

ACORNS: A Major North American Indian Food

California Indians did not have to be farmers, and for the most part were hunters and gatherers. There was a ready supply of deer, fish, rabbits, fowl, native plants for vegetables, native fruits, and even sea weed. Even so, acorns are said to have been the main food of as many as 3/4 of our native Californians. Acorns were everywhere, are easy to gather and store fairly well ... as long as your storage places are squirrel tight. Some groups buried baskets of nuts until they were needed. Some claim that white acorns were the most preferred because they were sweet and often eaten without leaching.

The most common oaks found in the San Francisco Bay area are the Tan Oak, Black Oak, California Live Oak, and Valley Oak. Many of these have been seriously endangered through the process of turning pasture land into housing developments, with the Live Oak being the least threatened -- since this oak is not deciduous, it offers "building development appeal" by remaining "green and healthy looking" all year.

Many of the Pomos prefer the Tan Oak because they feel it has more flavor. Many of the MiWuks prefer the Black Oak because it takes less leaching to get rid of the tannin. Many of us don't like the California live oak because "its too much work for the amount of meal you get compared to the amount of leaching you have to do," "its got no character," "too wormy," or "its too easy to get -- nothing that plentiful can be very good." The list goes on and on. My favorite is the Black Oak ... with a little Tan Oak added for character.

Acorns are gathered in the fall after they are ripe, Early in the season you will occasionally find acorns without their "little hats" lying on the ground. These are usually buggy. (If the acorn is so heavy that it pulls itself from its cap, it is usually because there is a worm flipping itself about inside the acorn, and all this activity is what breaks the nut free from its cap and the tree.) When the acorns are actually ripe, they fall from the tree, cap intact. If you see any holes in them, throw them away. They are sometimes stored first, to dry

them out, and then shelled. Other groups shell them first, and then dry them out by placing them someplace safe, yet warm, to dry. For the ultimate in information on processing acorn, refer to a new book about Yosemite's Julia Parker, written by Park Naturalist Bev Ortiz which came out in 1992 or 1993. It was published by the same group that produces News from Native California, headed by Malcolm Margolin.

There is first and foremost, the original recipe: AFTER THE ACORNS ARE **COMPLETELY DRY** & REMOVED FROM THEIR SHELLS, the Acorns are ground until the meal is so fine that "it will stick to the basket sifter" when it is turned upside down. When you have determined that you have ground the acorns to "primo" consistency, you must then leach it. This was traditionally accomplished (before we had woven cloth to work with) by building a mound of fine sand, near a spring or the river, and then scooping out the center. The meal you wished to leach was placed in the center of this mound and water poured over a clean cedar bough which was placed or held above

the acorn meal. The tannin would leach out of the acorn meal and harmlessly down into the sand. When tasting it showed the tannin had been removed, the meal was carefully removed from its sand "colander" and put into a cooking basket. Water is added -- the correct amount for the amount of acorn meal you are going to use, which is something that takes a while to adjust to. Too much water will require cooking longer to get the consistency you want. Not enough water and the acorn will burn. Then special cooking rocks were heated in a fire, rinsed off, and using special stirring sticks, the rocks were stirred in the basket to heat the acorn solution thoroughly. As each rock cooled down, it was removed, and another hot clean rock took its place in the cooking basket. The rock that had been removed was washed off and placed back in the fire to reheat and await its turn to become a cooking implement once again. In what seems like no time at all, the acorn soup is boiling, and the stirring continues until the soup is of the desired consistency -- either thin to eat with a spoon, or thicker to eat with a fork, depending on what the "cook" has in

mind. Though the above "soup" was eaten straight by the traditional people, I usually add a little salt, and occasionally some dried currents or blue elderberries, or even raisins. Some people like to add a little cinnamon.

The rocks are saved for the next time, since finding perfect rocks that won't explode when subjected to heat, or won't crumble into the food, or give a bad taste, etc., are not as easy to find as you might think. The baskets, tools, implements, rocks, etc. used to cook acorn are considered a family legacy and kept within a family to be passed down from generation to generation. What makes a good cooking basket is the subject of another dissertation and shall not be gone into at this time. Ask the next expert basket weaver you meet to explain to you how a cooking basket is made.

ALTERNATIVE LEACHING METHODS, & NATURAL DYING USES

The alternative method of leaching, which I personally use (as do most of the people I have spoken to about this subject) is to take my winnowing basket (or a broad-bottomed

basket), place a clean, "white" UNBLEACHED cloth (like a tea towel used just for this purpose....which will never be white again) in the bottom of the basket, and then place your finely ground acorn meal on top of the cloth. Then I get a piece of cedar branch (new growth preferred and place it on top of the acorn meal and run water on it, VERY SLOWLY. I place my basket on top of a large cooking pot (so that I can save the tannin water) in such a way that when the pot fills up, my basket won't be sitting in the water, and the pot can overflow. I check on the leaching process periodically, so I can empty the soup kettle as it fills. Since I am also a weaver and spinner, who does natural dying on occasion, a day or two before I know I'm going to be leaching acorn, I wash any uncolored wool fleece I may have on hand that I will want to dye later, or any white yarn I want to dye in the near future...IF I REMEMBER. Sometimes I don't plan ahead. Anyway, as the acorn leaching pot fills, I will pour this tannin-filled water into the washing machine, where I later place up to 3 or 4 lbs of clean white wool or yarn to soak up the tannic acid solution. When

I am ready to dye the wool at a later date, the color will come out much more dramatically that it would if I had used "untreated fleece".

Another way I have heard of to leach acorn, which I have NEVER tried and probably never will, is to SCRUB the water tank on your toilet to remove any algae, and use this "sanitary" part of your toilet to leach your acorn meal. It makes sense to use water that otherwise is wasted but it doesn't seem like a very aesthetic topic of conversation for a public gathering ... I can hear it now: "Gee, this acorn mush isn't half bad you must have leached it really thoroughly." "Why yes I do; I let it sit in a clean muslin bag in my toilet tank for a week or so..." Then watch your dinner guests put their food down, never to eat at your camp fire again. The girl that shared this bit of information with us had just remodeled her house, had a brand new toilet, and hence no green film in the tank, so she thought it was the perfect opportunity to try out a method she had heard of, or had a theory about. She also went on to say, that she was glad her new toilet was a pale brown color

because the tannin discolored her the toilet bowl for quite some time....

Below is a recipe that I have used as recently as last year which is a good one to serve to those who stubbornly believe that acorn meal is yucky ... they'll never even know its there unless you tell them later -- and then they'll say things like "oh, that's why it was so bland," or "oh, that's why I didn't like it," or "that's why it got hungry an hour later." If you want to be sure you are actually tasting the meal, use the recipe exactly as is. Once you feel confident that you wish to include the meal, but you want to add more character to the stew, feel free to add garlic, green pepper, carrots, etc. The acorn then replaces the starch of the potato, and provides you with more nutrition than the potato would provide.

Traditional Venison Acorn Stew

To make venison stew, you will need the following:

2 lbs venison, cut up

1 Cup finely ground acorn meal

Cover venison with water in pot or basket;
Add hot rocks to simmer until meat almost
falls apart. Remove meat from broth and chop
into fine pieces. Return to pot with liquid and
stir in acorn meal. Serve hot.

Acorn Stew

To make stew, you will need the following:

1 lb stewing beef

1/2 C finely ground acorn meal (tannin
removed)

Salt and pepper to taste

Place beef in heavy pan and add water to
cover. Cover with lid and simmer until very
tender. Remove from liquid and cut meat into
very fine pieces. Return meat to the liquid. Stir
in the acorn meal. Add salt and pepper as
desired. Heat until thickened and serve.

Ethnic food enthusiasts like to substitute acorn
meal for corn meal when making muffins --
usually using 1/2 corn meal and 1/2 acorn.
Some have substituted 1/2 of the flour in a

biscuit recipe with 1/2 acorn meal. Experiment carefully, remembering that a good portion of the work performed by flour has to do with the gluten in the flour. Acorn has no gluten, so you'll have to keep this in mind.

Here is a modern Acorn Bread recipe from the book "Cooking with Spirit, - North American Indian Food and Fact", By Darcy Williamson and Lisa Railsback Copyright 1987 by Darcy Williamson. Published by Maverick Publications, Drawer 5007, Bend, Oregon 97701.

Acorn Bread

To make bread, you will need the following:

6 Tbl. cornmeal

1/2 C cold water

1 C boiling water

1 tsp salt

1 Tbl butter

1 pkg active dry yeast

1/4 C lukewarm water

1 C mashed potatoes

2 C all-purpose flour

2 C finely ground leached acorn meal

Mix cornmeal with cold water, add boiling water and cook 2 minutes, stirring constantly. Add salt and butter and cool to lukewarm. Soften yeast in lukewarm water. Add remaining ingredients to corn mixture, along with yeast. Knead to a stiff dough. Dough will be sticky. Cover and let rise in warm place until doubled in bulk. Punch down, shape into two loaves, cover and let rise until doubled in bulk. Bake at 375 degrees F for 45 minutes.

Acorn Griddle Cakes

To make cakes, you will need the following:

2/3 C finely ground leached acorn meal

1/3 C unbleached flour

1 tsp. baking powder

1/3 tsp. salt

1 Tbl honey

1 egg, beaten

3/4 C milk

3 Tbl melted butter

Combine dry ingredients. Mix together egg and milk, then beat into dry ingredients, forming a smooth batter. Add butter. Drop

batter onto hot, greased griddle. Bake, turning each cake when it is browned on underside and puffed and slightly set on top. Makes 12 to 15.
