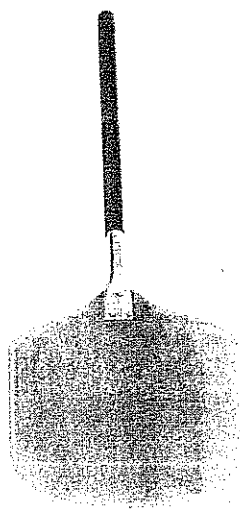


15.31 ALLIED METAL
ALUMINUM PEEL

The usefulness of this professional metal peel with hardwood handle will surprise you. Its 14"-wide blade,

tapering to a sturdy 21" wooden handle, slides under as many as five loaves of crusty bread or a family-sized pizza. The peel is well balanced and supports even the weight of a bubbling fruit crumble wedged in a hard-to-reach spot in the oven. Three solid rivets attach the blade to the tubular handle holder, assuring that this rigid peel will last through a lifetime of home baking and heavy-duty cooking.

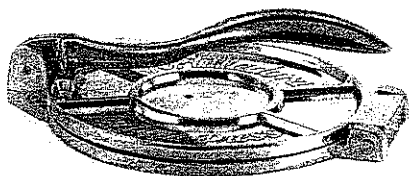
15.32 ALLIED METAL
BAKER'S PEEL

An elite group of twenty-six Italian pizzerias has come together to form the Associazione Vera Pizze Napoletana, the defenders of the true Neapolitan pizza. All members vow to make their pizza in time-honored ways, which means the pizza must be thin-crust, baked in a wood-fired oven, and made with classic toppings, not the newfangled likes of Peking duck. Their symbol is Pulcinella, Italy's masked clown, carrying the large wooden peel necessary to place their masterpieces into the oven. This diminutive version sports a 12" by 14" rectangular blade ideal for use in a home oven. The overall length of this peel is 22", long enough to be useful but not so long as to be unwieldy. One end of the blade is sharpened slightly so it slips easily under the bread.

TORTILLA & CHAPATI PRESSES

LONG BEFORE THE EARL of Sandwich lent his name to a classic portable food, flat pieces of cooked bread dough were used to wrap and transport any number of savory foods—the Mexican tortilla, the Indian chapati and *paratha*, and the Turkish *pide* are just a few. Simply patting a ball of sticky dough between flattened palms or rolling it with a wooden pin will transform it into a smooth, uniform circle, but there are also specialized tools to assist with the

process. Most presses operate on a simple mechanism—when pressure is exerted on the handle, the two flat plates of the press force the dough out into a flat disc. The main criteria for selecting a tortilla or chapati press are the same: proper construction, whether made from wood, cast iron, or aluminum, and a secure and comfortable handle, which acts as a lever to exert pressure on the plates. The plates must sit evenly on top of each other.

15.33 VILLAWARE METAL
TORTILLA PRESS

For centuries the sound of gentle and clapping was heard throughout Mexico as women prepared each

meal's tortillas from scratch. Sadly, the ancient and difficult art of the *torteando*—slapping a small ball of corn dough into the paper-thin flatness of a tortilla—is dying out. Nearly everyone in Mexican cities buys ready-made tortillas.

For those of us who still prefer to make our own, a simple heavy-duty tortilla press like this one is essential. It consists of two round, flat, cast-aluminum plates 6" in diameter with a hinge at one end and a 7"-long

handle at the other end. To use the press, lay a piece of plastic wrap—a sandwich bag is ideal—on the bottom plate, then place a walnut-sized ball of dough made from *masa harina* corn flour on top. Cover the dough with another layer of plastic wrap, close the press, and push the handle down firmly. Open the press and lift off the top section of plastic. You should have a flat, round tortilla ready for the griddle. This same press is an excellent tool to use to flatten

CORN TORTILLAS

✂ RICK BAYLESS ✂

With powdered *masa harina* so widely distributed these days, more of us have learned how wonderful a fresh-baked tortilla is. And with the fresh-ground dough (*masa*) becoming available from *tortillerias* in so many communities, it won't be long until the freshest-tasting home-baked tortillas are part of many of our lives. Though tortillas take some time to prepare, it's time well spent—at least on special occasions. Other times, store-bought, factory-made tortillas can be served as the authentic accompaniment.

15 tortillas

1 pound fresh *masa* for tortillas, store-bought or homemade
or

1½ cups *masa harina* mixed with 1 cup plus 2 tablespoons hot tap water

1 THE DOUGH If using *masa harina*, mix it with the hot water, then knead until smooth, adding more water or more *masa harina* to achieve a very soft (but not sticky) consistency; cover with plastic and let rest 30 minutes. When you're ready to bake the tortillas, readjust the consistency of the fresh or reconstituted *masa* (see Cook's Notes, below), then divide into 15 balls and cover with plastic.

2 HEATING THE GRIDDLE Heat a large, ungreased, heavy griddle or two heavy skillets: one end of the griddle (or one skillet) over medium-low, the other end (or other skillet) over medium to medium-high.

3 PRESSING THE TORTILLAS Cut two squares of heavy plastic to fit the plates of your tortilla press. With the press open, place a square of plastic over the bottom plate, set a ball of dough in the center, cover with the second square of plastic, and gently flatten the dough between. Close the top plate and press down gently but firmly with the handle. Open, turn the tortilla 180°, close, and gently press again, to an even ¼" thickness.

4 UNMOLDING Open the press and peel off the top sheet of plastic. Flip the tortilla onto one hand, *dough-side down*, then, starting at one corner, gently peel off the remaining sheet of plastic.

5 GRIDDLE BAKING Lay the tortilla onto the cooler end of the griddle (or the cooler skillet). In about 20 seconds, when the tortilla loosens itself from the griddle (but the edges have not yet dried or curled), flip it over onto the hotter end of the griddle (or onto the hotter skillet). When lightly browned in spots underneath, 20 to 30 seconds more, flip a second time, back onto the side that was originally down. If the fire is properly hot, the tortilla will balloon up like pita bread. When lightly browned, another 20 or 30 seconds, remove from the griddle (it will completely deflate) and wrap in a towel. Press, unmold, and bake the remaining balls of *masa*, placing each hot tortilla on top of the last and keeping the stack well wrapped.

6 RESTING Let the wrapped stack of tortillas rest for about 15 minutes to finish their cooking, soften, and become pliable.

COOK'S NOTES

TECHNIQUES

ADJUSTING THE CONSISTENCY OF THE DOUGH You want the dough to be softer than shortbread dough (or Play-Doh, if that rings a louder bell), about like a soft cookie dough (though it isn't sticky). Reconstituted *masa harina* should be as soft as possible, while still having enough body to be unmolded; it should feel a little softer than perfectly adjusted fresh *masa*. *Masa* is not elastic like bread dough, but fresh *masa* will have a little more body than a dough made from *masa harina*. Because the dough dries out readily, it is necessary to add water from time to time; tortillas made from dry dough usually won't puff much, and they'll be heavy and somewhat crumbly.

UNMOLDING If the tortilla breaks when you peel off the plastic, the dough is too dry. If the tortilla refuses to come free from the plastic, either you've pressed it too thin or the dough is too soft.

GRIDDLE BAKING If the lower heat isn't low enough, the tortilla will bubble and blister immediately and the result

will be heavy. If the higher heat isn't high enough, the tortilla will not puff, which also means it will be somewhat heavy. Don't leave the tortilla for too long before flipping it the first time; it will dry out and then not puff.

GETTING TORTILLAS TO PUFF After you flip the baking tortillas the second time, pressing on them lightly with your fingertips or the back of your spatula will encourage the two layers to separate.

INGREDIENTS

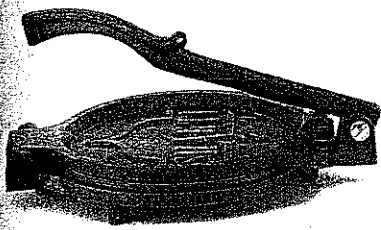
MASA VS. MASA HARINA Though fresh *masa* is unsurpassed for taste and texture, *masa harina* makes good tortillas, ones with a certain toasted flavor and a slight graininess.

TIMING & ADVANCE PREPARATION

Masa harina dough should be made at least ½ hour ahead (though it will keep for several hours at room temperature). Allow 15 to 30 minutes to press and bake the tortillas, depending on your proficiency and amount of griddle room. The hot tortillas can be wrapped in foil—towel and all—and kept warm in a low oven for an hour or so.

ough for Chinese dumplings or scal-
pancakes.

15.34 CHAPATI PRESS



It is not easy to roll thin, evenly shaped chapatis or *pooris* out of damp and sticky whole-wheat dough. As a matter of fact, if you don't have an Indian grandmother, a press like this is probably the best way to make proper Indian breads. Even in India, many urban families have taken to using presses for their bread-making. The device resembles a tortilla press and works on the same principle. A ball of dough, placed in the center of the press, is quickly and smoothly flattened into a perfect circle when the press is closed over it. This press

is made of two hexagonal pieces of enameled cast aluminum that are joined by a large, barrel-shaped hinge. Circles of pale blue plastic, 5" in diameter, are fastened to the inner

surfaces of the press to prevent the dough from sticking. With an implement like this in your kitchen you should have no hesitation about making a variety of Indian breads.

MY SOURDOUGH STARTER

✧ NANCY SILVERTON ✧

When I decided to open a sourdough bakery in 1988, I didn't know much about wild yeast starters. But I knew what I didn't have, which was the one-hundred-year head start of the Poilâne bakery in Paris. If I was going to make a quality bread, I needed to get my century going *tout de suite*. Certain information about starters had trickled down to me: I knew that flour and water were all you needed and that the natural yeast that lives on the skin of grapes is what kick-starts the process. But how many grapes? And what proportion of flour to water? "Eureka!" was achieved in a rented refrigerator that stood in the middle of what would be the dining room of Campanile, containing three white plastic buckets of fragile experimental slurry that I prayed wasn't being corrupted by sawdust and grit. Two batches were abject failures: 5 gallons of papier-mâché paste. But the container that bubbled ever so slightly is the mother to not only 15,000 pounds of white starter used daily at La Brea Bakery, but of loaves produced all over the country by protégés and consultees. What I discovered along the way is that wild yeast starter and an old Bordeaux have nothing in common but grapes. Age has little to do with a starter's success. It's all about daily monitoring and constant care.

BREAD MACHINES

INVENTED IN JAPAN, the bread machine came to the United States in 1987, where it was initially viewed as a novelty that would never fly. To the astonishment of the appliance industry and food professionals, however, the American consumer embraced bread machines. Never mind that most of the loaves they produced were not as good as the store-bought kind. They enabled unskilled, time-pressed cooks to bake the most basic, yet most complex, demanding, and exacting food by themselves without doing much more than measuring ingredients, dumping them in, and pressing a button. For many, the aroma of a loaf in the "oven" was a new but divine experience. Modern folklore is full of stories of how homes have been sold thanks to the smell wafting in the air of bread baking in an electric machine. On a more serious note, for

those who do not have ready access to a good bakery, a bread machine will provide loaves made without chemical additives and with nutritional boosters like wheat germ and nonfat dry milk.

There are wide discrepancies between the performances of various models. The best ones turn out a credible loaf that can compete with many in the supermarket, if not in the artisanal bakery. While bread machines come with a laundry list of special features—everything from beeps indicating it's time to add raisins and nuts, to crust-color settings, to jam and cake cycles—your most important consideration should be the quality of the finished product, and that's hard to tell from reading the box. For the most part, we've found that those with pans in a traditional horizontal shape bake loaves with a better texture, not