

## HONOURING TRADITIONAL TORTILLAS

*Homesick for the foods of his childhood, Mexican-Canadian Miguel Jiménez was inspired to open his own tortilla bakery and take-out counter.*

WORDS BY SONIA MENDES | PHOTOS BY MELODY MALONEY





In August 2023, Miguel Jiménez opened Tortilla Maker, the first tortillería in Orleans. A former lawyer, he frequently travelled back to Mexico for business. Unable to travel during pandemic restrictions, he found himself missing the foods he grew up eating and it sparked the idea of opening the tortilla factory. The naturally gluten- and preservative-free tortillas are made fresh daily.



**M**iguel Jiménez just wants to share the authentic taste of corn tortillas — along with their health benefits — with Ottawa residents. “Tortillas are very important,” Jiménez explains. “It is part of the [Mexican] culinary culture, it is very important for health and tradition.”

“In other parts of the world, you use bread to accompany your food and you also can make some dishes with the bread, like sandwiches. In Mexico, tortillas are the base of our culinary culture. For instance, you can use the tortilla as bread, or you can use it to make dishes.”

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Born in Mexicali, the capital city of the state of Baja California in northern Mexico, he lived in Aguascalientes, a city in central Mexico, from the age of 15. He says the style of tortillas can differ, depending on the geographic region.

“If you go from Mexico City to the north, they use a lot of processed dough,” he says. “They call it Maseca; they don't use the kernel like we do.”

“[At our store], we do the process more like from Mexico City to the south, the natural one, the original. We feel very proud of that, because it is very good for health.”

Made fresh daily, the tortillas are gluten-free, sugar-free and preservative-free, Jiménez says. “People who are celiac, diabetic, or people who care about their [health] — they are looking for something like this.”

### **Enhanced nutritional value**

Tortilla Maker uses a time-honoured process called nixtamalization. The word nixtamalization originates from the Mexican Indigenous language of Náhuatl, in which “nextli” means ashes and “tamali” means unformed maize (corn) dough. Nixtamalization involves cooking and soaking corn kernels in an alkaline solution, which is a mixture of water and calcium hydroxide (also known as lime). This process significantly improves the nutritional value of maize — increasing calcium, vitamin B3 niacin and iron.

“In Mexico, people don't have problems with their teeth or the bones as much as in other parts of the world, because we eat a lot of tortillas with a lot of calcium,” says Jiménez.

First developed in Mesoamerica, where maize was originally cultivated, there is no precise date for when nixtamalization was

developed. However, the earliest evidence of nixtamalization is found in Guatemala's southern coast, with equipment dating from 1500 to 1200 BC. White corn is used for the tortillas, which turns yellow when it's nixtamalized. Tortilla Maker sources its white corn from Mexico and, more recently, from the U.S.

“The problem now is that Mexico is charging a lot of tariffs for the export of maize,” explains Jiménez. “They don't want to take corn out of Mexico; they need more for themselves.”

While Ottawa producers offer sweet corn, the white corn he requires is currently unavailable. Jiménez says he would like to change that in the future.

“It's going to be a long process, but there is no reason why we can't grow this type of corn here,” he says. “We don't have a long season to get it, but still it would be possible.”

The bakery's open concept allows customers to watch the full process of turning the corn grain into tortillas. After nixtamalization, the corn is rinsed and ground in a mill using two volcanic stones. While it looks simple, Jiménez says there's a lot that goes into the process.

“You need to work with the stones, you need to polish them; it's a little bit of an art,” he says. “Maintaining the correct level of humidity is crucial; it's a delicate balance.”

Finally, the masa, or dough, is ready for the oven. In the centre of the kitchen, a massive machine sourced from Mexico cuts and bakes the tortillas.

“This machine is like an oven, because one part of this machine cuts the masa in the shape of the tortilla, and then it cooks the tortilla at the same time,” Jiménez says. “It works very fast. Technically speaking, we can make up to 1,500 kilograms of tortillas every day.”

While Tortilla Maker's production is not currently at that level, it has a growing list of area businesses that use its tortillas, in addition to its walk-in customers. The tortillas can be found for purchase at some Ottawa-area grocers (Produce Depot, Bienvenidos Latin Market and MargoFresh) and a number of local restaurants are using them in their dishes, including Working Title at All Saints Event Space, Britannia Bake Shop, Corazon De Maiz, Dessert First, Red Apron, Torta Boyz and Toro Taqueria.

### **More than just tortillas**

In addition to tortillas, Jiménez offers Salsas Carlota, an array of homemade salsas inspired by his great-grandmother, Carlota Silvestre Cornejo. Jiménez's 16-year-old daughter, Michelle Jiménez-Bucur, explains that the offerings range from very spicy to very mild. “Even as someone who's not, ‘Yay, spice!’ there's something here



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for everybody,” says Jiménez-Bucur, who manages the social media accounts for the business. “You want lots of spice, you have the Azteca; you want no spice at all — Popotla. My favourite is the Avocado Salsa, because it has just the right amount of spice.”

Tortilla Maker also sells salsa from Gingham Wisdom, Messicana Gourmet and La Chula. Of course, you can’t have salsa without tortilla chips. A purist at heart, Jiménez says he originally wanted to limit his offerings.

“The idea was tortillas, tortilla chips, salsas and guacamoles,” he says. “I thought, ‘That’s it.’” Yet customers asked for more, like ready-made options from the take-out counter. This prompted more additions, including refried beans, taquitos, sopas, tacos de canasta, nachos and frozen or ready-to-eat tamales.

“There are many types of tamales,” Jiménez says. “These tamales are from my region, from the region of Bajío, the lowlands.”

Tortilla Maker offers meat and vegetarian varieties, including rajas (jalapenos) and cheese or sweet guava. Jiménez says he always tries to take time to explain to customers how to prepare and eat the food.

“I have cases that some people call me and say, ‘the husk was very hard,’” he says, referring to the corn husk wrapper of the tamale, which is intended to be removed after heating. “For some people, this is something very new.; they have never seen a tamale.

“If you didn’t grow up with it, you’re not going to know. And it is very interesting to see that they come back.”

Jiménez-Bucur is quick to offer her top recommendation. “Out of the tamales, I’m going to go with chicken because we use a chicken with the salsa that I love a lot,” she says. “So it’s really good.”

In honour of the changing seasons, the newest addition to the menu is pozole — a traditional corn-based soup with pork. That recipe also hails from great-grandmother Carlota. In addition to the pride that comes from honouring the recipes of his ancestors, Jiménez says he enjoys seeing the emotional reactions from certain customers.

“Some Mexicans who come here feel the connection with their memories of their childhood or their families,” he says, adding that the tortilla machine makes a noise that’s very distinctive to those who know it. “I’ve seen men — like my age or older — call their mom or their dad from here, almost crying.

“All the smells, and all the things that you try when you’re a child, they accompany you all your life.”

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**Sonia Mendes** thinks tacos shouldn't be relegated to Tuesdays.