

Proposal for Emoji: TAMALE

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Identification

CLDR short name: tamale

CLDR keywords: conkies | hallacas | humitas | mexican | nacatamal | pamonha | pasteles | tamal | tamale

Images



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

Sort Location

The TAMALE emoji should be placed in the [food-prepared](#) category after 🌯 BURRITO.

Reference Emoji

HAMBURGER is used as the reference emoji.

Abstract

This proposal requests the addition of TAMALE to the Unicode emoji character library. Tamales currently have no representation despite their popularity, history dating back to Mesoamerica, and significance in many cultures.

Introduction

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 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)

Tamales 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 millennia.

Selection Factors — Inclusion

Compatibility

N/A; the major platforms do not currently have emoji depicting tamales.

¹ New Oxford American Dictionary, s.v. “tamale”.

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

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.

Expected Usage Level

Frequency

A high expected use of this emoji can be expected in the Americas. Tamales are very popular in Latin American culture around holidays such as Christmas, Day of the Dead, etc.

The data in the following sections compares “conkies + hallacas + humitas + nacatamal + pamonha + pasteles + tamal + tamale” with the existing emoji character “hamburger”.

Google Search

There are a little over a third as many results for tamale-related search terms as there are for hamburger (127 million vs. 328 million, respectively).



Bing Search

There are a little more than a quarter as many results for the tamale-related search terms as there are for hamburger (7.6 million vs. 29.2 million, respectively).

The image displays two Bing search result pages. The top page shows a search for the terms "conkies | hallacas | humitas | nacatamal | pamonha | pasteles | tamal | tamale" with 7,600,000 results. The bottom page shows a search for "hamburger" with 29,200,000 results. Both pages show the Bing logo, search bar, and navigation tabs.

YouTube

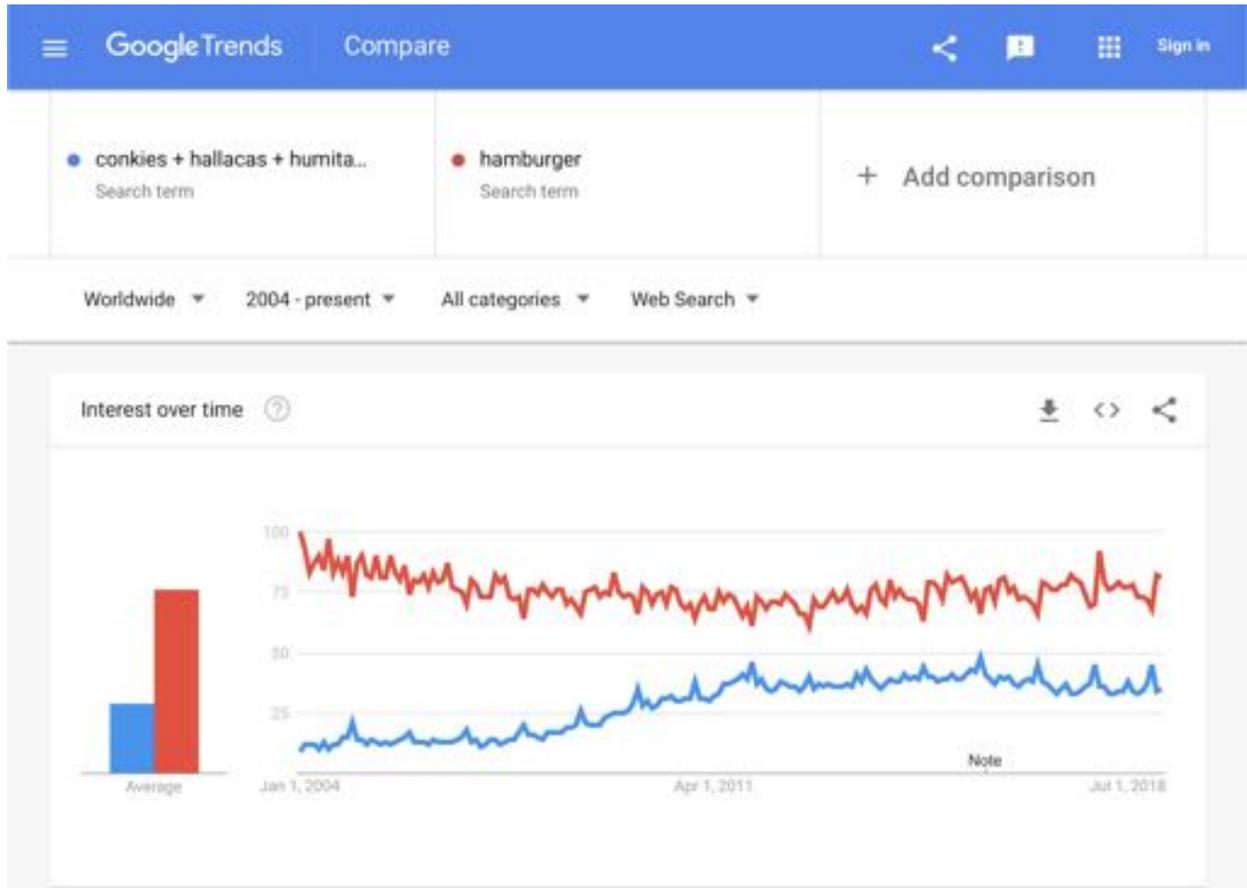
YouTube has removed the number of matching videos from their search results pages as of February 24, 2019. Results from Google searches are shown below instead.

The tamale-related search terms have a comparable number of search results when compared to hamburger (934 thousand vs. 975 thousand, respectively).

The image displays two Google search result pages. The top page shows a search for "site:youtube.com conkies | hallacas | humitas | nacatamal | pamonha | pasteles" with about 4,900,000 results. The bottom page shows a search for "site:youtube.com hamburger" with about 9,410,000 results. Both pages show the Google logo, search bar, and navigation tabs.

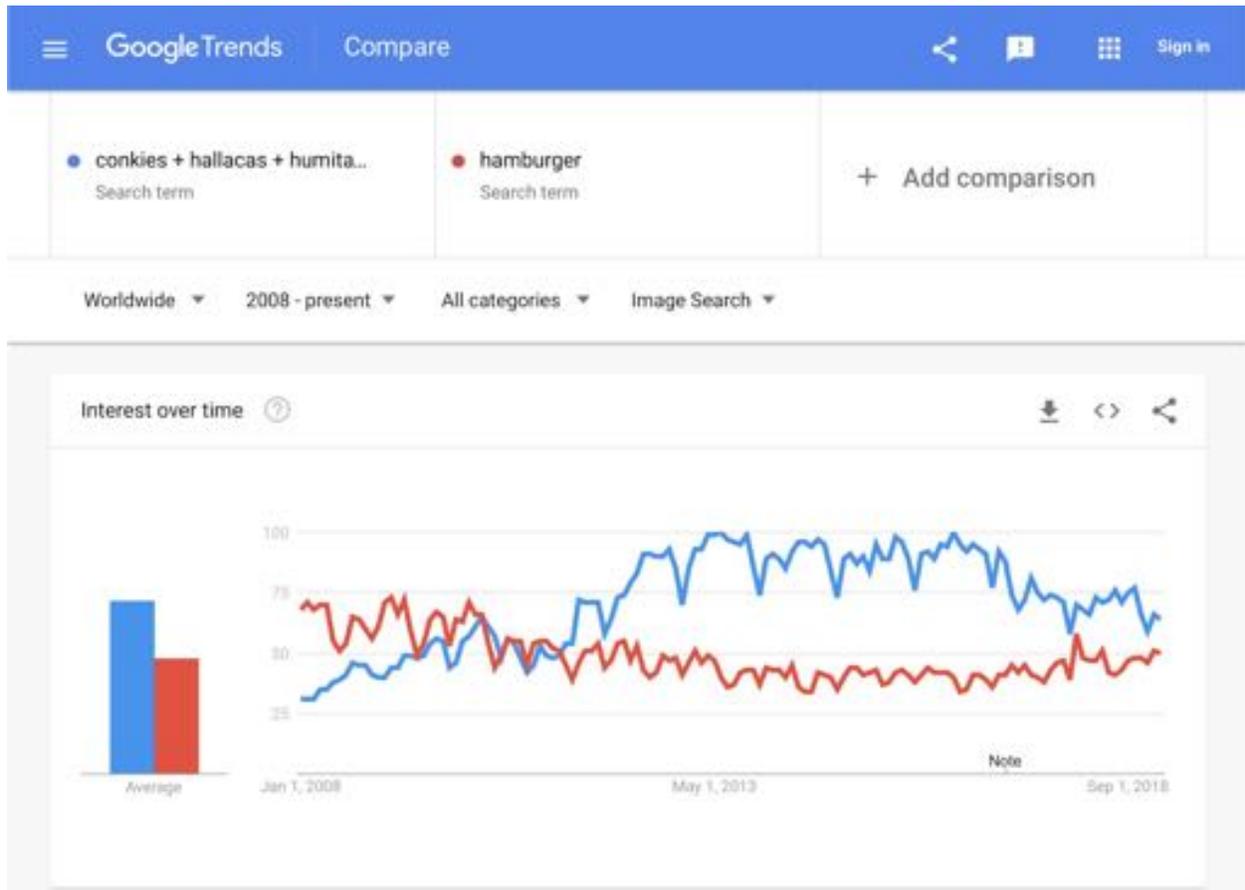
Google Trends: Web Search

Interest in tamale-related search terms has risen over the last decade to about 35% of hamburger's peak in January 2004, while interest in hamburger has fluctuated down as low as 60% of its peak to about 80% of its peak today.



Google Trends: Image Search

Interest in tamale-related search terms has varied over the years, from half of hamburger's interest in 2008 to double hamburger's interest in 2013–2017. There have consistently been more image searches for tamale-related terms since May 2011.



Multiple usages

Tamales do not inherently have any notable metaphorical references or symbolism, but the term “tamale” is used to refer to someone (usually but not exclusively female) who’s very attractive.⁶⁷

⁶ @saintcaldwell. “Hot Tamale 🌶️🌶️ Apple, we need a tamal emoji <https://twitter.com/saintcaldwell/status/992577055673016320>

⁷ “Urban Dictionary: Tamales” UrbanDictionary.com. Accessed Aug <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Tamale>.



Use in sequences

N/A

Breaking new ground

Yes, the TAMALE emoji breaks new ground: none of the existing emoji represent any popular tamale variants.

Image Distinctiveness

TAMALE 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.

It can also be depicted with its contents showing. While tamales can be made with a variety of fillings, it would be unlikely that different fillings would be easily differentiable in emoji form.

Completeness

The TAMALE emoji would encompass dozens of tamale varieties from the Americas.

Additionally, TAMALE would contribute to the set of emojis associated with Latin American food, which include 🌮 TACO and 🌯 BURRITO.

Frequently Requested

The tamale was included as a Mayan hieroglyphic sign in *A Preliminary Proposal for Encoding Mayan Hieroglyphic Text in Unicode*.⁸

Many Twitter users have requested various emoji that fall under the TAMALE description:

- The taco and burrito emojis are not enough. I need a tamale emoji.
<https://twitter.com/johnnyappeal/status/681214944478560256>
- 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
- @GustavoArellano @laloalcaraz why is there no tamale emoji? It's December, cmon!
<https://twitter.com/sjgloria/status/937905732007092224>

⁸ 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>.

Open-Ended

While there are many different types of tamales (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 sometimes have different shapes (e.g. some tamales are longer than others), but these differences are not so significant that they would be easily differentiable in emoji form, thus a single emoji representing tamales 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 tamale on the outside, and it does not have the same cultural appeal (burritos are mostly found in the United States and some parts of Mexico, while tamales can be found throughout the rest of the Americas and the world).

Logos, brands, UI icons, signage, specific people, deities

Tamales are not tied to a specific logo, brand, signage, person, building, or deity.

Transient

Given the existence of tamales 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 tamales being similar to or more important than existing emoji. The TAMALE 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 a tamale with a specific interior or exterior appearance.

Other Information

This proposal suggests the TAMALE emoji depict food wrapped in either banana leaves or corn husks (as shown in the images at the top of this proposal). The emoji may show a cross-section of the tamale despite the variety of fillings used in different types of tamales.

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 different types of tamales, tamales have been a part of his family's holiday culinary traditions for as long as he can remember.