



FOOD & DRINK

Battle of the Mexican Sandwiches: Cemitas Vs. Tortas

By Aly Walansky



Two popular Mexican sandwiches, the cemita and the torta, have earned a place in our collective heart as hearty and delicious takeout staples. The torta may be more universally known, but is the cemita more deliciously unique? What's the difference between these two sandwiches, and in the end, which one comes out on top?

The cemita is the Dagwood of Mexican sandwiches, says Ivy Stark, Executive Chef of **Dos Caminos**. "It is from the state of Puebla. Surrounding the Zocalo in Puebla City, where there are many shops that only sell cemitas," says Stark. A cemita starts with a hearty, slightly sweet, sesame-seed bun. "The top is occasionally fried, therefore becoming a "Pelon" (baldy). Topped with a layer of meat: Fried medallions of chicken are the most common; patas, jellied pig feet; or carnitas are also popular. Avocado slices, chipotle chiles, quesillo string cheese, sliced white onion, and crucially papalo — a green herb with a pungent minty flavor that cuts through the richness of the sandwich. A correctly made cemita must have a couple of leaves. It's a bit of a rare ingredient, and also one of those flavors you either love or hate. Cilantro may be substituted if absolutely necessary," says Stark.

As for a torta? "It is essentially a layered Mexican sandwich on a torpedo-shaped soft white roll and piled with taco ingredients like beef suadero and pork al pastor, refried beans, pickled jalapeños, hot sauce, and avocado. Lettuce, tomato, and mayo can be added, American-style," says Star. Basically, a torta is what you want it to be!

Bread

As with any sandwich, the bread you use builds an important part of the foundation. "Cemitas use a specific type of bread that is round and topped with sesame seeds. Tortas, on the other hand, are very versatile in terms of bread options — bolillo or pan frances, telera or birote, to name a few," says Chef Roel Mesta of **Masa** in Naples, Florida.

Staple Ingredients

Once you get beneath the bread, the possibilities are wide. "If you are in Puebla, which is known for its cemitas, staple ingredients include avocado, papalo (an herb), quesillo, or Oaxaca cheese, chipotle peppers, and white onion," says Mesta.

The protein in cemitas is often breaded chicken, although different proteins can be used. "Believe me, there are many different versions of this wonderful work of art!" says Mesta. For tortas, the protein varies from ham or pulled chicken to beef and even turkey. "It just depends what you're in the mood for — cold or hot. At Masa, we offer two tortas options on our lunch menu: one with pork and one with chicken, each has very different types of toppings," says Mesta.

Which Sandwich Reigns Supreme?

That depends largely on which part of Mexico you're in and what you're in the mood for. "Either way, it's guaranteed there will be no regrets on what you choose. The sky is the limit!" says Mesta.

Beef Torta

"Tortas are amazing because they have such complex flavor. A deep savoriness comes from the bean spread and the meat, while bright freshness comes from the pickled jalapenos, veggies, and avocados. Definitely a flavor and texture explosion in every bite!" says Jorge Barralles-Castro (aka Papi) of **Papi's Tacos** in Greenville, SC.

Ingredients

- 16 oz Top round, or Sirloin Beef
 - 1 cup flour
 - 1 egg
 - 1 cup panko
 - 2 tbsp *mayonesa* (mayonnaise infused with lime)
 - 4 tbsp bean spread
 - 8 slices tomato
 - 16–20 slices pickled jalapeno
 - ½ cup shaved onion
 - 8 slices queso fresco (sliced 1/8 inch thick)
 - 4 avocados (peeled, seeded, sliced)
 - 4 romaine heart leaves
 - 4 bolillo rolls
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Directions

1. Slice beef into four pieces and pound to ¼ inch thickness.
2. Dip beef in flour, then egg, then panko and cook in 1 inch of oil in a frying pan at 350 degrees for approximately 30 seconds on each side.
3. To assemble, lay the romaine lettuce leaf open. Top the leaf with tomato, avocado, onion, pickled jalapenos, and then the queso fresco slices. Slice the bolillo roll in half horizontally and lay open-faced on board.
4. Spread the bean spread and the mayo on both sides of the roll. Place the cooked beef onto the bottom half of the roll. Grab the stuffed lettuce leaf and carefully invert it into the top half of the roll (so the cheese is now against the roll).
5. Carefully invert the roll top onto the bottom and place the sandwich onto a Panini press, or place in a skillet with a weight on top. Crisp top and bottom and serve.