

Handmade Corn Tortillas – Comfort du Jour

Once you get a feel for making corn tortillas from scratch, you'll wonder why you ever settled for store-bought tortillas and all their strange preservatives. Authentic corn tortillas only need the simplest of ingredients. Here are my tips for getting them right, with or without a tortilla press!

INGREDIENTS FOR BASIC TORTILLAS

Makes 8 tortillas

1 cup masa harina (I like Maseca brand in white, yellow or blue)
2/3 cup very warm water (or 50/50 mix of water and puree of choice)
A pinch of kosher salt

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Combine all ingredients in a bowl and stir until liquid is absorbed. Knead the dough ball a few times until mixture is smooth, soft and uniform in texture. Cover the dough snugly with plastic wrap and allow it rest at least 20 minutes.
2. Preheat a cast-iron skillet or griddle over medium-high heat, about 375° F.
3. Divide masa dough into 8 equal pieces, then roll each piece into a smooth ball. Keep the dough balls covered to prevent drying out as you shape and press them into flat tortillas.
4. Place a dough ball between two squares of plastic wrap, or cut apart a zip-top bag. The thicker plastic gives better results. Use the tortilla press to slowly flatten the dough to a disc that is about 5 to 6 inches across. Alternatively, press the flat bottom of a clear glass bowl evenly over the surface of the dough ball (between the plastic layers) until the tortilla is about 5 inches across.
5. Carefully peel one side of the plastic away from the tortilla, then turn the tortilla out into your hand and peel away the second piece of plastic. Be prepared to ruin a few, but don't panic if you do (see Tips below)!
6. Turn the tortilla onto the preheated griddle and cook the first side 60 to 90 seconds, until the edges look dry and steam is emerging from underneath. Use a spatula to flip the tortilla over and cook the second side about 60 seconds.
7. Transfer the hot tortilla to a plate lined with a clean kitchen towel. Fold the towel over to keep them warm as you finish the remaining tortillas.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS (A.K.A. "WHAT I LEARNED THE HARD WAY!")

Follow the same guidelines for measuring the masa harina as I offer for measuring flour—fluff it up, sprinkle over the measuring cup to overflowing, and then level it off. If you dig a measuring cup directly into the masa bag, you'll end up with too much and the dough will be dry. The masa should be soft and loose in the measuring cup, not packed tight.

Use warm water, not cold, to mix with the masa flour. I've found that the warm water is more easily absorbed and helps to create better dough. Knead the dough until it is soft and smooth, which is usually only a minute or two, though longer kneading will not cause any harm.

Don't skip the rest time after mixing the masa. This gives enough time for the masa to hydrate fully. If you rush this step, you may find the dough crumbly or sticky (or both) during pressing.

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When you roll the dough into balls, it should hold together easily without sticking to your hands, and only showing slight cracks. Trust your instinct; if it feels too dry, wet your hands and knead a few more times. If it's sticky, lightly dust it with additional masa flour, then knead and rest it again.

I have found a modified zip-top bag more useful than plastic wrap for pressing the tortillas. Use a freezer bag if possible, as it is thicker than a sandwich bag. Cut off the zipper top entirely, and cut down the sides, leaving only the bottom of the bag attached.

Shape the sections of dough into balls all at once, and then place one dough ball inside the zip top bag layers. Keep the other dough balls covered with a damp paper towel or plastic wrap so they don't dry out. When placing the dough ball in the tortilla press, arrange it slightly off center toward the hinge side. Close the press and use the lever to apply gentle pressure. If the tortilla is noticeably thinner on one edge, turn it and gently press again to even it out. Until you get used to this process, it may help to make slightly thicker tortillas. If you are using a flat-bottomed dish to press them, press your hands on it in a rocking motion all the way around until the tortilla is about 5 inches across. It's helpful to have a clear dish so you can see the progress.

Focus on peeling the *plastic* away from the dough, not the other way around, and accept that you may find the first few tries unsuccessful. Hold the plastic bag flat in one hand, and use the other hand to peel, keeping the plastic at a sharp angle to the tortilla. Don't peel straight up or the tortilla will tear. If the tortilla falls apart, just scrape it into a ball and try again. There is no gluten in corn tortillas, so they will not get tough from extra handling. If the dough feels dry after a few failed attempts, wet your hands and knead it a bit.

The initial cooking of the tortillas should be on a dry skillet or pancake griddle. If you want to fry them later to suit a dish you are making, that will be a separate process. Think of it as a form of bread, which must be baked before it can be toasted or grilled.

Give your griddle or cast-iron skillet enough time to pre-heat, and plan to let your first tortilla be a test. It may take some practice to get the right temperature on your stove or griddle. Be ready to flip them when they look "right," not by the clock, but aim for somewhere between 60 and 90 seconds.

Have a plate ready, lined with a clean kitchen towel. You'll want to keep the freshly cooked tortillas wrapped as you complete the rest of the batch—for warmth and also for softness.

If you decide to use pureed vegetables to make flavored tortillas, start with a liquid mixture that is at least 50% water. Pureed vegetables such as spinach or pumpkin are wet, but there is also fiber in them that may change the consistency of the masa. I recommend making basic tortillas a few times to get used to it. As you gain experience making them, you will instinctively know what the dough should feel like, and how to best adjust ratios of other ingredients to produce fun colors and flavors. Here are a few of my favorites: spinach, black bean, pumpkin, cilantro, roasted garlic.