Opinion
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"These quesadillas are one of my comfort foods," writes Sr. Helga Leija. "They're quick, easy and require only three ingredients. When I make it, I feel my mother's presence." (Helga Leija)



by Sr. Helga Leija

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This recipe is part of a Lent 2025 series where National Catholic Reporter staff will share some of their favorite meatless meals. Sign up for the EarthBeat Reflections email newsletter to receive a recipe in your inbox each Friday of Lent this year.

Growing up, everything important happened around the kitchen table. It was the place where we celebrated birthdays, graduations and successes. It was where we discussed serious things like grades or negotiated permissions and curfews. It was also the place where we healed from heartbreak and grieved losses. And whether it was a moment of joy or worry or sorrow, we always had food to go with it, because, as the Mexican saying goes, "*Las penas con pan son buenas*" ("A sorrow shared with bread is easier to bear").

The women in my family are naturally gifted cooks, and cooking has always been about more than just food for us. It's about connection. The recipes I have learned do not involve measurements; they're passed down, shaped by taste and feel. I have learned to cook and bake by smelling, tasting and watching for the right color, the right consistency and the right texture.



(Helga Leija)

We never had a lot of money growing up, but somehow my mother managed to make every meal a feast. These quesadillas are one of my comfort foods. They're quick, easy and require only three ingredients. When I make it, I feel my mother's presence. She would never claim it as her own — her meals are more elaborate — but every time I make this meal, I remember the way she stood in our tiny kitchen, hands moving with practiced speed, while still being able to watch that we were doing our homework right.

These quesadillas are easy to make, but it is one of those meals that makes everything feel a little better. And it will taste like a Mexican mom made it for you. Mexican promise.

Quesadillas

Ingredients

- Maseca corn flour
- cheese
- salt
- warm water

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Instructions

1. Take however much Maseca you want (I use about 3/4 cup) and add a little bit of salt. Pour warm water (this is important) a little at a time until it has the consistency of playdough and no longer sticks to your hands. It should be pliable but not sticky, and not so dry that it crumbles.
2. After you have achieved the right consistency, make individual little balls. Then use a tortilla press with two pieces of plastic to flatten one ball at a time. I cut a zip-close bag to make two sturdy plastic pieces. If you do not have a tortilla press, two books or two flat plates will work.
3. Once you have flattened the ball, it should look like a small tortilla. Fill half of it with cheese. (I use mozzarella.) Lift the plastic and fold the empty side over the side with the cheese, then press the sides to close. It should look like a large dumpling.
4. Fry it until it turns golden. It will be crispy on the outside and warm and cheesy on the inside.
5. Enjoy with beans and Mexican cream or cheese and salsa.

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This story appears in the **Lent 2025** and **Our Daily Bread** feature series.