Wrapped Food in Leaf Emoji Proposal

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Date: August 29, 2018

Abstract

This proposal requests the addition of WRAPPED FOOD IN LEAF to the Unicode emoji character library. Foods made and served wrapped in leaves are popular in many parts of the world, including tamales in Latin America and zòngzi in East Asia. A WRAPPED FOOD IN LEAF emoji would cover a broad category of foods that cannot be communicated with the current emoji set.

Images

Image credit: Aphe Messer; free to be used in the context of this proposal.

Introduction

Food wrapped in leaves are a staple in many parts of the world. In Latin America, a tamale (or tamal in Spanish, from Nahuatl tamalli) is “a Mexican dish of seasoned meat wrapped in cornmeal dough and steamed or baked in corn husks.”¹ While most definitions mention meat being used in the filling, tamales can be filled with other savory items such as cheeses, fruits, and vegetables. Additionally, sweet tamales may be made with pink sugar or food coloring and contain dried fruit as a filling. Last and least in filling, tamales sordos (“deaf” tamales) have no filling at all.

Tamales have their roots as far back as 8000 to 5000 BCE in Mesoamerica.² Maize was a staple food for many Mesoamerican cultures and a major part of their religion, with deities “devoted

¹ New Oxford American Dictionary, s.v. “tamale”.
specifically to maize and its growth."\textsuperscript{3} The Aztecs, Mayans, Olmecas, and Toltecas used tamales in their festivals and rituals.\textsuperscript{4}

From the tamale’s roots in Mesoamerican civilizations, it spread throughout Latin America, where today almost every Latin American country has its own take on tamales. Some of the notable ones include:

- \textit{boyacense, santandereano,} and \textit{tolimense} in Colombia
- \textit{conkies and pasteles} in the Dominican Republic\textsuperscript{5}, traditionally eaten at Christmas
- \textit{hallacas} in Venezuela and Ecuador
- \textit{nacatamal} in Nicaragua and Honduras
- \textit{pamonha} in Brazil (also known as \textit{hallaquitas, humitas,} or \textit{humintas} in other countries in South America)

Food wrapped in leaves can be found all over the world. Chinese \textit{zòngzǐ} (粽子) is a traditional rice dish stuffed with different fillings and wrapped in bamboo leaves. It is said to originate from when a famous poet and trusted advisor to the king, Qu Yuan, was banished from the state of ancient Chinese state of Chu.\textsuperscript{6} After the Chu capital was taken over by another state in 278 BCE, Qu committed suicide by drowning himself in a river. When the king realized the gravity of his mistake in banishing Qu, he encouraged the locals to prevent fish from eating Qu’s body by throwing in rice or zòngzǐ. Or so goes one version of the story; another says the rice or zòngzǐ would feed Qu’s spirit.

Like Latin America, Eastern Asia has many varieties of food wrapped in leaves, including:

- \textit{chimaki} in Japan is similar to Chinese zòngzǐ
- \textit{lo mai gai} in southern China is traditionally wrapped in lotus leaves\textsuperscript{7}
- \textit{otak-otak} in Indonesia,\textsuperscript{8} Malaysia and Singapore is a grilled fish cake served inside a banana leaf
- \textit{suman} in the Philippines\textsuperscript{9} is a rice cake wrapped in banana or palm leaves

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In Indonesia, the term *pepes* is dedicated to a cooking method that uses banana leaves as food wrappings.\(^\text{10}\) For example, *arem-arem* and *lemper* are rice and meat snacks (not too dissimilar from *zòngzǐ*) that are typically wrapped inside a banana leaf.

The Mediterranean region also has food wrapped in leaves. *Dolma* is usually meat and rice wrapped in vine or cabbage leaves,\(^\text{11}\) although sometimes it’s more broadly applied to any food that is stuffed. *Sarma* (*kohlrouladen* in German or *gołąbki* in Polish)\(^\text{12}\) is similar, although it’s usually applied as a label to food specifically rolled in leaves.

Food wrapped in leaves are plentiful throughout the world. They may be wrapped in different leaves, and they can have wildly different fillings, but they are a type of food that have existed and will continue to exist for millenia.

### Identification / Names

**CLDR short name:** wrapped food in leaf

**CLDR keywords:** chimaki | conkies | dolma | hallacas | mexican | otak-otak | pepes | pamonha | sarma | suman | tamal | tamale | zongzi

### Selection Factors — Inclusion

#### Compatibility

N/A; the major platforms do not currently have emoji depicting food wrapped in a leaf.

#### Expected Usage Level

**Frequency**

Food wrapped in leaves originated independently in different parts of the world and are called by many different names. Thus, a high expected use of this emoji can be expected in many parts of the world. In particular regions, WRAPPED FOOD IN LEAF may be used more frequently; for example, tamales are very popular in Latin American culture around Christmas time, and *zòngzǐ* are traditionally eaten during the Duanwu (Dragon Boat) Festival.

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\(^{11}\) New Oxford American Dictionary, s.v. “dolma”.

The data in the following sections compares “suman + tamal + tamale + zongzi + 粽子” (the last character sequence being zòngzǐ in Chinese) with the existing emoji character “hamburger”. As noted in the introduction, WRAPPED FOOD IN LEAF can cover many types of food. These three main types were chosen because they are more likely to bring up food results; e.g. “pepes” would be a good term to include but returns results for things related to the name Pepe.

Google Search

There are about a third as many results for the search terms suman, tamal, tamale, zongzi, or粽子 as there are for hamburger (72.7 million vs. 210 million, respectively).
Bing Search
There are a little more than half as many results for the search terms suman, tamal, tamale, or zongzi as there are for hamburger (20.1 million vs. 36.3 million, respectively).

YouTube
It appears YouTube has removed the number of matching videos from their search results pages as of August 28, 2018. Results from Google searches are shown below instead.

The search terms suman, tamal, tamale, zongzi, or 粽子 have a comparable number of search results when compared to hamburger (934 thousand vs. 975 thousand, respectively).
Google Trends: Web Search

Interest in suman, tamal, tamale, zongzi, and 粽子 has slowly risen over the last decade to about 24% of hamburger’s peak in January 2004, while interest in hamburger has fluctuated down as low as 62% of its peak to about 79% of its peak today.

Google Trends: Image Search

Interest in suman, tamal, tamale, zongzi, and 粽子 has slowly risen over the last decade to about 23% of hamburger’s peak in April 2008, while interest in hamburger has declined to about 58% of its peak. Note the peaks in interest in terms related to this proposal in the middle of each year around the Duanwu Festival.
Multiple usages

Food wrapped in leaves does not inherently have any notable metaphorical references or symbolism, but some specific varieties do.

As mentioned above, zòngzǐ is traditionally eaten during the Duanwu Festival and symbolizes luck.

The term “tamale” is used to refer to someone (usually but not exclusively female) who’s very attractive.\(^{13}\)\(^{14}\)

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\(^{13}\) @saintcaldwell. “Hot Tamale 🍖_launch Apple, we need a tamal emoji 😚.” May 4, 2018, 6:29 PM. https://twitter.com/saintcaldwell/status/992577055673016320

Use in sequences
N/A

Breaking new ground
Yes, the WRAPPED FOOD IN LEAF emoji breaks new ground: none of the existing emoji represent any of the popular variants of food wrapped in a leaf.

Image Distinctiveness
WRAPPED FOOD IN LEAF has a clearly recognizable physical object after which the emoji can be modeled. It lends itself to being represented as a food item wrapped in a banana leaf or corn husk, optionally tied together with a string.

There are variations within this category: for example, tamales are rectangular while zòngzǐ are more triangular, but the differences are not so significant that they would be easily differentiable in emoji form.

Completeness
The WRAPPED FOOD IN LEAF represents dozens of different food types from around the globe. In particular, it would contribute to the set of emojis associated with Latin American food, which include 🌯 TACO and 🌿 BURRITO. Additionally, it would contribute to the Asian food category, which includes 🍤 FISH CAKE WITH SWIRL and 🍤 DUMPLING.

Frequently Requested
The tamale was included as a Mayan hieroglyphic sign in A Preliminary Proposal for Encoding Mayan Hieroglyphic Text in Unicode.¹⁵

Many Twitter users have requested various emoji that fall under the WRAPPED FOOD IN LEAF description:

  - Happy Dragon Boat Festival. Why there was no zongzi in emoji…
    [https://www.instagram.com/p/4lk3nTCDU1/](https://www.instagram.com/p/4lk3nTCDU1/)
  - The Dragon Boat Festival is coming, but where is the Zongzi emoji? We need it!!!
    @BabelStone @henryfhchan @jenny8lee
    [https://twitter.com/eiscoh/status/866507957063696385](https://twitter.com/eiscoh/status/866507957063696385)

- Podia ter emoji de pamonha né
  https://twitter.com/feliperc96/status/995848904011902976
- Tiene que haber un emoji de hallacas :
  https://twitter.com/lkarinamh/status/928044913383665664
- Hot Tamale 🍚🍎 Apple, we need a tamal emoji 😋
  https://twitter.com/saintcaldwell/status/992577055673016320
- @GustavoArellano @laloalcaraz why is there no tamale emoji? It’s December, cmon!
  https://twitter.com/sjgloria/status/937905732007092224
- PSA: My fam’ selling tamales ... Place your orders in my dm’s or in the comments!
  😊😊**tamale emoji** https://twitter.com/good__jason/status/807438375258984448
- The taco and burrito emojis are not enough. I need a tamale emoji.
  https://twitter.com/johnnyappeal/status/681214944478560256
- Now we just need a tamale #emoji! 🦃
  https://twitter.com/denisebrownLA/status/658465196654985216
- Still don’t get how there is all this 🍎🍋🍇🍊’avocado’ emojis but no taco, burrito, or tamale emoji
  https://twitter.com/TweetRyanM/status/419367286978248705
- Clays mom was one hot tamale 🍓 p.s I know that’s an eggplant but there’s no tamale emoji
  https://twitter.com/fl0urescentt/status/308120954196860928
Selection Factors — Exclusion

Overly Specific

This proposal covers a wide variety of different foods wrapped in leaves and does not advocate for a specific food wrapped in a leaf.

Open Ended

The WRAPPED FOOD IN LEAF would not be just one of many. While there are many different types of foods wrapped in leaves (with different fillings, wrapped in different leaves, etc.), most are wrapped in banana leaves or corn husks (or leaves that look similar to these).

The different varieties have different shapes (e.g. tamales are rectangular while zōngzǐ are more triangular), but these differences are not so significant that they would be easily differentiable in emoji form, thus a single emoji representing all food wrapped in a leaf would be sufficient.

Already Representable

The tamale emoji cannot be represented in the current emoji set. The BURRITO emoji is the closest, although it shows its filling, it does not appear like a generic food wrapped in a leaf on
the outside, and it does not have the same cultural appeal (burritos are mostly found in Mexico and the United States, while foods wrapped in leaves can be find throughout the world).

Logos, brands, UI icons, signage, specific people, deities
Foods wrapped in leaves are not tied to a specific logo, brand, signage, person, building, or deity.

Transient
Given the existence of foods wrapped in leaves for thousands of years, it is unlikely that references to them will stop in the future. They are not a transient or faddish food item.

Faulty comparison
The crux of this proposal is not based on the foods wrapped in leaves being similar to or more important than existing emoji. The WRAPPED FOOD IN LEAF emoji should not be added solely based on compatibility or adding a new variety of an existing emoji.

Exact images
This proposal does not require an exact image or type of food wrapped in a specific kind of leaf.

Sort location
The WRAPPED FOOD IN LEAF emoji should be placed in the food-prepared category after 🌿BURRITO.

Other Information
This proposal suggests the WRAPPED FOOD IN LEAF emoji depict food wrapped in either banana leaves or corn husks, as shown in the images at the top of this proposal. It’s not recommended to show a cross-section of the food because it can contain any number of different fillings.
Other Character Properties

The other character properties are suggested to be defined as follows.
General Category: So
Canonical Combining Class: 0
Bidirectional Class: ON
Decomposition Type: Decomposition Mapping:
Numeric Type:
Numeric Value:
Bidirectional Mirrored: N
Unicode 1 Name:
ISO Comment:
Simple Uppercase Mapping: Simple Lowercase Mapping: Simple Titlecase Mapping:

Author bio

Chasen Le Hara (me@chasenlehara.com) is a software developer from Long Beach, CA. While he hasn’t had the pleasure of tasting all the foods wrapped in leaves from around the world, tamales have been a part of his family’s holiday culinary traditions for as long as he can remember.