

NOSH



By Alix Wall,
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An Emeryville artist is hosting tamale parties to celebrate the sustainable technology of communities of color



Emeryville City Council Member John J. Bauters and Emeryville Mayor Ally Medina joined artist Praba Pilar (right) to make Mesoamerican tamales at the first Techno Tamalada at Emeryville Citizens Assistance Program. Photo: Natalia Mount

On a recent Saturday in Emeryville, 550 tamales were cooked, given away and eaten. Two hundred were chicken, 150 bean and cheese and another 200 vegan. Mexican women who specialize in a Mesoamerican style from Mexico made the tamales, assisted by various community members, including Emeryville Mayor Ally Medina and other city officials.

While the Bay Area is no stranger to tamales, the day was about more than chowing down on delicious masa. It was a “Techno-Tamalada,” organized by Emeryville-based performance artist and scholar [Praba Pilar](#) as a celebration of community, indigenous food traditions and sustainable technology.

Pilar, who describes herself as “a diasporic Colombian,” started thinking about tamale-making as a technology when she was an artist-in-residence in upstate New York during a discussion about emerging technologies.

The elaborate process of making tamales starts with a process called “nixtamalization.” During this process, maize is prepared by soaking and cooking it in an alkaline solution, usually with [pickling lime](#), which makes the corn’s nutrients more available and easily digestible. Without this powerful ancient technology, cultures who rely on corn for the bulk of their diet risk suffering from malnutrition.

Tamalada is the Spanish word for the party at which tamales are made. Pilar will be throwing two more “Techno-Tamaladas” in Emeryville: on Saturday, Aug. 24, featuring hot tamales, an African-American dish from the Mississippi Delta and on Sept. 21, with Colombian tamales from the Andes (both events run from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.). Future events will happen in Oakland on Oct. 19, and Dec. 14, in Fruitvale.

“The tamale is naturally slow food. You can never make hundreds of tamales alone; you have to do it with other people. Often, families do it together. You bring people to help you make them and help you eat them.” — Praba Pilar

Pilar said she chose tamales for her project for another reason, too.

“The tamale is a naturally slow food,” she said. “You can never make hundreds of tamales alone; you have to do it with other people. Often, families do it together. You bring people to help you make them and help you eat them. There’s no point in making five, you have to make hundreds.”

Another fun fact about the tamale is that it is made and beloved by different cultures, which is why each of the first three installments will focus on three distinct styles from various parts of the Americas.

In Mexico, tamales can be wrapped in either corn husks or plantain leaves. They can be sweet or savory. They can be made with just plain corn masa or with meat and vegetables, cheese and possibly mole. Those from the Mississippi Delta are made with cornmeal rather than masa and are sometimes fried. They are often spicy. Colombian tamales usually have plantains in them and are wrapped in plantain leaves. They mostly contain meat, but given the demographic here, more will be vegetarian, said Pilar.

As a performance artist, Pilar has done several projects around the importance of corn because “it’s such an important symbol of the Americas,” she said.

She noted that seeing food as a mechanism for performance originated from the Dadaist movement. “I’m providing a convivial setting for unexpected encounters. I’m providing a space for sharing. When you give something away, there’s an invitation to dialogue, to see if you’re willing to contribute. The individual encounters that happen are unexpected for me too, so it’s art as a social practice.”



Artist Praba Pilar. Photo: Sarah Lin

Pilar chose [Emeryville Citizens Assistance Program \(ECAP\)](#) to house the project, because it serves the needy already by giving away food every day, as well as delivering food to homeless encampments.

“They give people their dignity,” said Pilar. “When people come for food here, it’s like they’re shopping in a supermarket.”

A grant from the Emeryville community grants program paid for this series, and a grant from the California Arts Council is supporting the future *tamaladas* in Oakland.

At the first event, many who came to eat the tamales were ECAP clients, as well as artists and neighbors and everyone in between. Pilar hopes future events will have similar attendance.

“When the mayor Ally Medina and city council members came and made and served tamales for two hours, that was a commitment to their community that I rarely see in other cities,” said Pilar. “It’s what politicians should be doing and rarely do.”

Bobby Miller, ECAP’s director, said that he had no idea how the day would go, but he said the event “turned out miraculous. The idea was to draw the community together over tamales, it was something that people could enjoy and relate to and we saw that happen here. People were driving by and stopping and parking to see what was going on.”

Miller was looking forward to the next one, saying the tamales didn’t go unnoticed by ECAP’s regulars, either.

“We have some people who are very obstinate; when they get out of the food line, they go off in their head and create some disturbance,” said Miller. “But even those people were happy and enjoying the tamales.”

The next [Techno-Tamaladas](#) happen from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., Aug. 24, with African-American hot tamales from the Mississippi Delta and Sept. 21, with Colombian tamales from the Andes at ECAP, 3610 San Pablo Ave., Emeryville. Similar events will be happening in Oakland Oct. 19 and Dec. 14, in Fruitvale, with locations to be announced. All events are free and open to the public.