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hours
11 am - 10 pm

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Adriana Lopez

Hallacas (ah-jock-az)



Photography: Quentin Curtis Bacon

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The HALLACA (ahh-jack-ah) is the centerpiece of the Venezuelan holiday season. And it is also a dish that represents the influence of mestizaje (the mixing of indigenous people, Africans and Europeans) in Venezuela's culinary heritage.

Popular myth relates that hallaca originated in the country's colonial times, when plantation owners gave leftover food scraps from their Christmas feasts to their slaves and servants, who in turn would wrap this food in cornmeal and plantain leaves for slow cooking in boiling water. Other food historians note its resemblance to the Mesoamerican tamal, with its similar maize body and plantain envelope, that is found throughout Spain's South American colonies as far south as Argentina.

For Venezuelans the dinners on December 24th and 31st are the highlights of the Christmas holiday, and represent coming together as a family, enjoying peace and harmony – year after year, generation after generation. These meals have a very specific menu: hallaca, pernil (roasted pork shoulder), pan de jamon (ham bread), hen salad and sweetened papaya for dessert. Families get organized in December to work around the production of this traditional meal.

The hallaca is the most labor-intensive dish of the menu, usually taking about three days and many family members to assemble. On a plantain leaf, a flattened ball of corn meal dough or masa (dyed with annatto seed to give it an orange color) is filled with a pork, beef and hen stew; then decorated with almonds, raisins, peppers, onion and lard; folded over and wrapped with another banana leaf, tied and steamed for 45 minutes. Since the meat has been cooked several times, hallacas can be stored in the refrigerator for two to three weeks. Prior to serving, they are reheated in boiling water for about 30 minutes.

Enjoy.

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Steamed Banana Leaves with Chicken, Pork and Beef Filling

Yields: about 25 Hallacas

INGREDIENTS

Guiso (Stew) Filling

Make this a day in advance, as the flavors become more infused overnight.

2 limes, both halved
3 1/2 pounds chicken legs, thighs and breasts (hen is preferred/more traditional, but chicken works well too)
4-5 cups water (enough to cover chicken)
1/2 cup vegetable oil
3 1/4 pounds pork shoulder, with some fat remaining
2 1/4 pounds lean ground beef
1/2 pound lard or vegetable shortening (can also substitute 1/2 cup vegetable oil, though it will lack the flavor from the lard)
3 cups white onion, diced (about 3 medium onions)
4 cloves garlic, minced
1 cup (3-4) leeks, white and pale green portion only, thinly sliced
6 green onions, white part only, thinly sliced (about 1/2 cup)
1 pound red bell peppers, roasted with skins and seeds removed (*see note below on method), diced
1/2 teaspoon fresh or canned habanero peppers, finely diced
4 sweet cherry peppers pickled in brine (Italian style, sold in jars), diced
2 1/2 cups chopped tomatoes, peeled and seeded
1/4 cup capers, finely diced
1/2 cup pimiento-stuffed olives, sliced
1/2 cup pickled antipasti-style pickled vegetables, such as carrots and cauliflower (in a jar)
1/2 cup muscatel (Muscat) wine
2 tablespoons prepared mustard
1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
1 teaspoon paprika
1/2 cup raisins
1 1/4 cups shredded papelon/piloncillo (sugar cane blocks or cones, available in Latin stores), grated. If you cannot find piloncillo, substitute 3/4 cup molasses (which has a stronger taste than sugar cane)
2 tablespoons Worcestershire sauce
3 teaspoons salt

* To Skin and Seed Peppers:

Cover peppers with vegetable oil and place on a metal baking sheet; roast in moderate heat (350°) oven until skin wrinkles, about 50 minutes. Remove peppers from oven and place inside brown paper bag to cool. With a damp cloth, rub the pepper skin, then place the pepper under running water to loosen and remove both skin and seeds.





Dough

5 pounds pre-cooked white corn meal: (3 packages of Harina Pan, or Masa Arepa flour made by Goya, both available in Latin markets)
2 cups chicken stock (reserved from the cooked chicken)
3 cups lard or Crisco solid vegetable shortening (do not use butter)
3 tablespoons annatto seeds (or achiote paste if annatto not available), carried in Latin markets
3 tablespoons salt

Garnish

This garnish is actually a deconstruction of the guiso ingredients and therefore “introduces” the meal to the diner.

¼ pound lard or solid shortening, cut in ½ inch pieces
1 pound shredded hen or chicken breast
1 pound red bell peppers, cut in strips, skin and seeds removed (see technique in filling ingredients listing)
2 medium white onions, sliced thin and cut into 1-1/2 inch-long rings
½ cup small capers
1 cup pitted green olives, sliced
½ cup raisins
½ cup blanched whole almonds

Wrapping

The plantain leaves used for wrapping should be cleaned the day of hallacas assembly so they do not dry out after rinsing.

10 pounds fresh plantain leaves (available in Latin and Asian food markets)

Cooking twine

NOTE: The leaves are sold in frozen packages; to thaw, soak packages in warm water until leaves are soft, about 30-45 minutes. Do not microwave.

The plantain leaves must be cleaned prior to usage:

Place the leaves in the sink and cover with water. Then, taking one leaf at a time, unfold them very carefully on a tabletop, to avoid tearing the leaf. With a damp cloth, clean each leaf on both sides; set leaves aside for hallaca assembly.

Each hallaca uses 3 leaves. Cut 25-30 pieces of each size (see below) and set aside in three different piles. The first is the base leaf, upon which the dough is placed. The second leaf is called the ‘shirt’ or ‘camisa,’ used to keep water from leaking inside to the filling while the hallaca is cooking. The third one is called the ‘belt’ or ‘faja,’ a slim piece that holds the ends of the camisa together.

Base leaf should be about 11 x 15 inches

Shirt/Camisa should be 8 x 10 inches

Belt/Faja should be 4 x 6 inches

The plantain leaf has a hard vein down its center, with smaller veins stemming from it across the length of the leaf. When cleaning and working on the leaf, place the shiny side of the leaf up and move in the direction of the vein, not across the grain, so as not to break the surface of the leaf. If the base leaf breaks or tears, do not use it. Try to make belts out of that torn leaf, or toss. Torn leaves will not maintain the watertight seal and water will seep into the filling.

Cut one piece of cooking twine per hallaca. The length should be about one yard, or roughly the length from your left shoulder to the end of your right hand.



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INSTRUCTIONS

Filling Stew/Guiso

Clean chicken with lime, then rinse well with water. Place chicken pieces into a pot with water; bring to a boil over high heat, then lower temperature and let simmer on stovetop for approximately 30 minutes, until chicken is tender but not falling off the bone. Transfer chicken to a plate; and set aside stock. Pull meat off the bones; cut meat into 1/8-inch-wide strips, about 1 1/2 inches long, or shred with your hands. Reserve 1 pound to use for garnishes; the rest will go in the stew.

Clean the pork shoulder with lime, then rinse well with water and cut into a fine dice. In a large stock pot, heat oil over high heat; add diced pork and ground beef and cook, stirring frequently, until meats are browned; transfer to a plate.

Reduce heat under the pot and add lard or vegetable oil and leeks, green onions, onions and garlic. Add 1cup chicken stock and cook, stirring frequently, for 5 minutes or until vegetables are soft but not browned. Add red bell peppers, habanero peppers, sweet cherry peppers and cook until vegetables are soft.

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Add tomatoes and cook 15 minutes at low heat. Add the capers, olives, papelon (or molasses), paprika, raisins, Muscat wine, Worcestershire sauce, salt and black pepper. Add 2 cups of chicken stock. Return the pork and ground beef to the pot. Simmer uncovered for 30 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Stir in chicken strips and cook for 1 hour in low heat, stirring occasionally. Remove from heat and let rest, covered until completely cooled. Refrigerate until ready to use.

Dough

Place 2 cups lard in a pan with the annatto seeds over medium heat. Bring to a boil, then remove from heat; be sure not to burn the seeds (dough will turn brown, not orange if seeds are burnt). Remove seeds by straining mixture through a sieve. Set lard aside. Put corn flour in a large mixing bowl and add salt; then slowly add 1 cup uncolored lard and start mixing to get a dough. Add the additional 1-1/2 cups of colored lard and continue to mix.

Add the chicken stock to the mixture, and combine well until you reach a firm but soft consistency; knead the mixture. The dough should be a dark orange color, smooth with no lumps. Make balls of about 3 inches in diameter, set aside and cover with a humid cloth. Set aside the remaining 1/2 cup of colored lard, to be used to grease the plantain leaves during assembly of the hallacas.

Note: when forming the dough into a ball, your hands should appear shiny from the lard – that indicates the lard has been adequately mixed and absorbed for the correct consistency. If they are not, add more lard to the dough mixture until your hands take on a lightly oily sheen.

Assembly

Prepare plantain leaves as described in ingredients list, above.

Using a cloth or a pastry brush, lightly grease the center of the base-sized plantain leaf square with the 1/2 cup reserved lard with annatto. Take a ball of the orange dough and place in the center of the base leaf. Flatten the dough into a circle about 6 inches in diameter in the center of the leaf. Use your fingers, a cutting board or plate back to extend the dough; try to get it quite thin, about 1/8 inch thick.

Place 3 tablespoons of meat filling in the center of the flattened dough circle. Add 2-3 pieces of each of the garnish elements: lard/pork fat, red bell pepper strips, onion rings, capers, green olives, raisins, almonds and 1 piece of chicken.

Fold over the plantain leaf and dough circle, like a calzone or empanada, so the filling is covered. Fold the leaf against the grain to prevent the leaf from cracking or splitting (and the hallaca from leaking). Fold opposite side over so filling is completely encased. Then bring the ends of the leaf up over the filling on the seam side. Lap the two ends over each other to completely secure the filling; press seams closed gently, again so as not to tear the plantain leaf.



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Place the hallaca diagonally at one edge of the second square of plantain leaf, the camisa; fold the camisa over the hallaca on the diagonal grain, and fold the edges over the sides. Use belt or faja of plantain leaf to hold the two pieces down, by wrapping the hallaca around 2-3 times with the belt. Tie the entire hallaca like a postal package with twine (see photo) to keep the folded leaves secured during cooking process.

Cooking

Hallacas must be cooked after they are made, preferably steamed. Place the assembled hallacas upright, on end, in a large steaming pot. If you do not have a pot deep enough for steaming, hallacas can be boiled in a large pot with enough water to cover them. Cover and steam the hallacas for 1 hour, keeping water at a slow boil and replenishing as it cooks away. Let the hallacas cool down and then refrigerate.

Hallacas need to settle for at least one day after the steaming/cooking process so that the flavors of all the many spices and ingredients are absorbed and the dough settles. Prior to serving, carefully place hallacas inside a pot of boiling water and cook for 35-45 minutes. This is a heating process; the hallacas have already been cooked.

Serving

With kitchen tongs, transfer the hallacas to a strainer to drain out all the water. Then with a pair of kitchen scissors, cut the twine, remove the faja and the camisa leaves. Then place the hallaca on a dinner dish. Cut the sides of the plantain leaf, up to the edge of the plate. Carefully open the leaf and fold the sides back to present the hallaca on the plantain leaf; serve at once.

Hallacas are usually served as a main dish except during Christmas or New Year's Eve dinner. During these large feasts hallacas are served as a first course, accompanied by Pan de Jamon. Ham, pork or turkey is typically served as a second course, with hen salad, and sweet papaya cooked in sugar cane as a dessert.

Reheating and Storage

Because they are heavily spiced and the filling stewed over a long period of time, hallacas can be stored up to one month in the refrigerator after the first cooking process. They should always be reheated in boiling water for 35-45 minutes; do not reheat in a microwave.