

Tortillas: A Cultural History

Paula E. Morton

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The rich history of numerous cultures is revealed in this in-depth investigation into the tortilla.

Paula E. Morton investigates the history of the tortilla from its roots in ancient Mesoamerica to its presence in modern society. Along the way, Morton offers a detailed look at the cultures that have revered the tortilla, making it a symbol of national tradition that has endured generations of social and economic change.

The tortilla's beginnings were simple but far from humble: people of Mesoamerica prayed to gods and goddesses of corn, the plant used to make tortillas; they offered the tortilla to their gods; and Mayans buried their dead with tortillas. Morton also reveals that "the Aztecs loved their tortillas and believed the tortilla had a soul." As she unravels its history, Morton compares and contrasts the differences of the cultures that depended on the tortilla for sustenance.

The main link between all the groups is that, to them, the tortilla is a symbol of tradition and culture. Though the ingredients and the cooking method of the tortilla were adapted to survive the global social and economic changes, tortilla pride remained. For example, during the Spanish occupation, though the indigenous people were busy working for the Europeans, the tradition of making corn tortillas was threatened, but farmers still worked their fields to grow corn because "many refused to break the tie with their land and history."

Morton's in-depth investigation into the tortilla's history clearly presents a wealth of information about cultures and world events that helped shape the tortilla to meet the changing needs of those it sustained. No longer was the tortilla available just to nomadic hunters and gatherers; it was also made available to the sedentary farmer and homemaker—thanks to the introduction of dehydrated corn flour and the technology that produced hand-operated manufactured tortilla presses.

Tortillas offers images from primary sources, such as photographs of women on the street cooking for the Mexican army (during the Mexican revolution) and photographs of the people Morton mentions in her narrative—for example, migrant farmworker Leonel Pérez. Complete recipes and colorful descriptions of tortillas and how they are prepared, not only as food but as a canvas for ceremonial painting, create a history book that is far from a dry or bland collection of dates and events.

Tortillas is an educational and enlightening exposition about the origins of the flattened round disk of dough that has crossed cultures and survived social and political change to remain a symbol of national pride.

MAYA FLEISCHMANN (Fall 2014)

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