

Wrapped to success

TORTILLAS HAVE BEGUN TO DEVELOP FROM A TREND-SETTING FOOD INTO A TRADITIONAL FOOD PRODUCT IN EUROPE



+ In the past two decades, a baked product has developed an amazing track record in the US which is astonishing even for this country of unlimited possibilities. We are referring to tortillas here. At their peak, sales amounted to more than 6bn USD accounting for more than 30% of the entire bread production, according to figures provided by the American Tortilla Industry Association (TIA), McLean, Virginia. More than 84bn tortillas were produced in year 2004. This amounts to one tortilla per day for each American.

American industry experts do not believe that the tortilla boom was a short lived, temporary fashion. "Tortillas have moved from their niche market into the mainstream", reports Ken Sanchez, Vice-President, Marketing at Mi Rancho, a tortilla producer from San Leandro, California. "Now we are serving markets that had not been available earlier."

Taco shell sales are going down and have been for 15 years. As Americans become more educated on Mexican food, they want it more authentic, and the pre-fried Taco Shell is an American invention, not Mexican. Mexicans who are obvious the heaviest users generally do not shop in large supermarkets but in independent stores that are usually owned by other

Mexicans or in stores that are set up with the authentic Mexican food they know.

Wraps

Wraps belong to one of the new markets. They are an American development based on tortillas. The thin ethnic flat-bread originated in Mexico where, even today, no meal can be imagined without tortillas. Every Mexican eats an average of nine tortillas a day. This amounts to 900 million in this country alone.

Tortillas were introduced into the US by Hispanic immigrants, who retained their eating habits in their new country. It was in the 1980s that something really astonishing happened with the small ethnic specialty item. It was no longer consumed just as an accompaniment to meals; it was wrapped around a filling. Very quickly, fillings were offered in different flavors to suit every taste: Mexican, exotic, Asian-style, vegetarian and sweet. This indicates the success factor of this product. Tortillas are used in the US, even as fold-over sandwich wraps, as edible salad bowls and as replacements for pizza crust.

Within the scope of a nationwide campaign for the reduction of carbohydrates in the 1990s, wraps often replaced bread in restaurants and households. A survey initiated in 2004 by TIA revealed that 87% of all participants from the high quality catering service offered wraps on their menu. In more basic restaurants, it was still 74%. Food designers picked up on this consumer request for healthy food. They developed whole grain tortillas, tortillas rich in dietary fiber, gluten-free tortillas, tortillas with omega 3 fatty acids, 96% fat-free tortillas as well as organic tortillas.

Wraps in Europe

Tortillas have been distributed in Europe – mainly in the form of wraps – since the 1990s. However, there is no data available on sales figures or consumption. The large market research companies only list tortilla chips in the category of savory snacks. Soft tortillas or even wraps are not included. The large European tortilla manufacturers also have no precise figures (expect their own sales figures, of course). But they recognize the trends. “From all Europeans, the Scandinavian people consume the most tortillas,” explains Patrick Maselis, General Manager of nv Snack Food Poco Loco, Roeselare, Belgium, one of the largest tortilla producers in Europe. “They literally wrap everything. In Norway, I even came across a hot dog wrap.” Great-Britain is also a large market for tortilla suppliers. The market declines to the south of Eu-

rope. In countries such as Italy, Croatia, Serbia or Montenegro, the wrap consumption is almost zero. One exception is Spain due to its closeness to the Central American culture. Therefore, it is not by accident that three of the eight largest European tortilla producers are located in Spain: Liven S.A. in Barcelona, Mexifoods S.L. in Madrid and Azteca Foods Europe S.A. in Valdemoro. The latter one is a joint venture with the American Azteca Foods, Inc., Summit-Argo, Illinois. In addition, there are three tortilla producers in the UK: Honeytop Specialty Foods Ltd. in Dunstable, Discovery Foods Ltd. in High Wycombe, and a production facility of Gruma Sa, in Coventry. Gruma is the largest tortilla producer in the world. Its headquarters are in Monterrey, Mexico. The second tortilla production plant in Europe of Gruma is in Roermond, the Netherlands. Other suppliers are Santa Maria AB, Mölnådal, Sweden, and nv Snack Food Poco Loco, Roeselare, Belgium. Poco Loco boss, Maselis estimates that there are between three and ten other smaller, regional tortilla producers in Europe. All European companies started in the 1990s with the production of soft tortillas. Nobody is expecting a boom similar to the one seen in America. Nevertheless, the tortilla market is predicted to grow into Europe. Experts are optimistic. McDonalds has integrated a chicken wrap in its standard product range in Germany which costs 1.99 Euros. “We are expecting the German market still to grow. Wraps have ▶

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managed to move from the trend segment to the classical food service sector”, comments Gabriella Umbach, marketing communication manager at Salomon FoodWorld GmbH, Großostheim, Germany. This system supplier for “out-of-home” consumption considers itself as a pioneer in the German tortilla market and has sold wraps since 1999. However, Salomon does not disclose its supplier. It is reported to be a Dutch company.

In Germany, the filling varieties are still limited. However, when looking at the range from a European producer, it can already be anticipated what might happen in this market segment in the future. Several suppliers offer so-called Dinner Kits for different European markets. These kits contain tortillas, sauces and dips. The consumer just has to add fresh vegetables and meat. Preparation time: 15 minutes. Available flavors are Mexican, Indian, and Chinese.

Tortilla production

Tortillas are not the domain of bakeries. Some of the European producers started out with Mexican sauces and spices and imported tortillas before they decided to set up their own tortilla bakeries. Others started with the production of savory tortilla chips. It is only Honeytop in Great-Britain which, since its foundation in 1984 has baked ethnic bread (naan, pita, chapatta). This bakery is well established and delivers its specialty breads, for example, to McDonalds in Europe, where they offer their Indian or Mexican week specials. Some producers have even ordered the machines for the production of flatbread in the US. The leading manufacturer of equipment for the automated production of flat bread, Lawrence Equipment, El Monte, California, has provided, for example, many presses, ovens and cooling systems adjusted to the special tortilla production requirements. Other Californian machine manufacturers such as Casa Herrera, Pomona, and J.C.Ford, La Habra, are also suppliers to the European tortilla producers.

Lines for the production of tortillas are available from European suppliers as well, such as Rondo Doge, Burgdorf, Switzerland, Fritsch GmbH, Markt Einersheim, Germany, Tromp Bakery Equipment, Gornichen, the Netherlands, and APV Baker Perkins Group Ltd., Petersborough, UK.

Some quality aspects have to be considered in the production of tortillas: they must be soft and easy to roll, have a light color with toasted spots. The spots must be uneven and not too



large. Despite the 6-10% oil content, the flatbread must not have any fatty appearance and the tortillas must not stick together. Furthermore, the shape should be symmetric and the dough must neither contract nor flow.

Mexican tortillas are mainly made from corn flour, while the tortillas in the US and Europe are almost exclusively made from wheat flour. Corn tortillas are thicker, their texture is leathery and they have a distinct corn flavor. “There is no market for corn tortillas in Europe.” Patrick Maselis is pretty sure about that. The European taste preference is blander. This corresponds to the taste of wheat tortillas. Depending on the size, one tortilla contains 35-50 g flour.

Following the preparation of the dough, there are two ways of bringing the tortillas into shape: The dough is either sheeted and round shapes are cut out or it is formed into small dough balls and then pressed. Cut tortillas

have a small amount of flour on their surface and have a dry appearance. The most common method is pressing. The dough is passed through a dough divider, then rounded and finally transported to a hot press where it is pressed into shape. These tortillas are smooth and shiny and have very small flakes and layers on their surface. The shaped dough pieces are moved immediately into the tunnel oven. They are turned once during the baking process. The raising agent blows up the tortilla which then comes into contact with the top baking plate. Here, the characteristic toasted spots develop. The customer determines the color intensity and number of dark spots. The baking process takes only 30 seconds at 250 °C. Residual moisture is about 30%.

After baking, the tortillas are immediately sent through the cooler. The next station is a computer-aided quality control. Size and shape, number of dark spots and degree of browning are detected via scanner. Non-conforming products are rejected. The tortillas are then packed, either MAP, frozen or fresh, as the customer requests.

The challenge in tortilla production is that the products must be soft and elastic in order to be used as wraps. This texture is achieved with the addition of oil. Experts talk about 6-10% added oil. Strong flours with high water absorption are used to prevent the wrap having an oily surface. Another solution is often the addition of L-cysteine or enzymes.

Health trends

The current most favorable feature of the wrap in Europe is that it is new and trendy. However, if the wrap is to be increasingly consumed as a health food – as in the US – then the list of ingredients with its many additives will be impedimental. Some flour mills have already developed solutions to solve this issue. They offer tailor-made flours which provide the desired properties without having to be labeled as additives. “The market is interested. It is currently just a matter of price”, confirm industry experts. +++

A hand is dipping a croissant into a cup of coffee with a thick layer of foam. The coffee is in a yellow mug on a white saucer. Next to the coffee is a chocolate brownie topped with nuts and a chocolate chip cookie. The scene is set on a yellow tablecloth with a newspaper in the background.

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