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# Mexican tradition a tasty homage to nativity journey

By CRISTIAN SALAZAR | The Associated Press • Published December 17, 2008

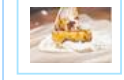
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NEW YORK – Some might have visions of sugarplums as the holidays begin, but the dreams of Mexican immigrants such as Margarita Larios likely will be filled with zestier foods as they prepare for las Posadas.

PHOTOS



That's the nine-day celebration during which Mexican and Mexican-American Roman Catholics pay homage to the biblical journey of Mary and Joseph in search of shelter in a foreign land.

For each of the days, from Dec. 16 to 24, families and friends re-enact the nativity story with singing, candlelit processions and pinatas for children.

And the celebration doesn't end until a meal to sate even the hungriest traveler is served: Dark moles churned from chocolates and chilies. Hot punch made from tejocotes, an apple-like fruit, and piloncillo, blocks of unrefined cane sugar. And a selection of sweet or savory tamales served steaming hot from huge pots.

"You should always have punch and tamales," says Larios, 60, who teaches a tamale-making workshop for las Posadas through the New York-based cultural organization Mano a Mano.

Las Posadas dates to the 1500s, when Christian evangelists seeking to convert the indigenous people of Mexico realized they could teach them their faith through the ritual re-enactment of biblical stories.

One of the most important stories they sought to dramatize was the nativity. Out of this emerged las Posadas.

Indeed, las Posadas is celebrated throughout the Southwest and almost anywhere a large community of Mexican immigrants has formed roots in the United States.

One such place is Chicago, where chef Rick Bayless has ascended to the highest ranks of Mexican gastronomy. He says tamales - steamed cornmeal dough and other fillings wrapped in cornhusks or bananas leaves - are perfect for such special occasions.

Bayless even suggests hosting a pre-party - or a tamalera - before the Posada celebration to make the tamales.

"Usually, you get a group of people together to make tamales. You make your batch together and you're filling and you're standing around together," Bayless says.

The ingredients for the corn-masa cakes are straightforward enough. If you are not near a grocer that sells Mexican foods, probably the most difficult to find ingredients are the specially prepared cornmeal and corn husks, though they can be purchased online. Banana leaves sometimes can be found in Asian grocery stores.

When the base is blended until it has the consistency of cake batter, and a ball of it floats in cold water, you can be sure your tamales will turn out fluffy.

As you can imagine, tamales are not low-fat. Bayless says any time he goes somewhere and someone says, "Oh, I'm making olive oil tamales," they have been a disaster.

"It's like saying you're going to do diet croissants," he quipped.

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