

## The lojano tamal as a living heritage of Ecuador's gastronomy

### El tamal lojano como patrimonio vivo de la gastronomía del Ecuador

**Doris Jeanneth Jiménez Durán<sup>1</sup>**  
**Andrea Cristina Aulestia Vizcaino<sup>2</sup>**  
**Jonathan Luis Cruz Pierard<sup>3</sup>**  
**María de Lourdes Larrea Paredes<sup>4</sup>**

#### Published

Instituto Superior Tecnológico Edwards  
Deming. Quito - Ecuador

#### Periodicity

January - March  
Vol. 1, Num. 24, 2025  
pp. 67-83  
<http://centrosuragraria.com/index.php/revista>

#### Dates of receipt

**Received:** June 12, 2024  
**Approved:** November 04, 2024

#### Correspondence author

[djimenez@ute.edu.ec](mailto:djimenez@ute.edu.ec)

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**Abstract:** Culinary heritage reflects the tradition and history of a region through its cuisine. The city of Loja, in Ecuador, is known for its typical dishes, which have been prepared and adapted over time in response to changes in consumption. The lojano tamale is an essential part of the region's diet, and its preparation facilitates cultural interrelation between the productive sector and society. This research aims to identify and understand the processes and evolution of the ingredients involved in the current preparation and their permanence in local cuisine, considering it an important component of intangible cultural heritage. The research is qualitative, using techniques such as observation, interviews, and bibliographic review. The results obtained were analyzed by considering aspects such as geographical distribution, types of filling, masa base, and cooking methods.

**Keywords:** Wrapped, gastronomy, corn, heritage, tamale.

**Resumen:** El patrimonio culinario refleja la tradición y la historia de una región a través de su cocina. La ciudad de Loja, en Ecuador, con sus platos típicos, los cuales han sido elaborados y adaptados a lo largo del tiempo en respuesta a los cambios de consumo. El tamal lojano forma parte esencial de la alimentación de la región, y su preparación facilita la interrelación cultural entre el sector productivo y la sociedad. Esta investigación tiene como objetivo identificar y comprender los procesos y la evolución de los ingredientes que intervienen en la preparación actual y su permanencia en la cocina local, considerándolo un componente importante del patrimonio cultural intangible. La investigación es de tipo cualitativo, utilizando técnicas de observación, entrevistas y revisión bibliográfica. Los resultados obtenidos se analizaron considerando aspectos como la distribución geográfica, los tipos de relleno, la base de la masa y los métodos de cocción.

**Palabras clave:** Envuelto, gastronomía, maíz, patrimonio, tamal.

<sup>1</sup> Bachelor's degree in Hotel Business Administration. Master in Business Management UTE University  
[djimenez@ute.edu.ec](mailto:djimenez@ute.edu.ec)  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8616-5206>

<sup>2</sup> Master's degree in innovation in tourism management, specializing in culinary and gastronomic heritage management Teaching UTE University  
[andrea.aulestia@ute.edu.ec](mailto:andrea.aulestia@ute.edu.ec)  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7509-6153>

<sup>3</sup> Master's Degree in Tourism Management, Bachelor's Degree in Tourism Business Administration UTE University Professor  
[jonathan.cruz@ute.edu.ec](mailto:jonathan.cruz@ute.edu.ec)  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6960-2662>

<sup>4</sup> Master's degree in innovation in tourism management, specializing in culinary and gastronomic heritage management Teaching UTE University UTE  
[llarrea@ute.edu.ec](mailto:llarrea@ute.edu.ec)  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5179-7732>

## Introduction

Reviewing culinary literature involves identifying, consulting, and gathering essential information to understand a country's gastronomic culture and identity. In many cases, this also encompasses aspects of religiosity, rituals, and traditions.

The knowledge of traditional cuisine has been spontaneously passed down through generations. According to Duque (2020), "this knowledge consists of the uses and customs that form a habit that needs to be learned and practiced".

The various techniques and preparations of traditional cuisine have encouraged the exchange of products among different regions, social classes, and ethnic groups. This aspect has helped to keep our culinary heritage alive over time. The transmission of culinary knowledge across generations is an integral part of the intangible cultural heritage of a region. This heritage is continually recreated by communities and groups based on their environment, their interaction with nature, and their history. This process instills a sense of identity and continuity, thereby promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity, as recognized by UNESCO.

An important aspect of living heritage lies in culture and daily life as social and economic phenomena of a region, highlighting the art of cultivating, preparing, and consuming local foods. This process brings unique and unrepeatable experiences to consumers' palates, often evoking childhood memories and forming part of a people's cultural identity (Unigarro, 2010).

In his book *Elogio de las cocinas del Ecuador*, culinary researcher Julio Pazos explores the context in which Ecuador's heritage dishes are prepared. Many traditional Ecuadorian recipes are preserved in books, notebooks, and handwritten or typed sheets, documenting families' favorite recipes and even the tricks used in their preparation. In this way, knowledge is passed down from generation to generation (Pazos, 2016).

Traditional cuisine is an essential component of popular culture, as it not only enriches daily and festive meals but also ensures that the knowledge and techniques used in preparing these dishes become part of our cultural identity (Novillo, *Los "envueltos" de Baños como patrimonio gastronómico de Cuenca - Ecuador*, 2018).

Pazos classifies traditional Ecuadorian cuisine into three types, indicating that these categories are influenced, to varying degrees, by baroque cooking. He identifies three categories of food: ritual, daily, and festive (Pazos, S., *Permanencias culturales y culinarias del Manual de Cocina de Juan Pablo Sanz en Quito - Ecuador: protocolos, cocina tradicional y formas de preparación*, 2010).

Cookbooks are documents containing detailed culinary procedures that explain how to prepare various dishes, offering step-by-step instructions. These manuscripts are carefully preserved by families, representing a valuable heritage passed down through generations. Typically, they are notebooks that include recipes specifying the order and quantity of ingredients and the organization of the process, which may or may not include cooking time (Bernal, 2021).

The use of traditional family cookbooks reflects a deep-rooted respect for the past while also showing dynamic continuity. While these recipes may not represent modern or evolved cuisine by contemporary standards, they have maintained their relevance and are valued over time, holding a prominent place in the popular imagination (Medina, 2003).

Regarding wrapped preparations, the author Santiago Pazos Carrillo, in his article *Recetarios y manuscritos quiteños del siglo XX influenciados por el manual de la cocinera de Juan Pablo Sanz*, mentions that these dishes represent traditional cuisine and are linked to five fundamental principles. First, this cuisine has ancient origins, indicating its practice since very early times. Additionally, it is generally associated with a specific geographical region, although it can be prepared elsewhere with varying ingredients. The recipes are inherited and have been passed down through generations, fostering a sense of community. Moreover, these preparations are "alive," meaning they continue to be made and valued. If they are no longer prepared, they risk being lost and needing rescue. Finally, their reproduction repeats culinary, cultural, and social codes (Pazos, S., *Recetarios y manuscritos quiteños del siglo XX influenciados por el manual de la cocinera de Juan Pablo Sanz*, 2014).

Pre-Hispanic cuisine has significantly influenced traditional recipes by introducing key ingredients such as corn. Corn is fundamental in preparing "wrapped" dishes, serving three culinary functions: it adds flavor and aroma, acts as a container for cooking food in various ways (boiling, steaming, smoking, roasting, or baking), and its husks preserve

the filling (Pazos, S., *Recetarios y manuscritos quitños del siglo XX influenciados por el manual de la cocinera de Juan Pablo Sanz*, 2014).

Today, Ecuadorian wrapped dishes are known by various names and may include a range of ingredients. Some of the most well-known are humitas, chigüiles, quimbolitos, tamales, hayacas, maitos, and tongas, among others.

Ecuador produces different types of tamales, including potato, hominy, rice, green plantain, and corn flour tamales. From this ingredient, a wide variety of dishes and beverages have been created using diverse preparation techniques and complementary ingredients that vary by geographic region. Corn has been a fundamental element in the gastronomic culture of Latin America, playing a starring role in many traditional dishes and representing the identity of its peoples. According to Bernal (2021), since the pre-Hispanic era and the domestication of corn, this ingredient has become a representative component of numerous dishes.

#### Corn

Corn is the second most important crop globally and has been a fundamental component of human nutrition since ancient times. It is known that since pre-Hispanic times, humans began cultivating it, making Mesoamerica the main producer of corn. This cereal has been a protagonist in ancestral food traditions that have endured over time, symbolizing life and identity for many Andean peoples (CIDAP, 2018). According to Guacán (2020), corn has been a staple in the diets of the peoples of the Americas since ancient times. Moreover, corn grains gained great importance as they were considered a sacred plant, serving as the primary food source for Mesoamerican civilizations, particularly the Maya and Aztecs (Joseph, Andy, 2017).

#### Tamale

The term "tamale" derives from the Nahuatl word tamalli, meaning "wrapped food." This preparation is ancient, and its name is associated with cooking corn with lime. While the exact origin of tamales is unknown, some historians suggest their roots may date back to 3000 BCE (Joseph, Andy, 2017).

In Ecuador's highlands, corn is one of the most commonly used products, and its preparations in food and beverages are highly diverse. Among the main wrapped dishes in the country, the tamal lojano stands

out, made from corn. Over time, techniques used for its preparation have evolved, leading to changes in the final product. According to Álvarez and Sammartino (2021), traditionally, humitas were consumed in the summer and tamales in the winter, made with raw corn flour and charqui (dried meat). Nowadays, flour is often replaced with semolina (a more affordable and accessible option), and charqui is substituted with minced meat, allowing these dishes to be enjoyed year-round.

GlobalMedia (2019) interviewed anthropologist Beatriz Ramírez Woolrich, who stated that Mexico alone boasts over five thousand ways to prepare tamales, with around 500 variations of the dish (Ramírez, 2019). Similarly, in Ecuador, tamale preparation varies by location, depending on the ingredients available in different geographic regions. In 1650, in what is now Ecuador, tamales were made with "a portion of corn flour mixed with water and salt, filled with meat and chili, wrapped in corn husks or achira leaves" (Pazos, J., *El sabor de las memorias: historia de la cocina quiteña*, 2008).

In Ecuador, tamales are typically handcrafted by women who have inherited recipes from their ancestors. This dish is consumed across all social classes, with various recipes influenced by local ingredients, resulting in countless flavors and presentations. Tamales are often used as a substitute for bread and served with *café pasado* (traditional brewed coffee).

Corn tamales, also known as peeled corn tamales, see a rise in consumption during the Christmas season, as they are prepared as a wrapped delicacy, though they can be enjoyed at any time of year. Culinary techniques and tools have evolved over time, adapting to new trends and preferences.

Removing the corn husk is essential since failure to do so significantly alters the resulting dough. It has been shown that ashes, which chemically modify the grain and remove its husk, are traditionally used alongside lime. Both wood ash and lime must be thoroughly rinsed with plenty of water, preferably running water, to eliminate any residual odor or taste.

Afterward, the corn is ground, which was once done manually with a *batán* (grinding stone) but is now facilitated by modern grinders. In all regions, ground corn dough is mixed with broth, such as pork broth. In the past, lard was added, but today, oil is preferred for its smoother texture (Rodríguez, 2003).

### Utensils for Tamale Preparation

For many years, firewood has been combined with the bounty of the land to create delicious dishes. Tamale preparation requires various utensils, including tools for shelling corn, such as stone scrapers; pots and pichanchas for making nixtamal (processed corn); hands and grinding stones for milling the grain; and, finally, pots and lids for cooking the dough (Alcantara, Velásquez, Zavaleta, & García, 2020).

### Preparation Method

Tamales are a type of wrapped dish that employs various elements for wrapping. In Ecuador, corn, achira, and bijao leaves, among others, contribute to the tradition of making these dishes, imparting a distinctive flavor. Historically, leaves were used to preserve food for workers during long days, reflecting the functionality and cultural significance of these materials in Ecuadorian gastronomy.

In the past, leaves were collected from forests by families or workers. Today, they are purchased in markets and supermarkets. Additionally, many people used to grow achira leaves in their gardens for wrapping tamales (Novillo & Sinchi, Los envueltos de Baños como Patrimonio Gastronómico de Cuenca, 2018).

For corn preparation, sufficient grains are placed in a clay pot with water and lime. They are cooked until the husk loosens, then removed from the heat and fresh water is added to prevent the corn from absorbing the lime's flavor. The next day, the corn (nixtamal) is washed thoroughly, removing and discarding the husk. Subsequently, it is ground three to four times on a metlatl (grinding stone) to obtain refined dough (Echeverría & Muñoz, 1988).

### Ingredients

Initially, tamales were made with dough consisting only of corn flour, water, and salt, filled with meat and chili. However, today, various ingredients have been incorporated, such as spices, raisins, boiled eggs, peas, carrots, red onions (paiteña), lard, and chicken broth.

Corn is a staple food in Ecuador's highlands, deeply connected to the cultural identity of various regions. There are several varieties of this cereal, classified based on their use, including soft or floury corn, morocho, canguil, criollo, hard corn, chulpi, and hominy (Red de Guardianes de Semillas, 2021).

## The Culinary Offering of a Region

The culinary offerings of a region not only attract visitors due to their diversity and cultural richness but also complement the unique experiences the territory provides. Promoting these culinary traditions is essential to preserving cultural identity and fostering sustainable tourism that benefits the local community and conserves resources (Cruz & Jiménez, 2024).

In the Americas, corn is frequently used in food. In Ecuador, it is known to have arrived more than 6,000 years ago, influencing all cultures, agricultural calendars, and gastronomy in the country. To maintain its vigor, corn needs to be continuously crossbred, resulting in significant genetic diversity. However, it is challenging to define specific varieties due to certain evolutionary lines. Unfortunately, most native varieties are endangered or have already disappeared (Osorio, Castro, & Osorio, 2021).

The following table (Table No. 2) details the ways corn is consumed based on its organoleptic characteristics.

**Table1** :Types of Corn according to their form of consumption

Ranking	Feature
Soft or floury	Tall, long cycle, useful to be consumed as corn (tender), rubber (semi tender) and ripe. Once dried, it is consumed toasted or in flour, which in turn can be raw or toasted. It is used to make tortillas, breads, or to thicken salty and sweet dishes. It is the most diverse, with colors that go from yellow to black, purple, white, red, etc.
Morocho	Tall, very hard grains, with a crystalline cover. It is coarsely ground to prepare different dishes, salt and sweet, of great energetic value and very appreciated for children's nutrition.
Canguil	High altitude popping corn. Native canguiles are colorful, small, nail-shaped kernels, and although they pop less, they are tastier, including the kernels that remain unpopped.

Creole	From hot lands, it is harvested after three and a half months. Yellow and floury grains are used to make tortillas and hard salt.
Hard corn	From hot soils and short cycle, they are mainly used for animal feed.
Chulpi	Tall, long cycle. Soft, for roasting
Mote	Although it can be made with many types of corn, there are varieties that are considered the best. In the northern highlands they are round, medium-sized, yellow kernels; in the Austro they are white, flatter and larger kernels. To make mote, the grains are cooked for several hours with an alkaline agent such as ash or lime. Then it can be peeled, dried and stored for several months. It is given a final cooking so that it opens and is ready to eat.
Source: Taken and adapted from the Guide to cooking and cultivation of ancestral seeds.	

**Table 2:** *Types of Corn Based on Consumption Form*

Classification	Characteristics
Soft or Floury	High-altitude corn, long growth cycle, used as choclo (tender), cau (semi-tender), or mature. Once dried, it is consumed toasted or as flour (raw or toasted) for making tortillas, bread, or thickening dishes. This variety has the greatest diversity, with colors ranging from yellow to black, purple, white, and red.
Morocho	High-altitude corn with very hard, crystalline grains. It is coarsely ground to prepare various sweet and

	savory dishes. Highly nutritious and valued for children's nutrition.
Canguil	High-altitude popcorn corn. Native varieties have small, colorful, nail-shaped grains. Although they pop less, they are tastier, including the unpopped kernels.
Creole	Grown in warm climates, harvested after three and a half months. Yellow and floury grains are used for making tortillas and sal prieta.
Hard Corns	Short-cycle corn from warm climates, primarily used as animal feed.
Chulpi	High-altitude corn with a long growth cycle. Soft grains, ideal for toasting.
Mote	Although many types of corn can be used, some varieties are preferred. In the northern highlands, the grains are round, medium-sized, and yellow; in the southern highlands, they are white, flatter, and larger. To prepare mote, the grains are cooked for several hours with an alkaline agent like ash or lime, then peeled, dried, and stored for months. A final cooking step makes the grains expand and ready for consumption.

Source: Adapted from the Guide to cooking and cultivation of ancestral seeds

#### Culinary Techniques Applied

Currently, tamale preparation involves various techniques related to cooking methods, such as the bain-marie, boiling, and sautéing (rehogado) for the filling. Essential skills include nixtamalization, grinding, kneading, wrapping, and cooking on embers or in ashes. Before the advent of modern mills and steamers, these instruments and techniques were traditionally used for tamale preparation. Their continued use highlights their effectiveness, as many methods remain nearly identical to those employed in ancient times.

### Nixtamalization

Ancestors observed that exposing corn kernels to fire caused them to crack. Over time, they discovered that wood ash helped separate the husks from the kernels. Later, they found that quicklime and hot water produced a similar effect, chemically altering the corn's structure. During this process, the corn absorbs calcium and potassium, while impurities are removed, and amino acids are enhanced in the grain.

For seasoning, tamal lojano is primarily flavored with salt, pepper, cumin, and garlic.

### Complexity

The preparation of tamal lojano is not complex, but it requires certain essential elements. Peeled yellow corn is crucial for the dough; if unavailable, peeled hominy grain can be used as a substitute. Additionally, achira leaves are indispensable for wrapping. These two ingredients are irreplaceable, as their absence would alter the product's essence and organoleptic characteristics.

The writing style and the way recipes are explained have evolved over time. In ancient times, according to the Codex Florentino, recipes were illustrated with drawings depicting the dishes and narrated by indigenous peoples.

Osorio, Castro, and Osorio R., in their work *Tourism and Gastronomy: Experiences in Innovation, Competitiveness, and Management*, highlight that intangible tourism resources include traditions and oral expressions, which are sets of knowledge passed down through generations. This category includes living recipes, which are an essential part of a country's intangible wealth (Osorio, Castro, & Osorio, 2021).

### Practical Recipe Preparation

There is no specific data in historical books about the quantities used in tamale preparation in the past. Therefore, research was conducted with individuals who still make this dish. Through interviews, testimonies from elderly people from the province of Loja were collected. These individuals have sold tamale lojano in Quito over the last thirty years and learned the recipe from their mothers and grandmothers. Their accounts detail the ingredients and process of preparing the traditional tamal lojano.

Interviews contextualized the preparation of this much-loved dish, especially during the Christmas season. A unique aspect of this recipe is the use of yellow corn, known as morochillo, treated similarly to white and dried corn. This corn is cooked with lime to remove the outer husk, soaked for three days, and then ground.

According to the testimonies, the dough was previously seasoned and steamed in large pots over wood-fired stoves. Over time, a filling was introduced, varying based on the household's economic circumstances. It could include pork, or in more humble homes, "pea heart" soaked and cooked into a puree and properly seasoned.

This filling, or *condumio*, typically included red onion, carrots, and peas. Once the dough was prepared, it was filled with this mixture, wrapped in *achira* leaves, and steamed for forty-five minutes.

## **Methodology**

To explore the preparation of *tamal lojano* and its persistence in traditional cuisine as part of intangible cultural heritage, a qualitative approach was adopted. This approach seeks to understand phenomena from the participants' perspectives (Hernández, Carlos, & Baptista, 2014). The study focused on the practice of tamale preparation through individuals who have inherited this knowledge over the years as part of their traditions.

For data collection, primary and secondary sources were identified in documents that contributed to understanding the various wrapped food preparations in Ecuador. Subsequently, interviews were conducted, primarily with elderly individuals from Loja, aiming to uncover the techniques used in tamale preparation. Additionally, observation was employed to identify and understand the processes and the evolution of ingredients currently involved in tamale preparation, allowing for a comparison of changes over time. Finally, data triangulation was performed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the significance of this preparation within traditional cuisine.

## **Results**

The research revealed that, depending on the region or country, there are various recipes for preparing tamales, as well as different wrapping methods. This dish is widespread across the Americas, and the use of

corn in wrapped foods is a fundamental aspect of its gastronomic identity. In Ecuador, particularly in the provinces of the highlands, tamales are prepared in diverse ways, varying in their wrapping, size, ingredients, and filling.

The following table (Table No. 1) presents an explanation of the different corn-wrapped preparations in Ecuador.

**Table 3:** *Typical Dishes Related to Corn-Wrapped Preparations in Ecuador by Zone and Province*

Zone	Province	Dish Name
South	Loja	Cuencan Tamale
South	Azuay	Cuencan Tamale
Center	Bolivar	Chigüiles
South	Cañar	Chivil or Chachi
Center	Cotopaxi	Guagüitos
North	Imbabura	Tamales

Source: Own elaboration

In the geographical context, a classification of typical Ecuadorian dishes related to corn-wrapped preparations is presented by geographic zone and province. This organization highlights the culinary diversity across different regions of the country, emphasizing the significance of corn in Ecuadorian cuisine.

**Table 4:** *Typical Dishes Related to Corn-Wrapped Preparations in Ecuador by Filling and Dough Base*

Dish Name	Dough Base	Filling
Cuencan Tamale	Corn flour soaked and ground, chicken broth, pork lard, salt, pepper, and cumin to taste	Pork or chicken, onion, carrot
Cuencan Tamale	Lightly cooked corn flour, salt to taste	Pork, eggs, raisins, onion, carrot

Chigüiles	Corn flour, water, butter, pork lard, salt to taste	Cheese
Chivil or Chachi	White corn (morocho), water, butter, pork lard, salt to taste	Cheese
Guagüitos	Yellow corn, raspadura sugar, mapahuirá	Pork
Tamales	Yellow corn, raspadura sugar, pork broth from the filling preparation	Pork

Source: Own elaboration

It is evident that most dishes use different types of corn (yellow, white, or soaked), highlighting the importance of corn in the culinary culture of the region. The fillings vary by territory but commonly include pork, chicken, and cheeses, suggesting a preference for rich and hearty flavors.

From a nutritional perspective, these dishes are high in carbohydrates due to the corn base and provide proteins through the use of various meats and dairy products. The inclusion of vegetables such as onions and carrots in some fillings adds fiber and nutrients.

These dishes are representative of Ecuadorian gastronomy and reflect the diversity of local ingredients. They are typically enjoyed during festivals and family celebrations, underscoring their cultural significance.

**Table 5:** *Typical Dishes Related to Corn-Wrapped Preparations in Ecuador by Cooking Methods*

Dish Name	Cooking Methods
Cuencan Tamale	In "tamalera" steaming pots
Cuencan Tamale	In "tamalera" steaming pots
Chigüiles	In "tamalera" steaming pots
Chivil or Chachi	In "tamalera" steaming pots
Guagüitos	Steamed in a bronze pot (paila)
Tamales	Steamed in a bronze pot (paila)

Source: Own elaboration

The use of steaming pots (tamalera) is a traditional technique that ensures even cooking and retains moisture, resulting in a soft and fluffy texture. Bronze pots (pailas de bronce), historically used for Guagüitos and Tamales, contribute a characteristic flavor and are a symbol of traditional cuisine. Steaming in bronze pots may enhance the flavor of the ingredients, adding a distinctive touch to these dishes.

**Table 6:** *Typical Dishes Related to Corn-Wrapped Preparations in Ecuador by Types of Wrapping*

Province	Wrapping
Loja	Achira leaves
Azuay	Achira leaves
Bolivar	Corn plant leaves
Cañar	Huicundo leaves (a type of bromeliad)
Cotopaxi	Achira leaves
Imbabura	Achira leaves

Source: Own elaboration

The findings of this research highlight that tamales are a widely recognized dish, both in Ecuador and across the Americas, as part of ancestral cuisine that enriches cultural identity. Tamales represent not only a traditional dish but also a preparation with roots predating the arrival of the Spanish. According to the article "The History of Hispanic Gastronomy at the University of Charcas in the 18th Century" by David Pérez, tamales originally consisted of a simple dough made from cooked corn without filling. Over time, with the blending of Hispanic and American cultures, a filling (condumio) was introduced to balance the ingredients. Proper kneading of the corn flour is essential for achieving a soft, pleasant texture, while the seasoning of the filling reflects the personal touch of the cook (Rodríguez, David, 1972).

The primary ingredient in tamale preparation is yellow corn, which was traditionally peeled with ash to facilitate cooking. According to the article "Tamales: A New Culinary Proposal", in Mexico, the wrapping varies by region, with corn husks or banana leaves used in coastal and

tropical areas. Other varieties incorporate leaves from plants such as reed, chilaca, potato, and milpa (Hernández, 2022).

In Ecuador, research indicates that achira leaves, traditionally sourced from family gardens, were used as wrapping. Today, supermarkets offer a variety of similar corn flours, including those used for preparing Colombian arepas. It is important to note that substituting traditional corn with commercial flours requires adding more chicken broth to the preparation, resulting in faster cooking but altering the traditional process.

## Conclusions

Preserving and valuing ancestral recipes as intangible cultural heritage is essential. This involves characterizing their distinctive flavors, experimenting with original recipes, and collecting living testimonies of our gastronomy. Documenting this valuable repository of knowledge is crucial to ensuring its transmission to future generations and strengthening cultural identity.

Tamales, a staple in the diet of indigenous peoples for millennia, have undergone significant evolution over time. Today, approximately 5,000 variations of tamales are recorded. However, traditional tamales, made from corn peeled with lime, retain their original essence. While some ancestral techniques have been adapted due to the unavailability of traditional utensils such as grinding stones (metate or batán), there is a general consensus that modern alternatives, such as pre-cooked flours, fail to replicate the distinctive flavor of tamales traditionally ground by hand.

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