

Tamales: How Corn Becomes Culture

For Upper Elementary Classrooms
→ Adaptable for Early Elementary



CelebratePlanetEarth.org

Introduction:

Welcome to our curriculum designed to bridge the gap between land, food, and people. Our goal is to foster a deep understanding and appreciation of the intricate connections between what we eat and the health of our planet. Through these materials, students will explore the cultural and historical significance of foods, cultivating a love for the natural world, ecology, sustainable agriculture, and food justice.

We aim to provide a culturally sustaining pedagogy that fosters a sense of belonging in students, valuing and connecting their families and cultures to the classroom. This curriculum promotes social-emotional learning, creating opportunities for students to build strong relationships and a sense of community within the classroom.

Goals of These Materials:

Generate Awareness: Highlight the vital link between land, food, and people.

Demonstrate Connections: Show the relationship between eating habits and the health of our planet.

Cultural and Historical Value: Explore the cultural and historical significance of different foods.

Cultivate Interest: Inspire curiosity about the natural world, ecology, sustainable agriculture, and food justice.

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: Provide educational practices that resonate with students' cultural backgrounds, fostering a sense of belonging.

Family and Cultural Connection: Encourage students to connect their family traditions and cultures to their learning experiences.

Social Emotional Learning: Promote opportunities for students to strengthen relationships and build a cohesive classroom community.



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Acknowledgments:

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About the authors:

Josefina Navarro is a dedicated linguistic activist and educator, born in San Salvador de Jujuy, Argentina. She has devoted her career to promoting and teaching Quechua, an indigenous language of South America. Josefina serves as an adjunct professor at the National University of Jujuy and teaches Santiago Quechua at the University of Buenos Aires' Language Laboratory. Her work includes creating educational projects like ESI in Quechua and co-authoring engaging materials for teaching Quechua as a second language. Her research focuses on Andean thought, intercultural philosophy, teaching indigenous languages, and addressing linguistic racism.

Isabella Ross has a background in cultural anthropology with a passion for food, ethnobotany, and culturally sustaining pedagogy. This project was inspired by her work bringing Celebrate Planet Earth's programs to Northern New Mexico Public School students. Isabella's love for diverse styles of tamales has been shaped by her experiences living in Jujuy, Argentina, Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Los Angeles, California.

We hope this curriculum enriches your classroom experience, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of the connections between food, culture, and the environment.



Part One: Icebreaker Game

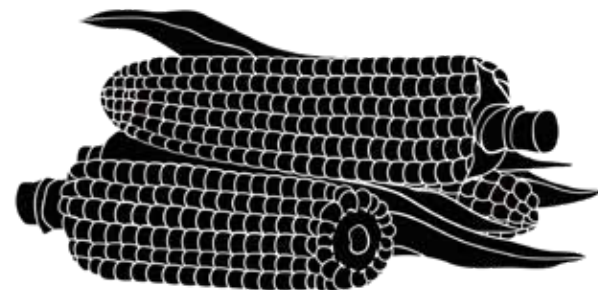
Overview: A collaborative ice breaker activity to get students thinking about food, community, and being comfortable with difference.

Benefits: Students will get to learn more about one another and bond through collaboration, active listening, and play. Students will begin reflecting on their relationship to what they eat as well as similarities and differences of what their classmates eat.

Grade levels: 3-6

Time needed: 1 hour

Materials: Sheet or blanket



Activity:

- Set ground rules: Bring students into a circle to set ground rules. Start the activity with a reminder that everyone has different food preferences. Just like no favorite color is 'wrong,' no food preference is right or wrong. Some preferences may be personal (like having a sweet tooth), and some may be familial (a special family recipe) or cultural (for example, many cultures eat salty foods or even soups for breakfast and pancakes are often considered a dessert!). Communicate to students that they can feel safe sharing their preferences and that teasing and negative comments will not be tolerated.
- In a circle, each student must say the name of their favorite food out loud. The rest of the participants must listen to and memorize the response of each of their classmates.
- Repeat the round two or three times so that everyone has a chance to remember the answers.
- Then, divide the group into two lines that face each other.
- Between these lines, the teacher and a volunteer will hold a sheet or blanket so that the students in each group will not be able to see the students in the other group.
- On the count of three, the teacher and the volunteer will quickly lower the cloth and the students at the front of

continued

each line will say the favorite food of the classmate in front of them out loud. Whoever correctly names their partner's food the fastest will win the round. Their partner will then change teams, joining the winner's team. The teacher and the volunteer will raise the cloth again and each team chooses another person to be first in line and play. Repeat this several times, so that students will rotate and exchange teams. Once each student has guessed at least once, you can end the game. The team with the most students will win.

Once the game is over, return to the circle and discuss some questions:

- *How did it feel sharing your favorite food with your classmates?*
- *Do you know what cultures or places your favorite foods are from?*
- *Do you and your family purchase these foods or prepare them at home?*
- *If they are prepared at home, who participates in the preparation?*
- *What ingredients are your favorite foods prepared with?*
- *Are any of the foods you mentioned prepared with corn?*

Part Two: Explore the Image, *Tamalada*

Overview: Students will observe and analyze the illustration, *Tamalada*, by Chicana narrative artist Carmen Lomas Garza.

Benefits: Students will practice image analysis skills and have a conversation about cooking, family relationships, traditions, and culture.

Grade level: K-6 **Time needed:** 1 hour

Materials: Projector, smart board or printed image of *Tamalada* by Carmen Lomas Garza (below), paper and pencils (optional)

Look closely at the following image:



Illustration: *Tamalada* by Carmen Lomas Garza, 1990.

Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2004665904/>

High Res Image: <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/tamalada-35507>

Activity:

Discuss the image as a class:
What are the people doing?
Where are they?
Who is participating in the preparation of the tamales?
Can you identify each of the activities?

Look for the following objects in the image:

- Masa
- Tamale filling
- Chili peppers
- Garlic
- Corn husks
- Doll
- Truck
- Purse
- Molcajete / mortar
- Oil
- Clay pot
- Keys
- Bandana

Carmen Lomas Garza is an artist who illustrates memories of her childhood. In an interview she spoke about the tamalada:

“Yeah, for example, the tamalada, something as simple as a tamalada. Families telling me, “Well, I remember my mother doing that, but I didn’t do that, but now we’re starting to get everybody together to learn how to make tamales.” So everybody gets together in the kitchen or in the dining room to help make tamales. You know, it’s just a conscious, deliberate reintroduction or revitalization of a traditional practice.”

Activity:

Write or discuss as a class or in groups your responses to the following questions:

What is your favorite thing that your family cooks?

Do you ever participate in cooking with your family?

Does your family have a family recipe that is prepared on special occasions?

If so, what is it and how do you prepare it?

Does your family grow any food? If so, what does your family grow and how do you eat it?



Part Three: A Family Story

Overview: This story introduces concepts of cultural knowledge, indigenous knowledge & technology and sustainability through the story of a grandmother teaching her grandchildren how to make tamales.

Benefits: Students will practice reading and text analysis skills and have a conversation about cooking technologies, sustainability, traditions, and culture.

Grade level: 3-6 **Time needed:** 1.5 hours

Materials: Printed copy of *The Tamalada: Sharing nature's gifts* and worksheet for each student

Activity:

Discuss the following as a class or in groups:

Who participates in the Tlaoli family tamalada?

Compare masa made from dry masa harina with masa made on the metate?

What are the benefits of wrapping tamales with corn husks?

The Tamalada is an activity that is done in a group, and both children and adults participate.

What is the importance of family, community, or collective work?

Why do you think Grandma Rosa says: "Each time we fill a tamale and fold a corn husk we keep the culinary tradition of our culture alive."

What are some gifts that nature gives you?

How can you show your gratitude for the earth?

How can you show your gratitude for your community?



The Tamalada: Sharing nature's gifts

The Tlaoli family always gathers at Grandma Rosa's house. She has a kitchen full of aromas and a large wooden table. There, between laughter and chit chat, they have the Tamalada every year. This is a special day where everyone gets together to make tamales. Everyone participates, from the youngest to the oldest.

This year, Grandma Rosa stood at the head of the table with a bright smile lighting up her face. She said, "Today, as we make these tamales, we are weaving together the history of our family."

As the family mixed corn flour, or masa harina, with water and lard. Manuela, one of her granddaughters, asked: "Grandma Rosa, did you help mix the dough when you were little?"

Grandma Rosa laughed and replied: "Ah, dear, when I was a child, we didn't have masa harina to buy in a store. We used the metate to grind the corn."

"Metate? What's that?" Manuela asked. Her grandmother replied: "The metate is a stone tool. It has been used for thousands of years to grind corn."

"Did you know that your cousins still use metate to grind corn?"

Manuela, with a surprised face, asked her "And why don't they use dry masa harina?" The grandmother responded: "Because corn ground in the metate has a special flavor."

Excited, Manuela said: "I want to use a metate and taste the special flavor of the corn!"

At that moment Luis interrupted: "Grandma, why do we wrap tamales in corn husks and not in tin foil like burritos?"

Grandma Rosa, happy about the question, explained: "Long before aluminum foil or plastic wrap existed, we needed a way to cook and transport our tamales. When tamales are made with fresh corn, the corn husk is left over."

She continued: "The corn husk not only holds the tamale together, it also gives it a unique flavor. Plus, when you're done eating, the husks can be returned to the earth, or composted, without contaminating the soil. Plastic or tin foil can't do that"

The family was fascinated by the wisdom and the ingenuity of their ancestors. "So when we wrap our tamales," concluded Grandma Rosa, "we are not just preparing a meal. We are participating in an ancient tradition and caring for the earth. Each time we fill a tamale and fold a corn husk we keep the culinary tradition of our culture alive."

As the family wrapped the tamales in corn husks, they felt a deeper connection to the earth and to their ancestors. They were grateful for each other, and for the delicious gifts that nature had given them.

Part Four: Lets get corny!

Overview: Learn about the history of corn and tamales!

Benefits: Informational text about history, social studies, and biology/botany.

Grade level: 3-6

Time needed: 1 hour

Materials: Copies of pgs 9 & 10

One of the main ingredients in tamales is corn. Let's learn more about this plant!

Corn is a plant native to *Mesoamerica*. It was originally a wild grass that the native people called *teocintle* or teosinte. Roughly 9,000 years ago, Native American farmers in southern *Mexico* began *domesticating* teosinte to make it easier for humans to eat.

Since the beginning of *agriculture*, farmers have worked to improve the nutritional value, harvest amount, and flavor of different foods including corn.

After thousands of years of farming, teosinte slowly transformed into larger corn cobs with more kernels that are softer and easier to eat. While the ancient teosinte plant produces hundreds of finger-sized ears with 5-12 rock-hard kernels, a foot-long ear of modern corn has more than 500 chewable kernels.

In the 16th century corn was brought from the Americas to Europe. It is currently one of the most consumed grains in the world and is present in many of our foods. There are many varieties of corn, with different colors, flavors and textures. Each of them can be used to prepare different foods and drinks.



MAP OF MESOAMERICA

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mesoamerica_english.PNG



TEOSINTE
A Wild Plant

DOMESTICATION
BEGINS

HYBRIDS &
MUTATIONS

MAIZE
Modern Corn

Let's learn a little more about the history of the tamal.

The word tamal comes from the word *tamalli*, a term from Nahuatl, an indigenous language spoken in Mexico. It is a pre-Hispanic food that varies from culture to culture. In their origins they were made collectively and were often used to make offerings to the dead, in gratitude for fertility of the land, and for social events. Today it is one of the most widespread indigenous foods in the Americas.

Tamales and meat stew served at a feast honoring the birth of a child. Date between 1540 and 1585.
Source: Florentine Codex, book 2, chapter 37.
Author: Bernardino de Sahagun.
Source: <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tamales-florentine-codex.png>



Hopi Maiden grinding corn, Arizona. Photograph ca. 1909.
Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <www.loc.gov/item/2006683505/>.

VOCABULARY

AGRICULTURE

Agriculture is another word for farming. It includes both growing and harvesting crops and raising animals, or livestock. Agriculture provides the food and many raw materials that humans need to survive.

DOMESTICATION

Domestication is a change that happens in wild animals or plants, when they are kept by humans for a long time.

TEOCINTLE, TEOCINTLI OR TEOSINTE

Wild grasses that were domesticated into corn. The word teosinte is derived from the Nahuatl word teocintli which means sacred corn.

FUN FACT

The words *maíz* and maize come from an indigenous language called Taíno that was spoken in the Caribbean.

Part Five: Tamal Is Synonymous with Diversity

Overview: Students research

Benefits: Students practice research and geography skills.

Grade level: 3-6 **Time needed:** 2 hours

Materials: Map worksheet, research tools such as library, computer lab, or Wikipedia access

Activity:

Tamal is synonymous with diversity!

In which countries do people eat tamales? Research the countries where tamales are eaten, using library resources or online research tools.

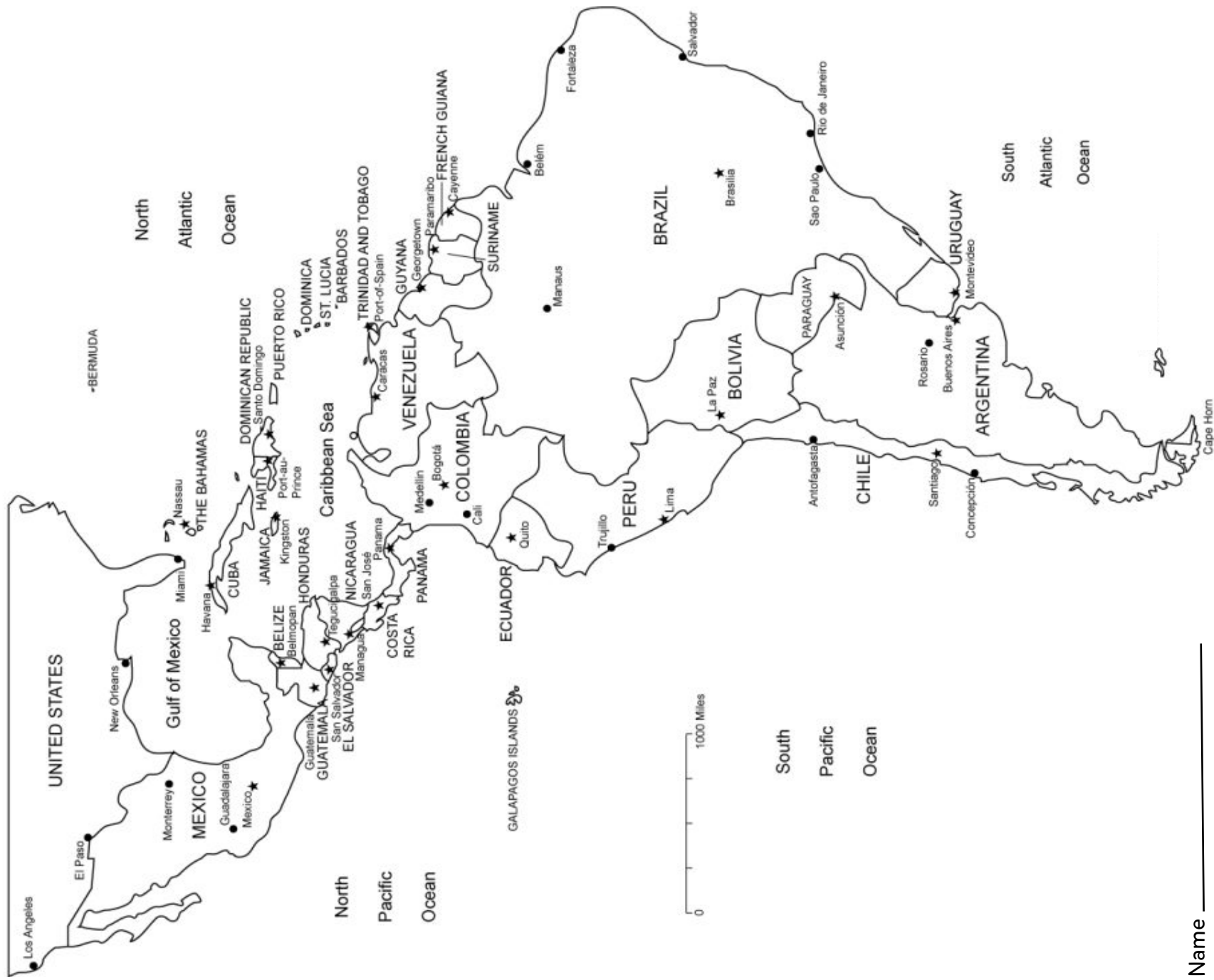
Color those countries on the map.

Search for tamales recipes from different places.

What are some differences between tamales around the world?



Latin America



Name _____

Date _____

Recommended Resources:

PDF: Make corn husk dolls (Spanish)

<https://es.slideshare.net/vaniavazquez77/como-hacer-muecas-con-hojas-de-maiz>



Video: Corn Husk Dolls Demonstration (English & Narragansett language)

https://youtu.be/Jr0BNg51Pml?si=Ek34CsQQIb5y_RIZ



Video: How a Mexican Delicacy Became a Mississippi Staple (English)

<https://youtu.be/ahUrObuiqgM?si=7L8zfe4sEbJh9c3z>



Video: Miguel Cooks Tamales | Cooking with Pixar (English)

https://youtu.be/IIGLb843MFA?si=_yL4144YySZUcQTn



Video: Mexico: Tamales | Relish (English)

<https://ca.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/mexico-tamales-video/relish/>



Video: Traditional culture and modern day use of manos and metates (English)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idSOjVQfX8E>



Video: Nixtamalization (Spanish with English subtitles)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jeX0nL1qKW0>



Video: Como Hacer Los Tamales Esponjaditos De Mi Rancho A Tu Cocina (Spanish)

https://youtu.be/h_kbN4cLmJI?si=AP3KFmeNuFhn7NFS



Video: Tamales in Jujuy, Argentina (Spanish)

https://youtu.be/NNwLRUkd4Gw?si=C5OQ-TBx3wl_spn_



RECOMMENDED READING:

Tía's Tamales by Ana Baca (Bilingual)

Tamalitos: Un Poema Para Cocinar / A Cooking Poem (Bilingual)

by Jorge Argueta

Virtual storytime: <https://shorturl.at/gbTkL>

I Like Making Tamales

by Allison Pomenta

Too Many Tamales:

Gary Soto, Ed Martinez

Time for Tamales Picture Book

