

Gramma's Pan-Fried Memories

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Abstract

This piece was written for my Writing About Food course, where we were asked to create a memoir depicting a “food memory” from our past. As I began thinking about some of my most vivid memories centered around food, I quickly realized that it would be impossible to complete this assignment without thinking about my grandma. Although she was technically my great-grandmother, Gramma was the only “grandmother figure” I had growing up and was my absolute favorite person in the world. We were incredibly close, and I miss her every day. She connected me and my siblings with our Hispanic culture through her love of cooking and providing for her family, and she was often in the kitchen or at the dinner table, encouraging everyone to eat just a few more platefuls of her delicious homemade meals. Losing Gramma was incredibly difficult for me, and replicating some of her famous dishes that I grew up loving has caused some overwhelming emotions more than once. Carrying on Gramma’s love of cooking and continuing to learn about my culture through food are some of the ways I feel most connected to her and our shared memories. I chose to write about a memory I have of using Gramma’s homemade *masa* to make tortillas with her and my younger sister. We had some wonderful times in the kitchen, and I enjoyed documenting one of those times here to look back on again. My greatest takeaway from creating this piece is this: the care that we put into preparing meals and savoring the flavors of good foods should also be directed toward cherishing our best memories with our loved ones.



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*In loving memory of Gramma.
I miss you so much.*

It was the sound of the cooking tortillas that reached me first.

The hiss of the oiled pan, popping and sizzling as the first disk of *masa* was laid down, echoed from the small kitchen and into the living room. My head whipped toward the sound as I sat up straighter on the couch, sliding myself to the very edge of the cushion.

“What are you making, Gramma?” I shouted toward the bubbling symphony, desperately trying to sniff out what food my grandma must have started cooking.

Her curt and clearly distracted voice shouted back, “Tortillas.”

A smile spread across my face, and I eagerly stood to head toward her. The salty smell from the first tortilla had finally reached me. My feet hurried across the plush carpet and onto the smooth tile of the kitchen floor, and my smile grew wider as I glanced around the room.

Gramma was hard at work, flour floating in the air and clinging gently to her clothes, as she mixed the ingredients for homemade tortillas. The fleeting sunlight shining through the small window above her head clothed her in gold to further accentuate the dusty air surrounding her.

She had divided her limited counter space into sections for ease and efficiency, dedicating one to the mixing and one to the rolling and flattening of the *masa* balls. The stove was set with her cast-iron tortilla pan; vegetable oil on standby to be reapplied as needed. Her movements were fluid and practiced, and she glided without a sound or a pause from one section to the next. I stopped to study her for a moment as she rolled out the next ball of *masa* she had plopped onto the floured countertop.

Gramma was a petite woman; the counter and stove rested around the height of her waist, and her clothes always hung loosely on her small frame. Her strong voice and rebellious attitude always added some weight to the space she filled, but there were certain movements, the ones she had repeated all her life, that showed the hidden strength she truly had. The speed at which she moved and the precision she had mastered as a lifelong cook brought strength to her muscles, hardly seen in her otherwise slim arms. She kept her long-nailed fingers raised as she rolled out the *masa*, pushing with the base of her palm against the wooden rolling pin she had used for as long as I could remember. Her brow was furrowed and focused, a sharp contrast to the ease with which her arms flexed and pulled at the pin. The *masa* flattened out and spread beneath her steady hands. Once it had reached the size and thickness only Gramma had perfected, she picked up the disk, pinched it around the edges a bit with her fingers, and tossed it into the pan.

I watched the process with care and a quiet eagerness, waiting until she had gone back to pulling out another handful of *masa* to ask, “Can I have some *masa*?”

Without a word, she finished shaping the mound she had just grabbed into a small ball, being careful to keep her nails away from the wet dough, and handed it to me. I squished the soft, doughy blob slightly in my hand, the smell of flour and the salty stinging air of the cooking tortillas overwhelming my senses. Before I could ask, Gramma reached into one of her utensil drawers and pulled out the child-sized roller my younger sister and I often played with. A perfect miniature replica of my grandma’s roller. Her other hand was already reaching back into the bowl of *masa* as she set the pin in my palm.

I grinned again and giggled, “Thank you!” before sitting down at the tiny dining room table set against the wall facing the kitchen.

The dough had begun to stick to my hand, stretching and squishing apart as I pulled it away from my sweaty palm. I shivered with disgust, “Bleh,” and plopped the dough down onto the table. After plucking a few stray globs from my hand, I excitedly got to work rolling out the dough.

Taking care to center the pin at my palms and lifting my fingers high like she had, I began pressing the rolling pin back and forth against the *masa*. Just like Gramma.

The sounds of slapping feet against the kitchen floor and shouting chants of “Me too!” let me know that my little sister had caught wind of the tortilla-making. She made her way over to Gramma and reached up to receive her own *masa* ball. With the *masa* in her hands, she climbed up onto the chair across from me and squished her dough down onto the table. I shook my head at her in disappointment and tried to ignore her, continuing to roll out my dough and staying focused on matching my technique to Gramma’s exactly.

Shyila noticed me working on my ball and began to whine, “I need a rolling pin too!”

I shook my head again and rolled my eyes at her while I continued working, “Leave Gramma alone. Just use your hands.”

She huffed at me and called out again to Gramma for sympathy. Luckily for her, Gramma had finished rolling out her own *masa* balls and was now focusing on frying the tortillas. She grabbed her rolling pin off the counter and walked it over to Shyila.

“Here. Roll it like this,” she turned Shyila’s mangled ball toward herself and showed her the rolling technique that I had watched her use before. After handing my sister the pin and turning the *masa* back toward her, she turned to me.

I grinned at her and quickly showed that I could roll the dough just like she had, “Like this, Gramma?”

She smiled and placed her hand on my arm to give me a small squeeze, “Yes. Good job.”

I felt a swell of pride rush through me as she walked back to the kitchen to pull some of the finished tortillas off the stove using just her fingers. I watched her calmly pluck each one from the popping oil until she added the last tortilla to the pile resting on a plate off to the side.

Scooping up the dish, she returned to set her homemade tortillas down between us on the table. The warm smell of salted oil and baked flour rushed up from the stack of pan-fried dough. Shyila cheered and grabbed the top tortilla, hissing with pain as the heat reached her fingers. I chuckled at her and grabbed my own tortilla from deeper in the stack, as Gramma scolded my little sister’s hasty choice.

The tortilla was firm and crisp, with varying-sized black spots speckling the pale-colored dough where the oil had been especially hot. The warmth of the tortilla flushed my fingertips as I took my first bite.

My mouth immediately began to water as the rush of heat, salt, and flour filled it.

I smiled up at my grandma and cheerfully exclaimed, while still chewing, “It’s delicious!”

She smiled back at me with a tight nod, “Good. Eat them.”

Shyila was already reaching for her third tortilla, and I quickly grabbed another one to save before she could stuff them all into her grubby little hands.

Gramma walked back into the kitchen and began cleaning up, placing her utensils back in the mixing bowl and preparing to wipe down the counter. As she began stacking her bowl and pan into the sink, she turned toward me for just a moment, and I caught a glimpse of a slight smile resting on her face. I couldn’t help but smile back at my beautiful grandmother as I took another bite of her perfect tortilla.