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Memo: Lucy's Tamale Factory

233C S. White Road, near Alum Rock Boulevard, San Jose. (408) 929-7311.

Types of food: Tamales are it at this takeout shop.

Average meal price: Under \$5

Hits: Pork tamales.

Misses: No seating.

Amenities: Who needs amenities when tamales are this good?

Hours: 8 a.m.-10 p.m. daily, including Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, when the shop closes a little earlier.

TAKEOUT TAMALES AT THEIR FINEST AT LUCY'S

ALETA WATSON, Mercury News

About this time every year, I begin worrying where I'll get tamales for Christmas Eve. I don't have relatives who make tamales, I'm not comfortable buying tamales from the sellers I've encountered in front of supermarkets, and the prospect of making them is daunting.

So each year I try another market or restaurant in search of takeout tamales with the homemade touch.

This year, I'll be heading to Lucy's Tamale Factory on White Road in East San Jose. The cooks there make some of the best tamales I've ever tasted. Every step is done by hand, from mixing the cornmeal masa to shredding the chicken and pork. The masa wrapper is fluffy and light, properly corny and moist but never soggy, while the meat filling is tender and mild with a nice chile flavor.

Owner Claudia Lopez's sister, Lucy, opened the shop four years ago next week. When she became ill, Claudia took it over. The sister later opened Lucy's Tamale Factory No. 2 on Story Road, which I haven't visited. The sisters learned to make tamales from their mother as children in Durango, Mexico.

Tamale season

The holidays from November to January are tamale factories' busiest time. Last year, Lopez said, her six cooks turned out more than 900 orders on Christmas Eve alone, and people who hadn't reserved theirs were lined up out the door.

"It gets really crazy," she said, recommending that customers order ahead. You don't have to wait for Christmas, though, to pick up tamales and a soda for a quick meal. People come in and buy them one at a time or by the dozen, fresh out of the big pots sitting on the gas stove.

Finding the White Road shop may be a bit of a challenge. It sits back off the street in a down-at-the-heels strip mall a couple blocks south of Alum Rock Avenue. Steamed-up windows mark the spot.

Step up to the counter and choose among the five varieties of tamales (all \$1.25 each or \$15 a dozen). They come out of the steamer hot and so tempting that it's a challenge not to start eating them before you get home. Sadly, Lucy's no longer has a table where you can sit down and gorge.

The least successful tamale is corn, the only variety not made on the premises. It's all masa, with the sweet corn worked into the dough, and tends to be dense, dry and crumbly.

Varieties galore

But the pork, chicken, jalapeno cheese and sweet tamales are all outstanding. The chicken and pork are cooked in the same spices and share similar flavors, but pork has the edge with a little firmer meat that makes a good contrast to the soft masa. The cheese tamale is made with queso fresco and Monterey jack cheese - which can get a little rubbery as it cools - and a slice of roasted jalapeno with more flavor than heat. Vegetarian versions, made without lard, are available on special order.

For dessert there are sweet tamales blending pineapple, raisins, sugar and cinnamon with masa for a delicious concoction resembling a cornbread pudding. If that doesn't satisfy your sweet tooth, you could pop next door to Rica Panaderia for a goopy slice of tres leches cake (\$1.25) or, more to my taste, a cinnamon-laced pan dulce for 40 cents. Throw in a Mexican soda (\$1.50) and you still have a meal for less than \$5. By any measure, it's a bargain.

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