

37. Are You Hungry?

I think my favorite meal is Christmas Eve chalupas – a one-dish wonder with something yummy for everyone. Not your usual holiday fare, not an authentic Mexican meal, yet no Christmas would be complete without it.

All the parts are cooked, ready for each person to create their own way. We don't even dish everything up – assembly line begins at the stove. Ingredients include crispy small corn tortillas, baked flat in the oven; Ranch style beans (and only this brand will do); ground beef seasoned with taco seasoning; chopped lettuce and tomato salad (don't forget to salt and pepper the chopped salad because it should be a bit wilted and weepy); grated cheddar cheese; chopped onions, fresh sour cream; guacamole salad (made Sam's way just a little sweet, not too chunky); and salsa (Pace in a bottle, various intensities provided).



Traditional with my family, this was another of my mother's stretch-the-meat masterpieces. After my parents separated, my mother's meals always included a big batch of pan-fried potatoes (recycling Crisco over and over) and a big mixed green salad, mostly Iceberg lettuce with

homemade dressing (Mazola corn oil, salt, pepper, garlic powder, and lemon juice shaken like crazy in an old Miracle Whip jar). Those two "courses" accompanied spaghetti, soups, casseroles -- so many meat-thin recipes that tasted so good I never even realized we were poor. I thought we *chose* to eat ground beef. Chalupas stood all alone.

When Sam and I first married, what with our big schoolteacher paychecks, I turned often to her well-remembered meals and discovered how she had made every mouthful count. Delicious, inexpensive meals – too carbohydrate heavy for our own good perhaps, but the way poor mothers have managed to feed their families for centuries.

The chalupas work so well for a come-and-go eat-when-you're ready holiday casual meal that soon became our contribution to each Christmas. Not for us, the hours baking the perfect turducken, or any formal sit-down dinner.

Don't like onions? Don't include them in your chalupa.

Vegetarian? Stick with the beans.

On Atkins again? Skip the tortillas.

Many a "friendly" disagreement has broken out over the order of assembly, but everyone knows the cheese goes between the meat and beans, or how's it gonna melt? Really? I mean really, come on!

Imagine my surprise all these years later to discover that the word *chalupa* is the name of the boats Aztecs used to get around the canals of Tenochtitlan, their capital. Cortez conquered and then razed the city in the early 1500s, where now rises la Ciudad de Mexico. Chalupas are the specialty of the southern regions of Mexico, Puebla, Guerrero and Oaxaca. Oh, and Taco Bell.

Traditional chalupas are made with a deep fried flat bread, or corn tortilla molded into the shape of a small boat and stuffed with cheese, tomatoes, onions, sour cream, refried beans, beef or chicken and drizzled with salsa. Generally, the thought was to be able to pick them up like a taco and eat them by hand. The Americanized Taco Bell version is made generally the same way they make tacos but with a flat tortilla rather than the boat shape.

But I gotta say, our *boat* won't float, it's loaded. Ours require a plate, fork and a bunch of napkins should you dare to try to pick it up. Cortez, eat your heart out! And thanks, Mom.