

GUAM CHAMORU TAMÁLES MENDIOKA

It has been a while since the very first time I prepared sweet tamáles in 1994. Tamáles mendioka is made of grated tapioca or mendioka, young coconut or mánha, sugar, and sometimes coconut milk. Of course, you can use fresh mendioka, but it is hard work to skin and grate the root.

Growing up on Guam in the 70s to early 90s, I have always seen tamáles made wrapped in foil. However, I have since learned that many foods were wrapped in banana leaves before World War II. A similar dessert, apigige', is made with the same ingredients but wrapped and grilled in banana leaves instead of steamed – I've never seen apigige' wrapped in foil. Apigige' tends to be drier in texture compared to tamáles mendioka. Tamáles mendioka are also thicker than apigige' and noticeably sweeter. Remember biting into that big hunk of sweet, chewy, coconuty-tapioca-y goodness?

When cooking this tamáles in banana leaves, there is an earthy aroma and flavor that is imparted to the tamáles. Just a head's up if you've always eaten tamáles mendioka wrapped in foil.

Note that if you are using fresh mánha instead of from a can, you should use the fresh, yummy mánha juice. If you are using mánha from the can, coconut milk may be a better instead of the liquid in the can – you'll have to try both and see which you prefer.

Way back when, fresh tapioca and mánha were picked compared to today's convenience of frozen produce. Tamáles mendioka also used to be boiled in banana leaves instead of steamed. Over the years, folks have not only used foil, but have also steamed tamáles instead of boiling them in water. That said, here are a few things to keep in mind depending on your cooking method.

BOIL

- Banana leaves must be tied, otherwise they will unravel.
- You can boil a greater quantity of tamáles – the more you have in the pot, the longer it will take to cook.
- Some water will seep inside the leaves so this method yields a more wet or fache' (fa-tsee) tamáles. You will also lose some of the sugar/sweetness when boiled in leaves, thus it's not as sweet as it should be.

STEAM

- If pouches are thick, such as a ½ cup of mixture, it can take 90 minutes to cook through and hopefully not dry out the tamáles
- You must leave space between pouches – the steam needs to come up very well with the water at a hard boil – even in a large steamer, you can't cook as many tamáles at once.
- There is a subtle metallic taste if wrapped in foil, but the flavor and texture of the cassava shines.
- The upside to steaming tamáles wrapped in banana leaves is that no water comes through. The tamáles is perfectly sweetened with good texture and subtle banana leaf flavor/aroma.

Makes 10 to 12 pouches.

INGREDIENTS – PICK ONE FROM EACH SET

Set 1: THE WRAPPER

1 – 16 oz bag of banana leaves – wrapped just in leaves, tamáles will be fache'; subtle flavor of cassava

AND/OR

Foil squares – flavor and texture of the cassava really shines through; not fache' at all

AND/OR

Banana leaves and foil

Set 2: MENDIOKA OR CASSAVA

32 ounces or 907 grams frozen cassava

OR

4 cups freshly grated tapioca – you will need a bit more of your chosen liquid

Set 3: YOUNG COCONUT

30 ounces total canned young mânia, sliced then rough chopped

OR

Two cups fresh mânia picked direct from tree, crushed – or sliced if mânia is firm

*Fresh young coconut is very soft and jelly-like; it will blend into the mixture.

Set 3: LIQUID

½ cup or 120 millileters fresh mânia juice

OR

1 cup or 240 milliliter canned coconut milk

OR

½ cup or 120 millileters FRESHLY SQUEEZED coconut milk (grate coconut, mix with water, squeeze hard)

OR

½ cup or 120 milliliters canned mânia liquid

Set 4: SUGAR

1 ½ cups granulated sugar

Tools: *banana leaves and/or foil, large square or rectangular baking pan for hot water that is at least 9 to 10 inches each side, large dinner plate, whisk, kitchen towel, large pot for boiling or a steamer, large bowl, ½ cup measuring cup,*

DIRECTIONS

Open bag of leaves and unfold the leaves. Cut 10 x 10-inch pieces, ensuring there are no big slits or holes. You'll have to skip some parts to avoid the slits, especially along the folds. Save excess leaves for making ties.

Set a kitchen towel on the counter. Clean the banana leaves with a sponge, tiny bit of soap, and running water. Use firm but gentle pressure. Rinse and set on towel. Continue to clean leaves, stacking them on the towel.

Use sections of long leaves to make ties. Tear ¼-inch wide pieces along the leaf's natural lines. Use three strips to make one tie. You'll need about 12 ties.

Fill a pot with water and heat until it is hot to the touch, but don't boil the water.

Transfer the thawed cassava to a large mixing bowl.

Crush the fresh young coconut if it is the very soft kind of mânia. If it's firm mânia, slice into slivers, chop to about 1-inch pieces then add to the bowl of tapioca.

Add the sugar to the bowl. Stir well to combine. Add a half cup of mánha juice (if using fresh mánha) **OR** 1 cup of thick coconut milk if using canned mánha. Stir to combine well.

Pour very hot water, not necessarily boiling, into the baking pan.

Line two pieces of leaves up along the flimsy end. Put both pieces into the pan. Wait about a minute. In the meantime, position your dinner plate next to the pan. The upward curved edges of the plate will help to keep the liquid in the mixture from seeping out too much. After a minute, grab the banana leaves from the midrib or spine end and place on the dinner plate. Holding the midrib end reduces the risk of tearing the leaves. Align the flimsy end with the left side of the plate. The direction of the fibers of the leaves should be running left to right. Cut the leaves along the edge on the other side of the plate, removing the spine. You may use the spine to tie the tamáles or use the strips you made earlier.

Scoop a generous half cup of the mixture and place in center of the leaves. Bring both upper and lower edges of leaves together and fold down two to three times. Fold in the left, soft edge side twice then fold the right side. The side where the spine was will be thicker because the leaves are thicker on that end. Carefully turn the tamáles over to hold the folds in place. Lay the tie across the long edge then flip over and tie, wrap around to tie across short edge, then back to the first side for the final tie.

If you are using foil, bring bottom and top ends of foil together and fold down to mixture – should be somewhat snug. Roll and crease end towards the center – should fold the end at least twice. Work quickly as the liquid may start to seep out at ends. No big deal if it does. Repeat folding at the other end.

Packets should be about 1 inch thick.

If boiling, use enough water to match the height of the tamáles. Bring to a boil. Boil for 60 minutes. Remove one and check for doneness. It should be easy to push down at the middle. Peel leaf away. Open in half at the middle. It should be completely transparent. If it looks off white, it is not done yet. Rewrap with leaf as best you can, then wrap in foil, and place back in pot – or eat the transparent parts! Boil another 15 to 20 minutes and check again.

If steaming, arrange a few in steamer basket. You should be able to see holes between each tamáles. Cover steamer and steam for 90 minutes (less time if tamáles are small and thin). Remove one and check for doneness like above.

Cool 60 minutes once done so the starch can set firmly. If eaten while warm, tamáles in banana leaves will be a little wet. Once they set in fridge overnight, it will all firm up. Sweet tamáles yummy hot or cold!

Packets may be frozen after wrapping, uncooked. When ready, boil frozen tamáles for about 75 minutes. Check for doneness as indicated above.

Recipe courtesy Paula Quinene of Paulaq.com.