

Wrapped Food in Leaf Emoji Proposal

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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 zongzi 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: Aphee 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 not 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”.

² Hoyer, Daniel. *Tamales*. Salt Lake City, UT: Gibbs Smith, 2008.

specifically to maize and its growth.”³ The Aztecs, Mayans, Olmecas, and Toltecas used tamales in their festivals and rituals.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:

- *boyacense*, *santandereano*, and *tolimense* in Colombia
- *conkies* and *pasteles* in the Dominican Republic⁵, traditionally eaten at Christmas
- *hallacas* in Venezuela and Ecuador
- *nacatamal* in Nicaragua and Honduras
- *pamonha* in Brazil (also known as *hallaquitas*, *humitas*, or *humintas* in other countries in South America)

Food wrapped in leaves can be found all over the world. Chinese *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.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:

- *chimaki* in Japan is similar to Chinese *zòngzǐ*
- *lo mai gai* in southern China is traditionally wrapped in lotus leaves⁷
- *otak-otak* in Indonesia,⁸ Malaysia and Singapore is a grilled fish cake served inside a banana leaf
- *suman* in the Philippines⁹ is a rice cake wrapped in banana or palm leaves

³ Smith, Michael E. *The Aztecs*. Malden, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

⁴ Clark, Ellen Riojas., and Carmen Tafolla. *Tamales, Comadres and the Meaning of Civilization: Secrets, Recipes, History, Anecdotes, and a Lot of Fun*. San Antonio, TX: Wings Press, 2011.

⁵ Dassanowsky, Robert, and Jeffrey Lehman. *Gale Encyclopedia of Multicultural America*. Detroit: Gale Group, 2000.

⁶ Dea, Cynthia. "The Legend of Zongzi (Sticky Rice Wrapped in Bamboo Leaves)." KCET. February 06, 2016. Accessed August 26, 2018.

<https://www.kcet.org/food/the-legend-of-zongzi-sticky-rice-wrapped-in-bamboo-leaves>.

⁷ Hsiung, Deh-Ta, Jason Lowe, and Nina Simonds. *The Food of China: A Journey for Food Lovers*. Australia: Murdoch Books, 2008.

⁸ "40 Indonesian Foods We Can't Live without." CNN. October 24, 2017. Accessed August 26, 2018. <http://travel.cnn.com/explorations/eat/40-foods-indonesians-cant-live-without-327106>.

⁹ "In Praise Of Suman Past | Tagalog Dictionary." Tagalog English Dictionary. Accessed August 26, 2018. <http://www.tagalog-dictionary.com/source.php?a=suman>.

In Indonesia, the term *pepes* is dedicated to a cooking method that uses banana leaves as food wrappings.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,¹¹ although sometimes it's more broadly applied to any food that is stuffed. *Sarma* (*kohlrouladen* in German or *gołąbki* in Polish)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.

¹⁰ Brissenden, Rosemary, and Rosemary Brissenden. *Southeast Asian Food: Classic and Modern Dishes from Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam*. Singapore: Periplus Editions, 2007.

¹¹ New Oxford American Dictionary, s.v. “dolma”.

¹² Milhench, Heike. *Flavors of Slovenia: Food and Wine from Central Europe's Hidden Gem*. New York: Hippocrene Books, 2007.

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).

The image shows two screenshots of the Bing search engine interface. The top screenshot shows a search for "suman | tamal | tamale | zongzi" with 20,100,000 results. The bottom screenshot shows a search for "hamburger" with 36,300,000 results. Both screenshots show the Bing logo, a search bar, and navigation tabs for All, Images, Videos, Maps, News, Shop, and My saves. The "All" tab is selected in both.

Search 1: suman | tamal | tamale | zongzi

20,100,000 Results Any time ▼

Search 2: hamburger

36,300,000 Results Any time ▼

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).

The image shows two screenshots of the Google search engine interface. The top screenshot shows a search for "site:youtube.com suman | tamal | tamale | zongzi | 粽子" with about 934,000 results. The bottom screenshot shows a search for "site:youtube.com hamburger" with about 975,000 results. Both screenshots show the Google logo, a search bar, and navigation tabs for All, Images, Maps, Videos, News, More, Settings, and Tools. The "All" tab is selected in both.

Search 1: site:youtube.com suman | tamal | tamale | zongzi | 粽子

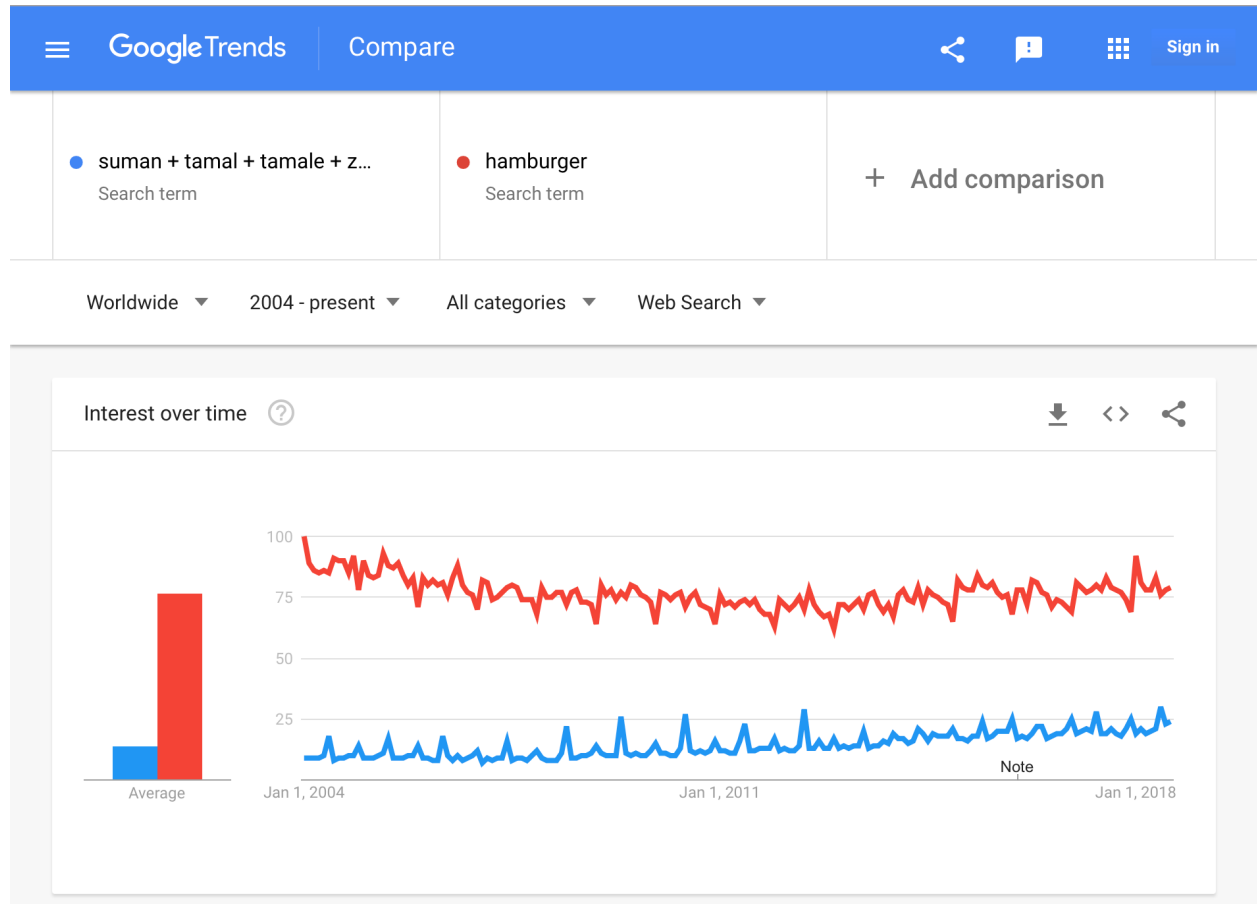
About 934,000 results (0.38 seconds)

Search 2: site:youtube.com hamburger

About 975,000 results (0.72 seconds)

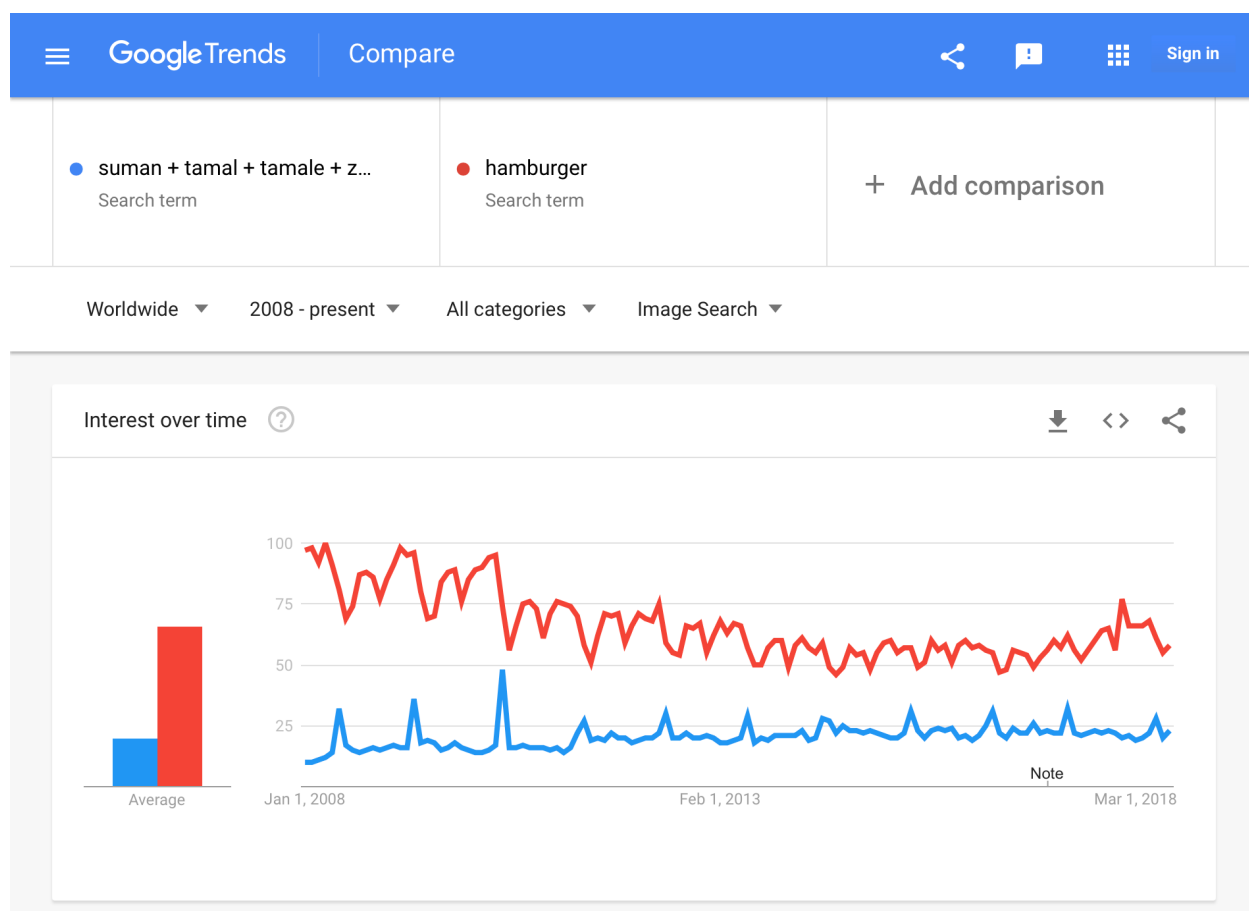
Google Trends: Web Search

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, zòngzi 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.¹³¹⁴



¹³ @saintcaldwell. “Hot Tamale 🍷🌶️ Apple, we need a tamal emoji 🤔” May 4, 2018, 6:29 PM. <https://twitter.com/saintcaldwell/status/992577055673016320>

¹⁴ “Urban Dictionary: Tamales” UrbanDictionary.com. Accessed August 26, 2018. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Tamale>.

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/4Ik3nTCDU1/>
- The Dragon Boat Festival is coming, but where is the Zongzi emoji? We need it!!!
@BabelStone @henryfhchan @jenny8lee
<https://twitter.com/eisoch/status/866507957063696385>

¹⁵ Gayol, Carlos Pallán. *A Preliminary Proposal for Encoding Mayan Hieroglyphic Text in Unicode*. Institute for Archaeology and Ethnology of the Americas, University of Bonn.
<https://www.unicode.org/L2/L2018/18038-mayan.pdf>.

- 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 🌮🌮🌮🌮🌮🌮🌮🌮🌮🌮🌮🌮 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/flourescentt/status/308120954196860928>

 **Johnny Esquivel**
@johnnyappeal

Follow

The taco and burrito emojis are not enough.

I need a tamale emoji.

12:47 PM - 27 Dec 2015

12 Likes

 **Jason**
@good__jason

Follow

PSA: My fam' selling tamales ... Place your orders in my dm's or in the comments! 😏😏
tamale emoji

8:14 PM - 9 Dec 2016

6 Retweets 5 Likes


 **Gloria Nieto**
@sjgloria

Follow

@GustavoArellano @laloalcaraz why is there no tamale emoji? It's December, cmon!

8:45 PM - 4 Dec 2017 from Ben Lomond, CA

2 Retweets 12 Likes

 **WOLWELIBE**
@feliperc96

Follow

Podia ter emoji de pamonha né

7:10 PM - 13 May 2018

4 Likes



Eiso Chan
@eisoeh

Follow

The Dragon Boat Festival is coming, but where is the Zongzi emoji? We need it!!!
[@BabelStone](#) [@henryfhchan](#) [@jenny8lee](#)



9:16 PM - 21 May 2017

4 Likes



miauyui • Follow

miauyui Happy Dragon Boat Festival. Why there was no zongzi in emoji...



44 likes

JUNE 19, 2015

Log in to like or comment.



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 zòngzǐ 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 found 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.