

CALIFORNIA

LOS ANGELES EDITION

CC 5G

Wednesday, October 30, 2003

latimes.com/california

Tamales of the world, united

Under one roof, cooks from all over make them like back home.

By BARBARA HANSEN
Times Staff Writer

EVEN if you went to Oaxaca or Honduras, you might not find tamales that compare to these. What a surprise to find them right here in Los Angeles, at a gem of a place on 7th Street called Mama's Hot Tamales Cafe.

The cafe is a sort of tamale co-op, with a communal kitchen where cooks from all over Latin America make the tamales they grew up eating.

Beatriz Garcia, who is from Tlacolula, Oaxaca, makes chicken tamales authentic down to the herb *pitiona*, which she blends into a green sauce.

Omar Lezcas, from Pochutla, Oaxaca, combines black beans and squash in one *tamal*, chicken with black *mole* in another. His *mole* sauce takes two days to prepare.

Eva Muñoz, from Santa Barbara, Honduras, makes a chicken *tamal* with masa that's extraordinarily soft and smooth, seasoned with cilantro, green pepper, onion and garlic. Achioté tints it a warm yellow.

Mama's Hot Tamales Cafe opened last year as a training center for the vendors in MacArthur Park, just across the street. Here they learn to prepare food according to health department regulations. In the morning, you can see them — most are women, but a few are men — carrying sacks of ingredients for the tamales they will assemble in the small kitchen, then load onto their carts.

These are the same tamales that you order in the cafe, which opens early for breakfast and closes after lunch. It's a pleasant place to sit, looking out at the sycamores and palms that frame the park, tranquil despite its crime-spotted history.

The cafe is also a lively center of Latino culture, the host to a surprising range of events, from last Friday's Frida Kahlo look-alike contest to this Friday's artists reception. On Sat-



LUIS SINCO Los Angeles Times

CORN IN COMMON: Waitress Rocío Ramirez and chef Juar Oleaz show off a platter of tamales made at Mama's Hot Tamales Cafe in Los Angeles. The cafe's kitchen also serves as a training center for the vendors in nearby MacArthur Park.

urday, the cafe is sponsoring a series of Day of the Dead events in the park.

Bohemia Books, which opens into the cafe, stocks folk art and Latino literature. Bright colors flow from one room into another. The walls are gold, blue, fuchsia-pink. In the mural that dominates the cafe, the goddess of corn sits in a golden sunburst, behind plump ears of corn. To her right, Indians plant a crop. On the left, women kneel to grind the kernels.

Clearly, tamales are the heart of the business. Each week, the cafe issues a menu of 10 to 13 tamales from a master list of about 50, changing a few to introduce new flavors.

A Tenochtitlan *tamal* from

Guerrero, Mexico, coats shredded beef with ground corn as chewy as grits. A *mixote tamal* from the same state bundles chicken, potato, carrot, bell pepper, masa and fragrant avocado leaf in a banana leaf.

A Oaxacan black bean *tamal* sits on a piece of *hierba santa*, an anise-flavored leaf used frequently in Oaxacan cooking. Silky soft black bean tamales from Honduras and El Salvador are called *pisques*. The tender creamy masa for a chicken *tamal* from Amatitlan, Guatemala, blends corn and rice.

There are sweet tamales too. One from San Salvador contains peaches, raisins, prune and coconut. Pink guava and chewy cubes of cheese are in a

tamal from Bogotá, Colombia. A sweet strawberry *tamal* comes from Colima, Mexico.

Drinks include a wonderful cinnamon-scented *horchata*, made from ground rice. Others are *jamaica*, *tamarindo* and hot, thick *champurrado*. In addition to tamales, the lunch menu offers cheese enchiladas, chicken fajitas, quesadillas and chicken with *mole*. For breakfast there are eggs, a breakfast burrito and *chilaquiles* — fried tortilla pieces in a red sauce made with California and pasilla negro chiles. And tamales, too.

And after your meal, you can stroll over to the park, meet the vendors and learn what makes their tamales so extraordinary.

Mama's Hot Tamales Cafe

Location: 2124 W. 7th St., Los Angeles, (213) 487-7474.

Price: Tamales, \$1.75 for one, \$1.50 each for orders of two or more; breakfast, \$2.50 to \$5; lunch, \$5 to \$7.

Best dishes: Tamales, *chilaquiles*, *horchata*, *champurrado*

Details: Open 7 a.m. to 2 p.m., Monday through Friday; 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., Saturday and Sunday. No alcohol. Street parking. All major cards.