Tortillas
Jose Antonio Burciaga

My earliest memory of tortillas is my Mama telling me not to play with them. I had bitten eyeholes in one and was wearing it as a mask at the dinner table.

As a child, I also used tortillas as hand warmers on cold days, and my family claims that I owe my career as an artist to my early experiments with tortillas. According to them, my clowning around helped me develop a strong artistic foundation. I’m not so sure, though. Sometimes I wore a tortilla on my head, like a yarmulke, and yet I never had any great urge to convert from Catholicism to Judaism. But who knows? They may be right.

For Mexicans over the centuries, the tortilla has served as the spoon and the fork, the plate and the napkin. Tortillas originated before the Mayan civilizations, perhaps predating Europe’s wheat bread. According to Mayan mythology, the great god Quetzalcoatl, realizing that the red ants knew the secret of using maize as food, transformed himself into a black ant, infiltrated the colony of red ants, and absconded with a grain of corn. (Is it any wonder that to this day, black ants and red ants do not get along?) Quetzalcoatl then put maize on the lips of the first man and woman, Oxomoco and Cipactonal, so that they would become strong. Maize festivals are still celebrated by many Indian cultures of the Americas.

When I was growing up in El Paso, tortillas were part of my daily life. I used to visit a tortilla factory in an ancient adobe building near the open mercado in Ciudad Juarez. As I approached, I could hear the rhythmic slapping of the masa as the skilled vendors outside the factory formed it into balls and patted them into perfectly round corn cakes between the palms of their hands. The wonderful aroma and the speed with which the women counted so many dozens of tortillas out of warm wicker baskets still linger in my mind. Watching them at work convinced me that the most handsome and deliciosas tortillas are handmade. Although machines are faster, they can never adequately replace generation-to-generation experience. There’s no place in the factory assembly line for the tender slaps that give each tortilla character. The best thing that can be said about mass-producing tortillas is that it makes it possible for many people to enjoy them.

In the mercado where my mother shopped, we frequently bought taquitos de nopalitos, small tacos filled with diced cactus, onions, tomatoes, and jalapenos. Our friend Don Toribio showed us how to make delicious, crunchy taquitos with dried, slated
pumpkin seeds. When you had no money for the filling, a poor man’s taco could be made by placing a warm tortilla on the left palm, applying a sprinkle of salt, then rolling the tortilla up quickly with the fingertips of the right hand. My own kids put peanut butter and jelly on tortillas, which I think is truly bicultural. And speaking of fast foods for kids, nothing beats a quesadilla, a tortilla grilled-cheese sandwich.

Depending on what you intend to use them for, tortillas may be made in various ways. Even a run-of-the-mill tortilla is more than a flat corn cake. A skillfully cooked homemade tortilla has a bottom and a top; the top skin forms as a pocket in which you put the filling that folds your tortilla into a taco. Paper-thin tortillas are used specifically for flautas, a type of taco that is filled, rolled, and then fried until crisp. The name flauta means flute, which probably refers to the Mayan bamboo flute; however, the only sound that comes from an edible flauta is a delicious crunch that is music to the palate. In Mexico flautas are sometimes made as long as two feet and then cut into manageable segments. The opposite of flautas is gorditas, meaning little fat ones. These are very thick small tortillas.

The versatility of tortillas and corn does not end here. Besides being tasty and nourishing, they have spiritual and artistic qualities as well. The Tarahumara Indians of Chihuahua, for example, concocted a corn-based beer called tesguino, which their descendants still make today. And everyone has read about the woman in New Mexico who was cooking her husband a tortilla one morning when the image of Jesus Christ miraculously appeared on it. Before they knew what was happening, the man’s breakfast had become a local shrine.

Then there is tortilla art. Various Chicano artists throughout the Southwest have, when short of materials or just in a whimsical mood, used a dry tortilla as a small, round canvas. And a few years back, at the height of the Chicano movement, a priest in Arizona got into trouble with the Church after he was discovered celebrating mass using a tortilla as the host. All of which only goes to show that while the tortilla may be a lowly corn cake, when necessity arises, it can reach unexpected distinction.