

RECIPES

Zacahuil, Mexico's Giant Tamale

The Zacahuil, Mexico's giant smoked tamale, is found mostly in the Huasteca region along the Gulf of Mexico. Up to at least six feet in length and filled with turkey, pork, chicken and other items, they are prepared in wood-fired pits, especially on market days and special occasions. The following recipe was created to make it possible for home cooks to imitate the original Zacahuil, albeit on a much smaller scale. Although I specified pork, feel free to substitute turkey, chicken, or just about anything else that you like. If you do not have a smoker, the zacahuil may be baked in an oven at 225 degrees.



Zacahuil

Meat and marinade

3 guajillo chiles, stemmed, seeded and toasted briefly on a griddle over medium heat and soak in hot water for 20 minutes

1 teaspoon salt

2 teaspoons black pepper

2 cloves garlic

2 teaspoons oregano
1 tablespoon rice vinegar
1/4 cup orange juice
1/4 cup water
2 pounds country-style ribs, cut into ½ - 3/4 inch pieces

Make the marinade and marinate the meat. Blend everything but the meat and then marinate the meat for at least 3 hours or overnight.

Masa

1 3/4 cups MaSeca instant corn masa flour for tamales (about 9 ounces)
1 1/2 cups chicken broth
10 tablespoons lard, duck fat or shortening at room temperature, 5 ounces
1 teaspoon baking powder
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon sweet, smoked paprika

Rehydrate the dry masa. Place the dry corn flour in a bowl and add the broth. Mix with a wooden spoon, then knead briefly with your hands to make sure all the liquid is incorporated. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap or a damp towel and allow to re-hydrate for 30 minutes.

Make the masa. Place the fat in the bowl of an electric mixer and, using the whisk attachment, beat it at medium to medium high speed until it is light and creamy, scraping down the bowl as necessary, about 2 minutes. Add the baking powder, salt, and smoked paprika, and beat for another minute. Add the rehydrated masa and, still with the whisk attachment, beat for 1 minute beginning at low speed and gradually increasing it to medium high,. Turn the speed slowly to medium high and continue beating for 10 minutes, stopping to scrape down the sides of the bowl 2 or 3 times, or as necessary. Test the masa by taking a ½ inch piece and placing it carefully in a glass of cold water where it should float. If it does not float, continue beating for another 2 minutes. If it still does not float, the measurements are probably off and a little more room temperature fat should be added, a tablespoon at a time, until the dough floats.

Make the zacahuil

Banana leaves
The Masa
Marinated meat

If necessary soften the banana leaves. Thawed frozen banana leaves often do not require softening, but fresh ones always do. To soften them, either pass them over an open flame (being careful not to burn yourself, or carefully fold them and steam or boil them until they are pliable

Form and wrap the zacahuil. Take two leaves, ideally about 2 feet long and 10 – 12 inches wide on a work surface in the shape of a cross with the shiny side up. Put several long pieces of cotton string under the leaves, going both ways, so they will be handy to tie the package. Spread a thin layer of the masa

over the center of the crossed leaves and extending far enough on all sides so it will cover the meat when wrapped into a package. You will need nearly all the masa.

Smoke and serve the Zacahuil. Put the marinated meat in the middle of the crossed leaves, make sure the masa will cover the meat and tie the leaves over the meat into a package. Smoke the package for 6 ½ - 7 hours at 225 degrees. Place the zacahuil on a dish on the table, open the package, and serve with guacamole and salsa.