

Signature Dish: Arepas, a reminder of home

Who

Denise Malave, 19, a sophomore at Florida Gulf Coast University, and her mother, Evelyn Malave, 43, of Clearwater.

What

Arepas, a Venezuelan corn bread stuffed with meat, cheese or black beans.

About the recipe

Denise Malave was 18 when she left home for Florida Gulf Coast University. She took an electric arepas maker with her, a reminder of home. Now a sophomore, she makes arepas when she feels homesick on campus.

Her mother, Evelyn, was also 18 when she left home for the first time. Her journey was longer: She left her birthplace, Caracas, Venezuela, for the United States. She came with her husband, a baseball player for the Toronto Blue Jays, and her first child. In a foreign country far from the rest of her family, she kept her culture alive through food, like Venezuelan arepas.

"When you come to America, the first thing you think of is hamburgers, hot dogs, french fries," Denise says. "Well, when you go over there (Venezuela), the first thing you think of is arepas, cachapas (sweet corn pancakes) and empanadas."

For the Malave family, arepas are more than just another meal. They often eat separately on ordinary nights. But everyone gathers together when they share a Venezuelan meal.

"When she makes arepas, cachapas or empanadas, it's something different," Denise says. "It's a time for us to gather around . . . and talk about what's going on in our lives."

Evelyn has fibromyalgia and is often too ill to cook. But she tries to make arepas a couple of times a month.

"She used to cook all the time when I was younger, before she got sick," Denise says. Now, cooking is a struggle, "so when she actually makes these arepas, it's like Christmas for us."

The cook says

"It's the easiest thing you can ever make," Denise says. "It's easier than opening a pack of cookie dough from the supermarket and sticking it in the oven. If I can't mess it up, anyone can do it."

On the side

Plantain chips.

>>easy

Arepas

2 1/2 cups of lukewarm water

1 teaspoon of salt

2 cups white cornmeal

1 teaspoon extra-virgin olive oil, more for greasing skillet

Pour the water in a bowl. Add the salt slowly. Then stir in cornmeal. Incorporate the ingredients well by hand.

Once the dough is forming, slowly knead in the extra-virgin olive oil. Continue to knead until the dough is smooth and firm. It will still be a little sticky when ready. Separate into 10 to 15 pieces, depending on how big you want the arepas, and shape into round balls, between the size of a peach and a baseball.

Grease a skillet with olive oil. Flatten balls with a spatula. Cook each side of the dough balls for about 5 minutes or until golden brown.

To serve, while arepas are hot split the discs without cutting all the way through. Add butter or whatever filling you desire, including deli meats or shredded or sliced cheese. The heat from the arepas will melt the cheese.

Makes 10 to 15.

Source: Denise and Evelyn Malave