

# From tapas to pinchos, Spanish tortilla is just right

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SPECIAL WRITER

The Basque Country, in northern Spain, features quintessential Mediterranean cooking. Most Basque dishes feature a few healthy ingredients, including tomatoes, onions, peppers, and olive oil. Typically, Basque cooking is simple. Most dishes are sautéed, stewed or roasted.

While other Spaniards eat tapas, Basques serve pinchos. Both are enjoyed in bars, often with wine or beer, before lunch or dinner. The main difference is that tapas can be anything served in small portions (and often eaten with a spoon or fork), from sliced cheese to one quail or clams in green sauce, while pinchos are always food to pick up with your fingers or on a toothpick. (Pincho means "to prick.")

Whether you are in the Basque Country eating pinchos or further south having tapas, tortilla de patata, also known as tortilla Española, is both a classic and a favorite. I grew up eating potatoes and eggs, but until I sampled this tortilla on my first trip to Spain,

I had no idea how extraordinary this combination could be.

In Spain, tortillas are always a kind of omelet. They have nothing to do with the flour or corn tortillas of Mexico; both simply come from the same Latin root of the word for a round cake.

A tortilla's creaminess comes, in part, from the way the potatoes are cooked. Half-submerged in olive oil, they are set over heat gentle enough to cook them without frying. This careful cooking makes the potatoes tender and velvety.

Although most of the generous amount of oil used is then discarded, what the potatoes soak up is more fat than most of us want. To remedy this, I have developed a technique using chicken broth and a mere tablespoon of olive oil.

With this method, using starchy potatoes like Russets or yellow-fleshed varieties, and cutting them into equal-size cubes so they cook evenly, you will still get a perfect tortilla. Cut it into one-inch pieces for pinchos, or serve it in wedges as a main course.

## TORTILLA DE PATATA

1 pound Russet potatoes, scrubbed and dried  
1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil  
1 small onion, finely chopped, about 1/2 cup  
1/2 cup fat-free chicken or vegetable broth  
3 eggs  
3 egg whites  
1 teaspoon salt  
Freshly ground pepper

To cut the potatoes into even cubes, first square them by cutting a thin slice off 4 sides of the unpeeled potatoes, then cut each potato into 1/2-inch cubes.

In a heavy, medium, non-stick skillet, heat the oil over medium-high heat.

Sauté the onion until it is golden, about 4 minutes. Add the potatoes, pressing them to make 1 even layer covering the pan. Add 1/4 cup of the broth. Cook 5 minutes. Stir the potatoes to turn them. Add 2 tablespoons broth, press the potatoes back into one layer, and cook 5 minutes.

Repeat this process again. Stir

the potatoes a fourth time and cook until they are al dente, 3-5 minutes.

Meanwhile, in medium bowl, beat together the eggs, whites, salt and pepper.

Add the cooked potatoes to the eggs and let sit 5 minutes. Set aside the skillet; do not wipe it out.

Spray the skillet in which the potatoes cooked with non-stick spray and place it over medium-high heat. Pour the eggs and potatoes into the pan, spreading them to make an even layer. Cook until the eggs are set enough that you can lift the edges of the tortilla and slide it around in the pan, 4-5 minutes, reducing the heat, if necessary, to prevent the omelet from getting too brown.

To turn the tortilla, place a dinner plate over the skillet. Picking up the pan, flip it so the tortilla drops onto the plate. Slide the tortilla back into the skillet, with the uncooked side down. Cook until the eggs are set all the way through, 2-3 minutes.

Slide the cooked tortilla onto a



Something different: In Spain, tortillas such as always a kind of omelet.

serving plate. Let it sit at least 5 minutes, or until it is room temperature. Then, for pinchos, cut the tortilla into 20 squares by slicing it into 5 strips one way, then making 4 cuts crosswise, and serve with toothpicks. Or, cut the tortilla into 6 wedges and serve.

**Nutrition information:** Each of the six servings contains 154 calories and 5 grams of fat.

Written for the American Institute for Cancer Research by Dana Jacobi, author of "The Best of Clay Pot Cooking" and "The Natural Kitchen: SOY!"

# Vegetarian lasagna-style casserole tasty dish for Passover

AP — A lasagna-style casserole defined as dairy and containing no pasta can play a nutritious role in a Passover meal. This Vegetarian "Lasagna" is exactly that, put together with tasty layers of eggplant, tomatoes, mushrooms and cheese.

The recipe is from "The New York Times Passover Cookbook" (Morrow, \$25), edited by Linda Amster. The book, subtitled "More Than 200 Holiday Recipes From Top Chefs and Writers," is a selection of recipes that have appeared in the paper, augmented with contributions from cookbooks written by past and present Times food columnists.

## VEGETARIAN 'LASAGNA'

4 medium-large eggplants, about 5 pounds total  
8 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil  
1 1/2 pounds fresh mushrooms, sliced

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1 cup chopped onions  
1 1/2 cups chopped sweet red pepper  
6 cloves garlic, minced  
8 cups well-drained canned Italian plum tomatoes, about four 28-ounce cans  
2 teaspoons chopped fresh oregano  
1 teaspoon chopped Italian parsley  
Salt and freshly ground black pepper

4 tablespoons unsalted butter  
4 tablespoons potato starch  
5 cups whole milk  
4 cups shredded mozzarella cheese  
2/3 cup matzo meal  
1 cup, about 4 ounces, freshly grated Parmesan cheese

Preheat the broiler. Line a large broiler pan with foil.

Cut eggplants into 1/2-inch slices, discarding the ends. Place slices in a single layer on the broiler pan and broil until lightly browned, turning the slices once to brown both sides. Repeat until all slices have been browned, then set aside.

Heat 3 tablespoons of the oil in a very large, heavy nonstick skillet over high heat. If you do not have a very large (4-quart) skillet, use two skillets. Add mushrooms and stir-fry until they have wilted. Remove them to a bowl.

Add 1 tablespoon oil to the pan or pans along with the onions, sweet pepper and garlic. Reduce the heat to medium-low and cook the vegetables, stirring until they are soft, about 10 minutes. Add the tomatoes and simmer until fairly smooth, about 20 minutes. Add the oregano and parsley, and salt and pepper to taste. Mix half

the tomato sauce with the mushrooms and set the rest aside.

Melt the butter in a medium-size saucepan over medium-low heat. Whisk in the potato starch, then slowly whisk in the milk. Cook over medium heat, whisking constantly, until the sauce comes to a simmer and is thickened and smooth. It will not be a very thick sauce. Season to taste with salt and pepper and remove from the heat. Mix in the shredded mozzarella.

Use 1/2 tablespoon of oil to grease two baking dishes, each about 9 by 13 inches and 2 inches deep (see note). Spread a little of the plain tomato sauce in the bottom of each dish.

Place a layer of eggplant in each

dish, using about 1/3 of the eggplant. Spread with 1/2 the tomato-mushroom mixture, then sprinkle with 1/3 of the matzo meal. Spoon on 1/2 the mozzarella and white sauce mixture. Repeat the layers.

Finally, top each baking dish with a layer of eggplant and spread with a thin layer of plain tomato sauce. Sprinkle with remaining matzo meal and Parmesan cheese. Drizzle with the remaining oil. Cover the baking dishes with foil. If the dishes are prepared more than 2 hours before serving, they should be refrigerated.

When ready to bake, have the baking dishes at room temperature. Preheat the oven to 350 F. Place the baking dishes in the

oven and bake for 15 minutes. Uncover the dishes and bake 25 to 30 minutes longer, until the ingredients bubble and the top lightly browns.

Meanwhile, reheat the remaining tomato sauce. When the dishes are removed from the oven, allow them to stand for 5 minutes before serving. Serve extra tomato sauce on the side. Makes 12 to 16 servings.

**Note:** If you cannot fit both baking dishes in your oven, bake one at a time. In that case, cover the first one with aluminum foil while the second one bakes. If both "lasagnas" are prepared in advance, they can be refrigerated, then brought to room temperature and reheated at 425 F for about 15 minutes before serving.

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