

Gift, Wrapped

Tamales are the cornerstone of Mexican holiday tradition. Why not make these little gifts part of your celebration?

In another chapter of my life, I taught bilingual children in Denver Public Schools. My students were Mexican—they were either born there and moved to the States, or born here to immigrant parents. When these families came to Colorado, they brought with them many of their own traditions, including, fortunately for me, their food. I especially loved the holidays when many of my students would bring me edible gifts: homemade salsa, tortillas, and best of all, tamales, which are a little like packages themselves. Fold open the corn husk, and you're guaranteed to be surprised and delighted by what's inside.

It's been years since my teaching days, and I still haven't had the guts to try making tamales at home. But at this time of year, I crave the flavors of corn melded with meat and beans. So I've searched high and low to find the best. Luckily, Denver is full of spots to buy a dozen delicious, authentic tamales to serve at your next holiday party. Here, a few of my favorites. —REBECCA CARO

WHERE TO GO

LEOBARDO'S TACO SHOP

Open just short of a year, Leobardo's is indisputably the jewel in the crown of Denver's tamale scene. Housed in a brightly painted orange and yellow A-frame, this tidy counter-style eatery offers not only many traditional Mexican dishes, but also a large variety of tamales. Choose from chicken-vegetable, vegetarian-cheese, corn-filled, or traditional red or green chile with pork. For dessert, save room for the strawberry or pineapple versions. 825 S. Federal Blvd., 303-934-2722

EL JAKALITO

Don't be put off by the quirky strip mall that houses this Mexican kitchen—the tamales are as authentic as you get this side of the border. Order a dozen to go, but stay to enjoy the salsa bar and traditional faves like birria de chivo (goat stew) or menudo. 2280 S. Quebec St., 303-368-9941

TAMALES BY LA CASITA

A fixture for years in Highland, La Casita packages tamales—red or green pork or green chile and cheese—to go, and also serves them smothered to eat in-house with a margarita. 3561 Tejon St., 303-477-2899

LA POPULAR

La Popular has been keeping Five Points' residents fueled with tamales since 1949. The price is right, too, at a dollar apiece. For a crowd, order by the dozen, or purchase supplies for making your own at home. 2033 Lawrence St., 303-296-1687

TAMALE KITCHEN

Customers have been picking up tamales at one of Tamale Kitchen's many locations (from Northglenn to Highlands Ranch) for years. Made from family recipes, these red, spicy green, or veggie varieties are deeply satisfying. www.thetamale-kitchen.com

