

Ann Carranza
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Making Tamales

After getting married, my husband quickly let me know his expectations regarding a woman's place in the kitchen. While I do enjoy being a traditional wife and mother, there is so much more to me than that single identity, so I hit against his expectations hard and swiftly—culture shock for both of us—and the expectation wars began.

One of Leonel's ways of exerting pressure upon me was to compare me to other women in his life—his sister-in-law, his mother, his sister, and many more—women he thought I'd really enjoy emulating. As you probably can tell it was something I *hated*. After years of trying to meet his unreasonable expectations, I realized that the women held up as epitomes of perfection were much like me and not at all like he thought, so I ended up with the last laugh.

Anyway, his expectations, my desire to please, coupled with my enjoyment of cooking all led to my first attempt at making tamales, for Christmas Eve no less, and for twenty-five guests. He had gotten the recipe from his mother and sister the last time he'd gone to Mexico, so my first job was to translate the ingredients, which in itself was no easy feat. I called bilingual friends, searched through dictionaries, picked his brains, all to be able to understand just the ingredient list. After that I had to translate *bolsita*, *bolsa*, *cucharita*, and *cuchara* into recognizable measures. This was a trial and error process whereby I held up an onion and asked him how large of a piece I needed (of course, since he had never made tamales or mole in his life, he was winging it too).

Buying all the ingredients, and desperately searching for some of them, especially the chiles—*chiles negros*—that were not used much in our area, at that time. After purchasing the ingredients, including two pork roasts, I realized that I probably could not do all of this in one day. There is a reason why, in *México*, the women of a household work together when making meals. Being independent minded and wanting to prove a point, I decided to do this all on my own.

December 23, 1988, after twelve hours of doing child day care, I stayed up late to roast the meat with onions and garlic. The aromas of the cooking meat spread throughout the house awakening the senses and making us all hungry. I finally got to bed around 12:30 a.m., roasts cooling in the fridge.

December 24. The day dawns clear. I get up around 5:30 in the morning, to make the *mole*, toast and grind the spices—*pimienta*, *pimientones*, *ajonjolí*, *clavos*, *almendras*, *chiles*, *ajo*, *cebolla*, and more. I toast chiles and their spiciness and deep aroma permeate the air, making the boys cough. I soak them in broth to soften them for blending. I get that part going then shred the meat into a small mountain. Some things I learn by trial and error, like soaking the cornhusks. I try to use them dry—mistake! They do not fold well

when they are dry. They must be soaked in warm water to soften them. The hardest part, though, is kneading the masa—10 pounds of lovely corn meal, baking powder, lard, and hot water. To get the right texture for the masa, I knead for a very long time, until the graininess of the corn meal smoothes into a soft texture. Just when I think I am finished kneading, my husband wanders by and touches it and says, “*todavía no sierva*,” it still isn’t right. My arms are so tired that I had to divide the masa into lumps of dough and knead them one at a time. I taste the *mole* and its spiciness tantalizes my taste buds and brings a smile to my face, this may just work out.

During breaks in the cooking, I clean, wash, and vacuum the house. I dust, set up tables, cover them with cloths, cook breakfast and lunch, serve and clear. Who knows at what time the guests will arrive?

Finally, *molé* cooked, meat roasted and shredded, masa soft and inviting, cornhusks soaked. Now it is time to sit down and put them together. I am assailed by exhaustion and the fear that I will not get finished on time. After all I still have to cook them, take a shower, and get dressed. I am frustrated with tying delicate knots in the ends of knotted-together cornhusk strips. I keep breaking them, and I want to give up and cry. Meanwhile those luscious aromas kept the house warm and inviting, windows streaked with condensation and steam.

I am exhausted, tearful, and overwhelmed. I am worried to be offering so many guests a food that I have never cooked before, I am worried that I will fail and Leonel will be ashamed of me (of course, am I to fail, my shame will be so much stronger than his).

Finally, the tamales are prepared, wrapped in the cornhusks, and I tuck them into the two huge pots that I was using as steamers. All one hundred two of them. And I start to finish cleaning the house in a frenzy, I set out plates, utensils, napkins, then I shower, gulp down four ibuprofen and, wearing a dress, no less, set out to greet guests and watch the steamers.

I try a tamale—yuck! Sticky masa dough—however they are not inedible, they are just undercooked. More time passes, I try them again. Getting better. With tongs, I place another tamale on my plate and unwrap my prize. Now, the masa is soft and puffy, surrounding the hot, spicy pork roast in *mole*, and the flavors burst across my taste buds like lightening, and I hum with delight. While I find them pretty doggone tasty, the final judgment lies in my husband’s mouth.

All our guests arrive and I wait on tenterhooks to hear his opinion. I serve the tamales buffet-style, so each person can help him or herself, however it is my responsibility to make sure that everyone eats tamales. I walk around with plates of tamales, offering, offering, offering, while waiting for the “man” to tell me what he thinks.

Much later, I am back out in the kitchen, ready to melt into a puddle of tears, because I still have not heard from Leonel and in just two hours, all the tamales have been consumed. There is only a dirty kitchen and empty husks to show for the hours of work. Then my handsome husband strides into the kitchen. He

grabs me by the shoulders, kisses me on the lips, and says, “*¡Hiciste tamales como las de me mamá!*” “You’ve made tamales like my mother!” Ah, sweet reward and just what I have been waiting for. Suddenly, I no longer feel like crying.

I can imagine the horror with which women are reading this memoir, but as I write this, more than 20 years later, my now-liberated husband briskly sweeps the broom along walls and the edges of our bed, preparing to vacuum every room in the house.