
3. Heat a well-seasoned 10-inch square or round griddle (preferably cast-iron) or a

sor to a mixing bowl, soak the workbowl, blade, and lid in *cold* water right away. Cold water will loosen the sticky masa; hot water will just make it worse.

In the event you have leftover tortillas, bake them up crisp, then crumble them into soups or stews. There's your *real* tortilla soup.

heavy-bottomed 10-inch nonstick skillet over medium-high heat. With scissors, cut away the top of a quart-size zipper-lock bag (if you're using a tortilla press to form the tortillas) or gallon-size zipper-lock bag (if you're using a rolling pin) just below the zipper. Cut along the 2 side seams and the bottom, creating 2 squares of plastic.

4. Divide the masa into 14 or 15 pieces, each one weighing about 1.3 ounces. Roll each piece between your palms into a ball; it should be about the size of golf ball. (The size of the masa balls is important. If they are too small, once pressed, the tortillas may be too thin; if too large, they may be too thick.) Set the balls on a baking sheet and cover lightly with plastic wrap. Brush the griddle lightly with oil and blot the excess with paper towels.

5. *If using a tortilla press:* Open the press, place a plastic sheet on the bottom plate, and brush it very lightly with oil. Center a masa ball on the plate and flatten it with the palm of your hand. Brush the masa very lightly with oil and cover with the second plastic sheet. Close the tortilla press. (You don't have to bear down on it; it's perfectly capable of pressing a tortilla without much pressure.) Open the press, then lightly moisten your hands with water and pull off the top layer of plastic. Lift the bottom sheet of plastic and invert the tortilla onto your damp palm. Release the tortilla onto the hot griddle. If the griddle is the right temperature, the tortilla will sizzle softly. After about 10 seconds it should begin to puff in places. After about 20 seconds, use a long metal spatula to loosen the tortilla. Flip the tortilla when it is lightly golden and spotty brown and continue to cook until golden and spotty brown on the second side, about 20 seconds (You'll want to rewarm the tortillas just before serving, so don't overcook them at this point.) Place the tortilla on a plate lined with a damp clean kitchen towel and fold the towel over the tortilla. Repeat with the remaining masa balls, stacking the tortillas on the plate and keeping them covered.

6. *If using a rolling pin:* Place a sheet of plastic on the work surface and brush it lightly with oil. Center a masa ball on the plastic and flatten it with the palm of your hand. Brush the masa very lightly with oil and cover with the second plastic sheet. Using the rolling pin, roll the ball into a 6-inch round of even thickness. Lightly moisten your hands with water and pull off the top layer of plastic. Lift the bottom sheet of plastic and invert the tortilla onto your damp palm. Release the tortilla onto the hot griddle. If the griddle is the right temperature, the tortilla will sizzle softly. After about 10 seconds it should begin to puff in places. After about 20 seconds, use a long metal spatula to loosen the tortilla. Flip the tortilla when it is lightly golden and spotty brown and continue to cook until golden and spotty brown on the second side, about 20 seconds. (You'll want to rewarm the tortillas just before serving, so don't overcook them at this point.) Place the tortilla on a plate lined with a damp clean kitchen towel and fold the towel over the tortilla. Repeat with the remaining masa balls, stacking the tortillas on the plate and keeping them covered.

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Note: Corn tortillas are considered daily food, to be prepared and consumed the day they are made. Fresh tortillas may be re-warmed in a dry pan or griddle before rolling or filling. (Once refrigerated, they will crack rather than bend when folded or rolled.) Leftover tortillas may be cut into quarters, brushed or sprayed with vegetable or olive oil and crisped in a 300 degree oven on a dry sheet pan.

Makes fourteen or fifteen 5-inch tortillas