

Masa for Tamales (Easy Tamale Dough)

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This basic tamale dough recipe will give you soft and fluffy tamales. Make the masa by hand—it's a labor of love—or with an electric mixer in half the amount of time.

By [Ericka Sanchez](#), Updated October 27, 2025

Why Make This

This recipe, using easy-to-find instant corn masa flour, works for both sweet and savory tamales. A simple “float test” tells you when your dough is ready to create soft, fluffy tamales. Vegetarian and vegan options are provided, using vegetable oil, onion, and broth.

As the holidays approach, Latin American families like mine begin to plan their menus, and tamales are always the main star of the feast. Making tamales from scratch takes a bit of time and preparation, from soaking the husks to serving a steamy tamale that slides off the husk when unwrapped.

Many tias, mamás, and abuelitas debate around the kitchen table—who has the best tamale recipe? Though it's an argument that's never really settled, one thing's for sure: whether you are new to making tamales or an expert with your own recipe or one passed down to you, the most delicious tamales start with a delicious, reliable masa recipe.

How to Make Masa for Tamales

Back when I learned how to make tamales from my grandmother and mom, they scoffed when I asked for exact measurements. They measured the ingredients al tanteo, meaning “a calculated guess” in Spanish. They measured the masa harina, baking powder, and salt with a favorite soup spoon, a coffee cup, the palm of their hands, or pinch with their fingers. This masa recipe yields a basic tamale dough—one that I meticulously wrote down as I watched them. This is my go-to masa recipe for both savory and sweet tamales.

My Favorite Brands of Masa Harina

Convenience is a big plus for me, so I opt for instant masa harina to make masa for tamales. Some brands like [Maseca](#) and [Masabrosa](#) have a variety of options to choose from. **Their masa harinas made specifically for tamales have a coarser grind, which yields a masa with a bit of a gritty texture.** Their regular masa harinas meant for tortillas will be smoother. Both are delicious, and it's a matter of personal preference. Both brands can be found at your local Latin supermarket and most big box grocery stores. You will likely get a better deal buying them at a brick-and-mortar than online.

[Bob's Red Mill](#) and [King Arthur](#) also have great tasting masa harinas. Both have a finer grind, perfect for tamales, tortillas, sopes, gorditas, and everything corn masa your heart desires.

Knead the Masa by Hand or With an Electric Mixer

If I am making masa for about two dozen tamales I clear out my schedule because I to knead the masa by hand. The process is a bit long if done by hand—whipping the lard takes about 20 minutes and kneading the dough takes about 15 minutes. I like to feel the texture of the masa in my hands. For me, it's nostalgic because this is how I grew up making tamales. But you can use an electric mixer and cut the prep time in half.

If I am making 40 to 60 tamales for a family gathering, I let my stand mixer do the work. The masa becomes more difficult to knead by hand when making a large batch—the masa might not mix properly and will then cook unevenly. My mom will always notice tamales pintos, “unevenly cooked masa,” and we don't want that!

Make It Vegetarian or Vegan

This recipe calls for lard and chicken stock, for making savory tamales. Here is how to modify the recipe for vegan or vegetarian tamales.

- Switch out the lard for vegetable shortening or vegetable oil.
- Fry 1/4 cup of sliced white onions in vegetable oil until golden. Cool the onions to room temperature before adding it to the masa right before the masa harina.
- Instead of chicken stock, use vegetable stock or water.

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Prep Time 20 mins ~ **Servings** 24 tamales (12 servings)

The chicken stock should be warm or at room temperature. If it's too hot, the lard in the dough will melt and separate. Instead of chicken stock, you can use beef or vegetable stock. For sweet tamales, use water.

Ingredients

- 1 1/2 C lard (or vegetable shortening), at room temperature
- 4 C masa harina
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/2 tablespoon salt
- 3 3/4 C warm chicken stock or water, divided

Method

Whip the lard: Place the lard or vegetable shortening in a large mixing bowl. Knead with your hands until it becomes light and airy, about 20 minutes—yes, it's a long time and that's why it's a labor of love. Instead, you can beat it in a stand mixer fitted with a paddle attachment or hand mixer on medium speed for about 8 minutes. The lard will change from yellowish to white.

Add the dry ingredients: Add the masa harina, baking powder, and salt to whipped lard, and continue mixing by hand, breaking up the large clumps of dough with your fingers.

The mixture will be crumbly, resembling wet sand. You can do this with a stand mixer or handheld mixer—scrape the bottom and sides of the bowl with a rubber spatula a few times to incorporate any dry ingredients that may stick to the bowl.

Add the liquid: Slowly stream in 3 1/2 C chicken stock as you continue mixing the mixture with your hands for about 15 minutes or with an electric mixer for about 10 minutes on medium speed.

Test the masa: Drop a quarter-sized ball of masa in a glass filled with cold water. If the masa floats, it is ready. If it sinks, add the remaining 1/4 C chicken stock, knead for 5 more minutes, and repeat the test. Continue kneading and testing until the ball floats to the top of the glass. The masa will be wet, spreadable, and sticky.

Now you're ready to make tamales!

The masa can be kept at room temperature for up to 4 hours and stored in a tightly sealed container in the refrigerator for up to 48 hours. The cold temperature will keep it from growing mold and the tightly sealed container will keep it from drying out. Any longer than 48 hours, it will sour.

If you plan to make a large number of tamales, I recommend making the filling up to 2 days ahead, and the masa the day you plan to assemble your tamales. When assembling, keep the masa covered with a clean kitchen towel to avoid it from drying out.

If time is tight: Day 1 Cook the meat; Day 2 Prep the Chili sauce and add the meat; Day 3 Make the masa and assemble the tamales.