

OFF DUTY



GOOD EGG The tortilla española at Té Company in Manhattan is as luscious as a wedge of brie.

The Ultimate Tortilla (Does Not Exist)

It takes under an hour and only four ingredients to make this dish—and a lifetime to make it your own

BY CHARLOTTE DRUCKMAN

IT IS EITHER a most opportune or bewildering time to learn how to make tortilla española. In the last year, at least four new cookbooks on Spanish cuisine have arrived, each with a recipe for the traditional tapa and no two of them the same.

The potato-dense Spanish "omelet" is a compact, satisfying one-pan production. An affable breakfast, lunch, dinner or drinking buddy, it's ready in less than an hour and can be made in advance. Some may throw chorizo in there, or, in the Basque region, cod, but the classic has only four components, eggs, potatoes, onions and oil; five, if you count salt. Still, finding decent examples in the U.S. isn't so easy. They're often desiccated or floppy, and lacking in flavor.



CRACKING THE CODE Chef Frederico Ribeiro behind the counter at Té Company in Manhattan.

"Most people do not manage heat properly," said New York City chef Alex Raji of El Quinto Píño, where you can enjoy one of the few respectable, appropriately slightly gooey tortilla wedges in town. "You must toggle between high and low and you must know when to stop stirring and start shaping the sides." That's only the half of it. "People are shy about using enough oil, and most hesitate when flipping," she continued. "Both cause problems."

Ms. Raji included her tortilla recipe in "The Basque Book," which she co-authored with her husband, Eder Montero, and the food writer Rebecca Flint Marx. It calls for four flips. She believes this "improves the shape of the edges and keeps the tortilla from over-browning." The only modification the chef makes when adapting her instructions for home cooks is to recommend they use a blend of olive and canola oils, as opposed to olive alone. Canola is less expensive, for one thing. And, as Ms. Raji notes, if you're not working with a delicate one, "100% olive can create bitter flavors."

In Asheville N.C., chef Katie Button serves tortilla española at her tapas bar Cúrate. The recipe, included in her new cookbook of the same name, has less potato than Ms. Raji's, cooks a bit longer and only flips once, causing it to pick up more color in the pan. Ms. Button, too, calls for a 50/50 blend of oils, to replicate the flavor of a mild Spanish olive oil. She maintains her most valuable lessons were learned at the side of her Spanish mother-in-law. After years of repetition, "I finally feel like I can make a tortilla as good as

hers," Ms. Button said.

In his Spain-focused culinary travel book, "Grape, Olive, Pig," Matt Goulding describes what sounds like my dream tortilla, served at Taberna Pedraza in Madrid. Cooked by co-owner Josefina Pedraza over a low flame, "it arrives to the table soft and pale, jiggling like a waterbed; slice into it and it exhales across the plate."

I had all but given up on finding anything like this in New York City. Then Frederico Ribeiro, a Portuguese chef who trained in Spain, put a slice of his Spanish tortilla down in front of me at Té Company, the tea salon he opened at the end of 2015 with partner Elena Liao. It was custardy, almost like a brie, with the pastel-yellow hue of a newly hatched chick. I asked him how he was able to keep it in that barely solid state and move it in and out of the pan. He mentioned something about a wet plate and I realized I was going to need a demo. Mr. Ribeiro agreed.

Prepared in a small, deliberately crowded pan, his tortilla has an ingredient list that extends to garlic, which he cooks with the onions before adding fingerling potatoes. The onions and garlic become sweet, the tubers, creamy. He beats them together, feverishly, with three eggs, then cooks this mixture for two minutes on each side. The finished product shows not even the barest hint of brown. "It should feel like a baby's bottom," Mr. Ribeiro said, patting his tortilla with a grin.

I took notes, wrote up a recipe and practiced—and practiced some more. It will never be perfect. I'm not sure there is such a thing as the perfect tortilla española. But I know I'm on my way to close.

Frederico Ribeiro's Tortilla Española

TOTAL TIME: 55 minutes SERVES: 6

- 1 medium yellow onion, finely chopped
- Neutral oil, such as grapeseed or canola
- 2 cloves garlic, finely chopped (optional)
- 3 cups peeled and thinly sliced coins of fingerling potatoes
- Kosher salt
- 3 large eggs

1. Place onions in an 8-inch nonstick skillet. Add enough oil to submerge onions. Cook on high heat 2 minutes, then add garlic. Cook until onions and garlic are sizzling and moving in pan, but before they begin to take on color, about 3 minutes. Reduce heat to low and cook until onions are soft and translucent, 10-15 minutes.
2. Place potatoes in a bowl and massage with 2 generous pinches of kosher salt into potatoes.
3. Add potatoes to pan in an even layer covering onions and garlic. Increase heat to high. (Pan will be very crowded.) Stir potatoes frequently for even cooking, taking care not to break them. Bring liquid to a simmer, then reduce heat to low. Continue to cook until potatoes are soft and creamy, about 20 minutes.
4. Transfer contents of pan to a mixing bowl. Pour off most of oil from bowl into a separate container, leaving about 2 tablespoons in bowl with potatoes. Set aside reserved oil for later use. Wipe pan clean.
5. Add eggs to potato mixture in bowl, aggressively stirring to create a batter that resembles soft-scrambled eggs. Break up potatoes for a

- creamier, wetter texture, but avoid mashing them. Season with salt.
6. Just before cooking tortilla, rinse a large, flat plate under running warm water. Remove plate from faucet and shake it off, so plate is slightly wet. Use your hands to spread drops of water over plate's surface so it's just slick. Place plate beside stove so it's easy to grab when you're ready to flip tortilla.
7. Return clean pan to stove over high heat. Add 2 teaspoons reserved oil and tilt pan to coat. Once oil is just hot, add egg batter, gently swirling pan to prevent sticking as sides begin to set. Once batter starts moving as a unit when swirled, after no more than 2 minutes, you'll know it's ready to flip.
8. To flip, cover pan with inverted plate. Flip plate and pan together to turn half-cooked tortilla onto plate.
9. Let tortilla sit on plate for about 30 seconds while you return pan to stove over high heat and add enough oil just to lightly coat pan. Once oil is hot, take pan off heat and place on counter next to plate with tortilla. Lift plate and use a wooden or rubber spatula to carefully and gently slide tortilla back into pan, cooked side up. Use spatula to shape tortilla, gently pushing any uncooked batter underneath.
10. Set pan over medium heat and cook tortilla just until it moves as a unit when swirled in pan, 1-2 minutes. Remove from stove, wait 1 minute, then flip finished tortilla onto a plate. Serve warm, at room temperature or cold, sliced into wedges.

GAMECHANGER

SOUR POWER

Tangy tamarind paste punches up all kinds of dishes, drinks and dressings

THINK OF tamarind as the love-child of lemon and caramel. The tart and sticky pulp comes from the pod of a tropical shade tree. Pressed into blocks of paste, it must be reconstituted with hot water and pressed through a sieve to remove any seeds and gnarly fibers. The alternative, a syrupy concentrate available in jars, also tends, confusingly, to be called paste.

Tamarind pairs beautifully with orange, garlic and ginger to make a fast and zesty marinade for chicken and pork. Its tartness renders drinks ex-

tra-refreshing. Tamarind agua fresca quenches thirst across Mexico. Here in the U.S., chef Andy Ricker mixes tamarind with bourbon, lime juice and simple syrup for a bracing whiskey sour.

I love the acidity and richness tamarind brings to a dish. The excellent recent cookbook "Birna Superstar" employs this ingredient extensively—in bright curries, in a puckery sour-leaf soup, in a good-on-everything tamarind-ginger dressing. "Tamarind adds a deeper, rounded kind of acidity," said the book's co-author Kate Leahy.

"It lasts forever in the refrigerator, so it's good to have on hand for those days when there aren't any lemons or limes in the house." —Jane Black

Where to Buy: Both tamarind paste and concentrate are available at Indian, Latin American and Southeast Asian markets. For paste, opt for one labeled seedless, like Cook brand (\$8 for 16 ounces), though a few seeds may be hiding inside even these. Laxmi (\$6 for a 14-ounce jar, plus shipping) is a high-quality concentrate.

Bang out a batch of granola: Heat 2 teaspoons tamarind concentrate with ½ cup light brown sugar and ¼ cup coconut oil until sugar dissolves. Combine with 2 cups oats, ¼ cup each shredded coconut, cashews and dried apricots and a generous pinch of garam masala.



Assemble an agua fresca: Mix ¼ cup each tamarind concentrate and brown sugar. Add 5 cups water and stir until sugar dissolves. Drink over ice.

Gun up a ginger dressing: Soak 2½ ounces tamarind paste in ¾ cup hot water and strain. Add 1 teaspoon each sugar, grated garlic and ginger, and salt.