

## Chicken Tamales with Purple Tomatillo Salsa



### Ingredients

Dried corn husks

Corn masa

Chicken breasts

Tomatillos

Lard

Salt

By **Maria Bolcom**

My memories:

I considered it an onerous task, hard work, but I knew well that it would be worth it. My job was to bring everything from outside to the table—I had to walk far and look for what my mother asked me for.

She would ask for freshly-ground corn masa, so I'd go to the *tortillería* and happily bring back over 4 pounds of piping hot dough. "Don't forget the fresh chicken!" I would think. "It has to be split breasts from chicken butchered just today."

Then I'd have to go across the street to buy the tomatillos.

"Get the purple ones," my mom used to say. They were actually green, and the salsa would come out green anyway, but she insisted on the purple ones.

Everything would be seemingly ready, and well, after cleaning and cooking everything, we would shred the chicken and turn the tomatillos into salsa.

My mom would knead the masa, as it was the most important job and everything depended on it.

"Taste for salt," she used to say, and I'd try it raw, just like that, and tell her that it was good, but she would always adjust it and make sure that it would turn out perfect. "More Royal... More lard... I think that's it."

Dry corn husks were quite a challenge for me. After they soaked for a while, I'd start with my assigned task. "Pass me the husks," she would say, and I'd nervously give her a big, beautiful one, praying to God that the husk would come out "well" and the masa ball would fit in it.

We would fill the husks one by one, flattening the masa by hand—a task in and of itself, because as I said, the husk size had to be just right, or the masa would spill out in the steamer. When we were done with the masa, it was time for the chicken, and then drenching it with salsa... Very well drenched.

“The last few ones might come out deaf,” my mom used to say, for fear that we would run out of chicken and salsa, but still have plenty of masa. (Deaf tamales are those without any filling, just dough and that’s it.) “Let’s see how many we can make... If I bought over 4 pounds of masa, how many can we make...”. She would count in her head. We never knew, as we would lose count, and then ask the same question every single time.

We would arrange them in the huge steamer, the special one, cast aside when not in use, but now shining brightly and filled to the brim. Cooking time would depend on how full the pot was “from the first boil”, which was the cue to start counting the minutes. Time would vary, so it was the perfect opportunity to rest. I’d feel exhausted, but now I know that she was the exhausted one.

Once the smell made it all the way to the rooms upstairs, somebody would yell “They’re ready!” or “Let’s eat!”. It was time to hurry downstairs and meet happiness—the feeling of knowing that I would eat the same thing for days made me happy,

Birthdays, Christmas, New Years, were all important dates when we would make the tamales.

I never thought that I’d miss those flavors, sooner than I imagined. I did not think that those flavors would be separated by a border, and that going back to them would make me happier than I was when I helped make the tamales.

It’s all about being grateful for the hands that keep on working as the list of important dates keeps on growing with a “Because they will be coming”. It’s all about the appreciation for a meal so special and delicious that you can only get it at home. The process, dedication, effort and, above all, love, which set an example for me not only in the kitchen, but also in daily life.