

# Holidays are flavored with tradition

By Gracie Cavnar

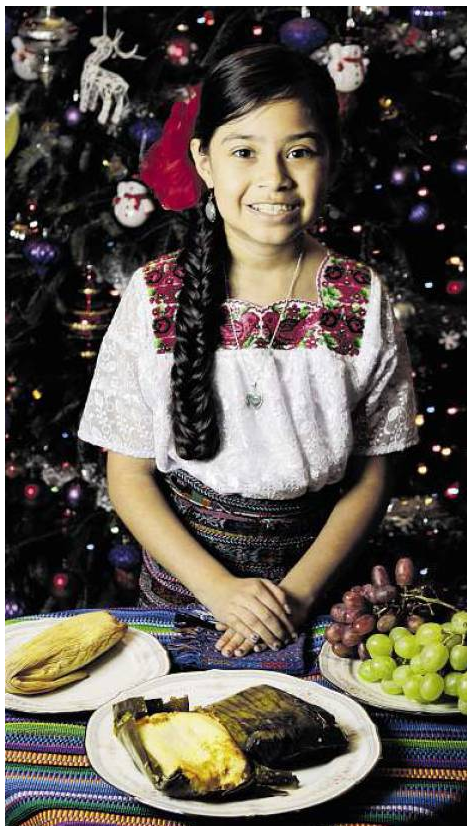
**HC** A few years ago, I spent countless hours and crazy dollars scouring eBay for editions of the Better Homes and Gardens cookbook from the 1940s.

I was frantically searching for a lost recipe — a note I'd scribbled on a scrap of paper during a long-ago phone call with my mother. It was the key to a velvety piquant pineapple cheese dressing we use on our Waldorf salad and critical to my family's Thanksgiving meal. The parade of iconic red and white plaid binders that arrived in my mailbox triggered memories of hours spent cooking with my parents. They were some of our happiest times together.

For millennia, cultural legacies, family traditions and lifetimes of shared memories have centered on food. Holiday meals are especially poignant. Everyone hankers for their own favorite dish — a link to their childhood.

In the American South, sweet potatoes, pecans and cornbread figure prominently at the table. Texans have long shared in those traditions, compounded by food that we have learned to love from our neighbors even farther south. For instance, though we find pecan pie irresistible, my hometown of San Antonio is more strongly influenced by Mexico than Louisiana. Every December, grandmothers and aunts gathered in someone's kitchen to grind masa, stir steaming pots of picadillo and roll tamales — a sure signal to the children that Santa was close behind.

Our second-generation Welsh-Irish family happily absorbed the ancient tamale-making custom into our own holiday rituals. We experimented over the years with all kinds of fillings, from whole shrimp with their heads peeking out, to sweetly delicious dessert tamales made with



Melissa Phillip / Houston Chronicle

**Jaqueline Marroquin, 9, won the Recipe for Success Foundation writing contest with an essay describing her family's tradition of making Guatemalan tamales, center, at Christmas. Chuchito and grapes also are part of the traditional meal.**

cinnamon and pecans, and served with that other Mexican specialty — hot chocolate.

Making Christmas tamales is a tradition that I passed along to my kids and grandkids, though I raised my family in Houston,

where cultural diversity has inspired us to expand our tamale repertoire. That's one of the yummiest features of living in our melting-pot city: Traditions from hundreds of countries offer a dizzying choice

of culinary adventures.

Every year, I am reminded of this rich panoply when Recipe for Success Foundation conducts a story-writing contest for fourth-grade students. We ask the kids to tell us about their favorite holiday food in an essay that also describes the tradition behind the dish and their family's preparation rituals. The holidays described are as varied as the dishes.

I love to take a literary tour through the recipes of Hanukkah, Kwanzaa and Eid al-Fitr. And it's always particularly interesting for me to read about traditional Christmas dishes such as Vietnamese pho or Ethiopian wat — so different from my own childhood.

This year, half of our contest semifinalists wrote about tamales, every recipe unique. There were Mexican-style tamales enshrouded in cornhusks filled with jalapeño and garlic-spiked pork, or with chiles and chicken, or with onions and beef. There was a story about red and white Honduran tamales filled with peas, green beans, olives, potatoes, garbanzos, rice and spicy anchoite chicken, all wrapped in a banana leaves.

Our contest winner, 9-year-old Jaqueline Marroquin, explained that a 3,000-year-old Mayan tradition inspires her Guatemalan family's Christmas tamales — a statement itself full of cultural layers.

Jaqueline's story describes her Aunt Irma's method of coating banana leaves with a rice paste and layering that with a sauté of chicken, cumin, onions and tomatoes, then topping everything with a pureed sauce made of roasted pumpkin seeds, sesame seeds, dried chiles and tomatillos. Her story's measurements are not precise, and the directions are very general because, after decades of making Christmas tamales, her Aunt Irma cooks instinctively.

With few cookbooks available

that feature them, traditional Guatemalan tamale recipes are passed from one generation to the next in the kitchen, where kids join the cooking party as soon as they can stand on a chair.

Since many of us don't have that option, I suggest Mexican-style tamales are a good starting point, because recipes are easy to find. My favorites come from "The Cuisines of Mexico," by Diane Kennedy and Rick Bayless' "Mexican Kitchen" cookbooks. Tamale making includes small tasks easy enough for young children to participate and generates a busy kitchen full of family and friends that turns quickly festive with storytelling. It can be a multigenerational culinary adventure and a wonderful new holiday tradition for your family.

## Pineapple Cheese Dressing

From Better Homes and Gardens Cookbook (1947)

- ½ cup sugar
- 4 teaspoons cornstarch
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- Juice of 1 lemon
- Juice of 1 orange
- 1 cup unsweetened pineapple juice
- 2 beaten eggs
- 6 ounces cream cheese, softened at room temperature

**Instructions:** Mix together sugar, cornstarch and salt in the top of a double boiler set over a pan of water. Stir in lemon, orange and pineapple juices. Turn heat to medium and cook about 20 minutes. Slowly add beaten eggs, stirring constantly so they don't curdle, and cook 5 minutes longer, continuing to stir. Remove from heat and cool slightly. Using a hand mixer, beat the cream cheese into the cooled mixture, and chill.

*Gracie Cavnar is the author of "Eat It! Food Adventures with Marco Polo" and is the founder of the Recipe for Success Foundation.*