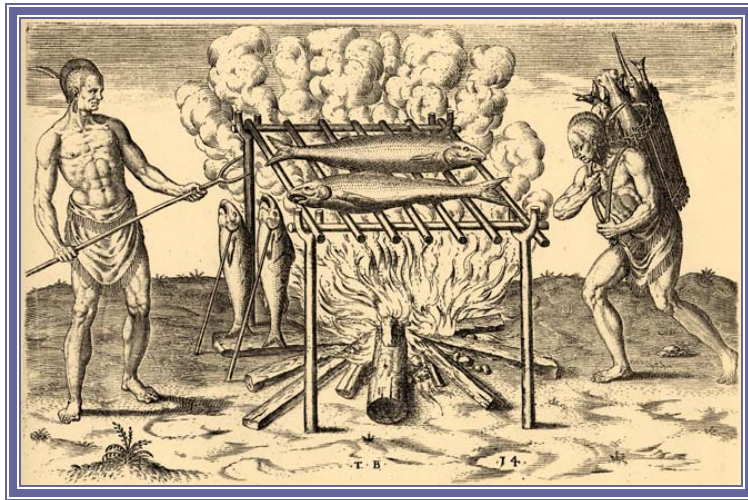


Native American Foodways, an Overview © By: Victoria Rumble



From the writings of Thomas Harriot.

To study Native American foodways is in essence to study native plant and animal life, or ethnobotany. Earthen pots were usually filled with local game and wild or cultivated plants and vegetables, the types of which varied from one region to another. Temperature, soil type, amount of rainfall, and other factors combined to determine what foodstuffs were found in any given area.

(The contents of those pots and the methods of preparing the foods will be a significant and lengthy chapter in *Soup Through the Ages, A Culinary History with Recipes* by Victoria Rumble, to be published by McFarland Publishing and released in 2009. Release date will be posted to this website.)

By their continuall ranging, and travel, they know all the advantages and places most frequented with Deare, Beasts, Fish, Foule, Rootes, and Berries.
– John Smith, Virginia.

Ladies were charged with carrying provisions, gathering wood, and preparing food for hunting parties as the hunters themselves were concerned with no other activity than the affairs of the hunt.

Game and fowl were trapped, snared, hunted by fire-hunting (use of a light to mesmerize deers or other animals in the dark giving the hunter time to bring them down), use of dogs in hunting varied from tribe to tribe.

Game and fowl included deer, turkeys, boar, ducks, bison, bear, elk, pigeons, alligators, rabbits, opossums, raccoons, squirrels, partridges, etc. Depending on religious beliefs some tribes ate fish and turtle while others did not, and likewise while some ate dogs

routinely, others did not. Early accounts often mention eating snake, especially rattlesnake. Some tribes were much more meticulous in the cleaning and processing of fish and game than others, the least appetizing examples of which are found in most of the early accounts.

Bison can be documented over most of the inhabited country well into the 18th century through the writings of early explorers. Swanton stated there were large herds in what is now Kentucky, Arkansas, Tennessee, the western gulf region toward the plains, Florida except for the southern-most part of the state, and parts of the Atlantic coastal region. In 1880 their disappearance east of the Mississippi was said to be due to draught. (For more information see *Outdoor Recreation & Leisure in 19th Century America* by Victoria Rumble, Thistle Dew Books)

Large quantities of fish and shellfish were gathered annually by traps, weirs, spears or arrows, poisoning streams, netting, trot-lines, angling, by the bare hand, and by attracting fish to night fires. They were often preserved for winter by drying and smoking. Oysters were dried in quantities enough to last the winter and often transported surprising distances back to villages.

The types of fish harvested depended on indigenous species particular to any river or region, including herring, sturgeon, cod, rockfish (bass), bluefish, salmon, trout, jacks, perch, suckers, mullet, alewives, carp, tunny, ray, plaice, garfish, catfish, eels, etc.

In addition to the preparation of soups and pottages, the methods of cooking fish included roasting over a framework of twigs and coating the entire fish in mud and baking it thus coated in hot coals. When the hardened mud coating was broken away the scales and skin came away with it leaving only the tender flesh.

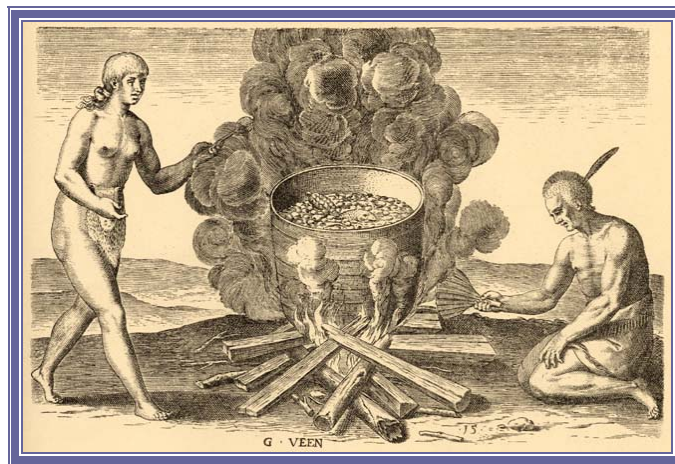


Image from the writings of Thomas Harriot

Plants and grains played an important role in native diet – both wild and cultivated varieties. The most commonly recorded varieties of cultivated vegetables included the three-sisters, corn, beans, and squash. This method yielded the highest quantity of

produce from a limited amount of space. Beans ran up the corn stalks while squashes grew at ground level underneath.

Corn, or *maize*, was eaten many ways including roasted in its *green* state (mature ears fresh from the garden). By growing multiple varieties and staggering planting times the green corn season was prolonged considerably. Different types of corn lent themselves best to the preparation of particular foods, some being better for meal or flour or hominy than others, for example.

Dried corn was consumed in many ways. It was boiled with meat and beans, made into bread, grits, porridge, mush, and hominy, sometimes referred to as sofki, sagamite, etc. Beans were combined with cornmeal by the Cherokees and others in making bread.

Documentation can be found of burning corn cobs and adding the ashes to bread or broth, a practice which Southern women later resorted to during the Civil War when baking powder, yeast, and other leavenings were unavailable.



Mortar and pestle for pounding corn – the large end was used at the top for weight to drive the smaller end into the mortar to crush the grains.

Corn was also used to make a popular drink by draining and straining the liquor from boiled dried corn.

Peas, beans (pulse), pumpkin, sunflowers, some melons, nuts of many sorts, wild roots and fruits, cabbage palmetto, etc. played an important role in native diets. With the arrival of Europeans came the introduction to foods such as Irish potatoes (to be differentiated from wild tubers), true sweet potatoes, leeks, onion, cabbage, garlic, additional varieties of melons, turnips, parsnips, etc.

Any wild plant that could be rendered edible was consumed. Gathered nuts included acorns, walnuts, hickory nuts, chestnuts, etc., and in addition to eating nuts in the usual manner they were valued for the oil obtained from them (used in soups and in boiling meats and vegetables), and bread that could be made from the roasted nuts (especially acorns and chestnuts).



Public domain image, Harvesting Wild Rice, S. Eastman, 1853, Wikipedia

Peaches were among the first cultivated fruits. Valued wild fruits included crabapples, cherries, mulberries, persimmons, grapes (muscadine and scuppernong), strawberries, plums, bilberries (also called huckleberries, whortleberries, and blueberries), blackberries, cranberries, raspberries, etc. Berries and fruits were used to make bread, peach bread for example, pottages, or boiled with any other available vegetables or wild plants.

Commonly consumed foods which were found in only specific areas included the citrus gathered by the Seminoles of Florida, and pinion nuts and mesquite berries gathered by the Hualapai and others in Arizona. (Space will not allow listing every wild plant consumed, however, research into the writings of early explorers combined with studies of botany and native plants will yield information relative to any location)

Common cooking methods included boiling, roasting, smoking, and baking in a coating of mud very similar to the method of fish cooking. Meat was often placed onto the end of a sharpened stick which was inserted in the ground leaning toward the fire where it roasted to perfection.

Methods of boiling included boiling in hides, either suspended from a tripod over the fire or by placing heated stones into the hide with the food to be cooked. Earthenware pots were replaced early by traders' metal kettles, though some tribes were quicker to adopt them than others.

The tongues of deer and bison (also buffalo humps), and the tails of beaver were delicacies with many tribes. Bear fat and venison suet were preserved and used in the preparation of food as long as the quantities lasted. Both Native Americans and whites cured bear meat into bacon and bear lard made excellent bread.

The most popular method of food preservation was by drying, and this applied to meats, fruits, nuts, grains, and vegetables (cultivated and wild). Large caches of dried corn, peas, beans, pumpkin, and squash were common with many Southeastern tribes. Maple sugar and syrup were documented by many early writers.

The Native American diet varied greatly in flavor, quantity, and quality from region to region and from one time period to another. Most ate heartily during times of plenty, and

made do, resorting to much poorer quality ingredients and consuming less, during times of scarcity.

Almost any statement could be made regarding native foodways in general, but what is correct for one situation is not necessarily correct for another. Prepared foods made significant changes which can be traced to incidents such as the introduction of metal kettles, the introduction of new seeds and cultivation equipment, or even differences in native plants for those who were forced to leave their homes in the Southeast and settle in what many considered the barren wasteland of Indian Territory.

Because of these significant changes in foodstuffs and cooking techniques it is necessary to do lengthy study and research on any period, tribe, or food type in order to arrive at accurate conclusions.

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