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Food Detective: In Chile, tortillas are for sharing, sustenance

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Last Modified: Sep 27, 2011 11:58AM

Chef Rick Bayless once said to me, "Chicago arguably has the best tortillas in the world."

We're indeed fortunate to have many outstanding local tortillerias, some grinding grain on-site and producing tortillas of either corn (favored in southern Mexico) or white flour (more popular in northern Mexico), delivered daily throughout Chicagoland.

Even such fresh tortillas, however, seem a species apart from hot-off-the-griddle, hand-shaped wonders at Pilsen's Casa de Samuel, the North Side's Sol de Mexico or many of the only-on-Sunday food stands at the Maxwell Street Market.

These tortillas are distinctly Mexican, of course, but the word "tortilla" applies to a very wide range of foods. Spanish and Cuban tortillas, for instance, are more like omelets, made not of grains but of eggs and other ingredients such as onions and potatoes, and served warm or cold.

Panamanian tortillas look like fried puffy doughnuts. Guatemalan tortillas are palm-sized, easily foldable into two-bite tacos.

Chilean tortillas are almost too big for one person to handle, and preparing and eating them seems to require a group effort.

During Chile's winter, I had dinner at the home of Ernestina Cruz Cruz in a small, dusty pueblo in the Atacama Desert, some parts of which haven't had rain in over 400 years. Living in one of the driest places on Earth is challenging; still, people find a way to make it work.

The Cruz Cruz family prepares tortillas of white flour, lard, baking soda and water, hand-pressed and cooked over fire. These "tortillas de rescoldo" (scorched tortillas) are crisp and smoky, quite crunchy and frequently dressed with pebre, a red salsa. Fancier versions incorporate fatty nubs of chicharron (fried pig skin). Rarely seen on restaurant menus, these tortillas are sold in the street and at roadside stands throughout rural areas.

On a cold desert night, we huddled around a crackling fire, tearing off chunks of a large charred tortilla set on a grate above red coals. In our group was Clemente, whose small mill outside town is driven by water that flows through ancient irrigation channels. Each neighborhood "allyu," or clan, is allotted water according to a traditionally enshrined schedule.

In springtime, as streams begin to run from the Andes, families in each allyu pick up washed-down debris that could clog the waterways. This communal effort ensures that everyone gets clean water as planned.

That shared spirit was alive in those who gathered by the fire, breaking off scraps of bread and eating what they'd made together, warmed by the communion of the scorched Chilean tortilla.

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