

Arepas (Colombian Corn Cakes)

We were in Colombia, recently, for our daughter and son-in-law's wedding. There, we learned of the **arepa** (pronounced "ah ray pah"), which is to the nation of Colombia what the tortilla is to Mexico. ...or more.

It consists of white (or better, yellow) corn meal, ground very fine, formed into a cake half a centimeter or so thick, (sometimes thicker so it can be more easily split and stuffed, grilled. The authentic form of corn meal is called "choclo," yellow cornmeal with a bit of cane sugar mixed in. (The white corn kind has wheat flour mixed in. ...cheaper. Beware!)

It is lamentable that a few years ago, due to a screw-up by a certain large chemical company that was busy genetically modifying corn, some of the FrankenCorn escaped, contaminated the yellow corn crop, and they had to buy it all up and destroy it. That, combined with our government's subsidies on corn-based ethanol (guess who lobbies for that, too) has really disrupted corn supply. ...so hold out for the good stuff, the yellow corn. Down with maiz blanca! (...although arepas made from either type of masa are delicious.)

Uh, where were we? Oh, yeah, arepas. You can stuff an arepa corn cake with anything edible and it tastes great! The pita bread guys got nuthin' on arepas. The menu at one of the restaurants we stopped at in the mountains to the west of Cali listed 27 kinds. The one with deep-fried pork belly is to die from. No! ...die for. There are various meats, cheeses, fruits, mushrooms of various types, various hamburger and cheeseburger styles (hamburger with a fried egg is quite good), various pizza styles (one with ham and Kabanosy sausage), seafood, ...endless varieties. If you can whack a chunk of anything edible off and stuff it in, you're good to go. Add some chimichurri sauce, or maybe some of the fairly tame local pepper sauce while you are at it. You'll love it.

RECIPE for half a dozen Arepas (pronounced "ah ray pahs") (Translated from the package)

- One cup of fine-ground corn meal (masa arepa, or "masarepa") (yellow type preferred)
- One cup of water
- One half teaspoon salt
- One teaspoon butter, margarine, oil, or lard.
- (optional) shredded mild white cheese such as queso fresco, Monterrey Jack, Swiss, or Muenster

Start heating up a griddle or pan to medium-high.

Gradually add the water to the corn meal, mixing as you go. Knead the dough briefly, then let it rest for 3 minutes. Mix in the salt and butter/margarine/oil/lard. Mix in the cheese, if used. Knead briefly. Let rest a few minutes.

Separate the dough into six balls. Flatten each by hand onto waxed paper or a non-stick surface. Work each into a circular shape about ½ to 1 cm thick. If you plan to add an egg or slice of cheese, leave an upturned edge around the upper side.

Grease the griddle or pan lightly. Fry each dough circle on one side until slightly brown, then either

(1) Put the cheese, egg, or filling on one, then slap the uncooked side of another onto it. Grill for a bit until browned, then flip and grill the other side until browned. Serve, or remove to a plate to cool.

(2) flip and grill the other side until browned. Top with an optional topping, or leave plain. Serve, or remove to a plate to cool.

Each arepa can be split on the edge like a pita to reveal a pocket, which can be filled with various ready-to-eat fillings such as cooked bacon, cheese, eggs, meats, vegetables. Optionally, fillings, sauces, etc. may be placed on top. ...more ideas to follow shortly.

Variation: To fix "arepa de huevo," split an arepa (or fix halves, as described above), add a raw egg, seal the side back together with a little moistened dough, and brown until the egg is cooked.