

Native American Food

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The rivers and forests of Arkansas provided a bountiful selection of foods for Native people and for the European immigrants who followed them. People first came into the Americas around the end of the last Ice Age and reached the Mid-South soon after. For thousands of years, Native people sustained themselves as hunters and collectors, relying for food on the cycles of abundance, maturity, and dormancy of wild plants and animals across the seasons and the years. Around 3000 B.C. some Arkansas communities began to domesticate certain nutritious local plants, and gardening became more important. By around A.D. 900, most Native American communities in Arkansas relied on agriculture for their staple diet.

When European settlers arrived, they brought Old World farming and domesticated animals with them, but they had to adapt their habits to the new environment. They borrowed many of the staple foods being grown by Indian farmers (for example, corn and beans). They also relied on hunting and trapping to survive in the American frontier.

Some American Indian groups adopted a home-steading lifeway in historic times that was quite similar to that of European settlers. Though they still maintained many of their kinship and cultural traditions, they farmed and raised livestock just as their white neighbors did. Ironically, some of the staple plants being grown—corn, beans, many kinds of squashes, and certain fruits—were those that the EuroAmerican immigrants had already borrowed from the Indians.

From diaries, letters, and ethnographic reports we can read about what early Arkansas residents—both Native Americans and immigrant settlers—ate, and how they prepared some foods. But there is much about this necessity of life that cannot be learned from written documents. Archeology reveals important information about past environments and foodways by



This painting by Acee Blue Eagle shows the First Man and First Woman of the Caddo origin myth bringing corn and squash to the earth. Courtesy of Watson Memorial Library, Northwestern State University.

gathering the actual remains of ancient meals. Archeologists unearth discarded food bones, charred plants, and the garbage that was left at farmsteads and campsites. They also sometimes find naturally preserved caches of seeds and other plants in dry Ozark rock shelters or in the saturated sediments of river bottoms. These modest artifacts of everyday life can be of great value in telling us directly how past people sustained themselves centuries ago, revealing for us pictures of the natural world that early Arkansas residents inhabited and that now has been greatly altered by modern development.





Hunting for Meat

The Native American diet consisted of many tastes and textures. The variety and abundance of favored foods certainly varied from season to season and from place to place. Meat was always an important element. People hunted, trapped, and fished for animals of various kinds. Probably the most important in terms of size and easy availability was deer, but bear, elk, and many smaller animals were also used for food. The earliest people to arrive in Arkansas probably also hunted the now-extinct large Ice Age mammals (sometimes called “megafauna”) like the mastodon.

Some of the smaller game animals were raccoons, rabbits, opossums, turtles and terrapins, fish and reptiles, and birds. The bird most sought after by Indian hunters was the wild turkey, but seasonal migratory birds like geese and ducks were also taken. Fish and shellfish were probably captured by a variety of means that included nets, spears, and poisons. Bison would have been an attractive game animal, but they only became common in the Arkansas forests and prairie openings shortly before Europeans arrived on the scene. Native diets could have included some animals and animal



parts that we do not consider food today. For example, though we have no proof yet, at times insects and other small animals may have been eaten.



Gathering Plants

Because bones are easier to see on archeological sites than plant remains, it can be hard to remember that all American Indians ate plant foods along with their meat. But when we excavate properly, we find the evidence for this part of the diet. Burned nut shells, seeds, and even pollen can tell us about these foods.

Hardwood nuts like hickory, acorn, walnut, and pecan were important crops that provided nutritious fats and proteins and could be stored through the winter and spring seasons, when other foods were scarce. Weedy annual grasses and other annual plants, like chenopodium (or goosefoot), maygrass, amaranth, and little barley, had both nutritious seeds and edible greens. Many fruits and berries such



as grapes, persimmons, and blueberries grew in the wild, and people no doubt looked forward to the time when these tasty seasonal treats would ripen. There was a wide assortment of edible greens, bulbs, tubers, and flowers that probably were consumed as well, but the physical evidence of their use in prehistory is rarely unearthed.

Preparing Meals

This varied menu could be prepared in many ways. Some food was undoubtedly eaten fresh. Some was dried, parched, and either eaten like snack food or pounded into a powder or paste on a grinding stone to be mixed with other foods. Some foods would have been cooked over open fires, most likely by roasting, and possibly by pit roasting, smoke drying, and cooking in skins or bladders. Archeologists find evidence of cooking hearths as discolorations in the soil, hardened baked soil, or ash deposits. There may also be pieces



of rock cracked by the heat of the fires. Large pits that were used for roasting show up as stains in the soil with a hardened, baked area beneath, and ashes and cracked rocks scattered about. There may have been additional ways to fix food that we don't know how to recognize at archeological sites.

The First Gardens

By 3000 years ago, some Native Arkansans had small gardens in addition to their hunting and food collecting activities. The plants that they tended were annuals that grew well in disturbed soil, producing bunches of starchy and oily seeds. These plants still exist today along roadsides and in abandoned fields. We tend to think of them as weeds. Some, like chenopodium, were domesticated by Indians in Arkansas. Domestication means that their genetic makeup was changed by hu-



amaranth

man manipulation and their appearance evolved to be different from that of wild members of the same genus. This manipulation may not have been intentional, at least at first. Other plants seem to have been tended and en-

couraged, yet they kept their wild genetic characteristics. Squash and gourd vines and sunflowers probably grew among the annuals—maygrass, amaranth, little barley, and chenopod. The gourds and squashes might have been more useful for their seeds and as containers rather than for their flesh.

This gardening activity probably contributed less than half of the food eaten by Native Arkansans, but it represented an important change in the relationship between people and the landscape. Humans were making a more significant impact on the environment around them. The human diet was changing in ways that affected human health, and cultural practices were adapting to accommodate the increased effort being put into using these foods.

Serving and Storing

Not long after this period, about 2500 years ago, people began making pottery containers that were useful for cooking, serving, and storing foods. With pots it was easier to prepare gruels, stews, and other dishes that used whole or ground seeds as well as pounded nuts and other processed meat and plant products.

We don't know for certain what relationship may have existed between the sudden popularity of pottery containers and the spread of small scale gardening, but it seems certain that a new cuisine emerged among several Native cultural groups. People still consumed a varied diet of meat and plant foods, and they had a good general level of health. The new way of preparing food may have also been related to new social relationships that emerged around giving, displaying, or sharing meals in new settings.

We don't know yet whether the popularity of particular animals changed in relation to this new cuisine.

Farming

About 1000 years ago, another great change took place in Native food getting.

Corn, or maize, which is actually a tropical grass originally domesticated in Mesoamerica, first became an important part of the diet of Native

Arkansans about this time. Some people had already grown small amounts of corn, but after A.D. 1000 people all over Arkansas began devoting more of their time and energy to farming.

Corn was the main crop, accompanied first by squashes and next by beans. These crops were eaten in many ways, including drying and then reconstituting them in stews and gruels, roasting and boiling them fresh, and pulverizing them and mixing them with other foods. Gardens also contained sunflowers and a number of other plants. People did not give up hunt-



ing and gathering—they continued to look for deer, turkey, and other animals, to fish, and to gather wild plants. All these remained as important food items.

But this devotion to farming resulted in substantial changes in human diet and in Native cuisine. Corn farming meant that people put more time into developing large gardens and field plots. Settled family farmsteads and larger communities developed, where people made facilities and containers for storing their harvests and next year's seed corn. Farming people were more dependent on carbohydrate-rich plants for food than they had been before, and this dependence affected their health. Although food could now be stored and used throughout the year, a corn-rich diet was less varied and less nutritious overall than the earlier diets of hunters and gatherers.

These late prehistoric farmers were burdened with more tooth decay and a greater susceptibility to food deficiencies than were their ancestors. Farming was beneficial in many ways, but it had drawbacks that included a greater impact on the natural environment, physical demands on farmers to raise and harvest crops, less variety, and some nutritional deficiencies in the diet.



Sharing Cuisines

When Europeans arrived in Arkansas, Native communities still used a wide variety of foods. The Quapaw reportedly kept extensive fields in the neighborhood of their villages where they grew corn and many other plants.

The Caddo in southwest Arkansas lived in scattered farmsteads with family corn plots nearby. Both groups hunted deer, bear, and a variety of other animals. Native people continued to collect wild plants. Persimmon fruits were eaten fresh, and were pulverized into a flour that was then available for thickening stews and making breads and cakes. Nuts were likewise eaten raw, pulverized, and sometimes boiled to extract oil for adding to many dishes. Bears, too, were rendered for oil that was reportedly long lasting, sweet tasting, and desirable to flavor food in many of the ways that we use margarine, butter, and vegetable oils today. On special occasions the Quapaw served dog meat to their guests. A few Old World plants and animals, such as peach trees and chickens, had been introduced into Native communities before the first European settlers arrived, passed from one Native society to another in advance of the Europeans themselves, and more crops and domesticated animals came later. For most of the historic period, however, Native people continued to sustain themselves with local foods in time-honored ways.

Some of the plants & animals used for food by Native people in Arkansas before the arrival of Europeans.

Wild Plants

grapes
hickory nuts
acorns
walnuts
pecans
persimmon fruit
various fruits & berries
lambsquarter (chenopod)
sumpweed
marshelder
knotweed
amaranth
maygrass
sunflower
greens, tubers & roots (probably)

Cultivated Plants

corn (maize)
beans
squashes
chenopod
little barley
sumpweed
maygrass

Wild Animals

deer
bear
elk
turkey
goose
ducks
other birds
raccoon
opossum
other small mammals & rodents
various fish
turtles
shellfish

Domestic Animals

dog (on occasion)



Suggestions for Further Reading

NATIVE AMERICAN

- Sophie D. Coe. **America's First Cuisines**. University of Texas Press.
- Beverly Cox and Martin Jacobs. **Spirit of the Harvest, North American Indian Cooking**. Stewart, Tabori and Chang.
- Frances Densmore. **How Indians Use Wild Plants for Food, Medicine, and Crafts**. Dover Publications.
- Walter Ebeling. **Handbook of Indian Foods and Fibers of North America**. University of California Press.
- W. and R.V. Hays. **Foods the Indians Gave Us**. Weathervane Books.
- David Hunt (ed.) **Native Indian Wild Game, Fish & Wild Foods Cookbook: Recipes from North American Native Cooks**. Fox Chapel Publications.
- Barrie Kavasch. **Native Harvests: Recipes and Botanicals of the American Indian**. Vintage Press (Random House).
- Yeffe Kimball and Jean Anderson. **The Art of American Indian Cooking**. Doubleday & Co., Inc.
- Lewis H. Larson. **Aboriginal Subsistence Technology on the Southeastern Coastal Plain during the Late Prehistoric Period**. University of Florida Press.
- Jay Miller. **American Indian Foods: A True Book**. Children's Press.
- Carolyn Neithammer. **American Indian Food and Lore**. Collier Books of Macmillan Co.
- Virginia Scully. **A Treasury of American Indian Herbs**. Crown Publishing Co.
- Raymond Stark. **Guide to Indian Herbs**. Hancock House.
- Marie Svoboda. **Plants that the American Indians Used**. Chicago Natural History Museum.
- Alice and Sylvester Tinker. **Authenticated American Indian Recipes**. Pawhuska, OK.
- Thomas B. Underwood and Edward J. Sharpe. **American Indian Cooking and Herblore**. Cherokee Publications.
- Herman J. Viola and Carolyn Margolis. **Seeds of Change**. Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Elias Yanovsky. **Food Plants of the North American Indians**. Miscellaneous Publication 237, US Dept. of Agriculture.
- Michael Weiner. **Earth Medicine-Earth Foods: Plant Remedies, Drugs, and Natural Foods of the North American Indians**. Macmillan.
- Jack Weatherford. **Indian Givers: How the Indians of the Americas Transformed the World**. Fawcett.
- Darcy Williamson and Lisa Railsback. **Cooking with Spirit: North American Indian Food and Fact**. Maverick Publications.

COLONIAL AND TERRITORIAL SETTLER

- Sally Booth. **Hung, Strung and Potted: A History of Eating Habits in Colonial America**. C.N. Potter, Inc.
- Ann Leighton. **Early American Gardens**. Houghton Mifflin Co.
- S. Carson and A.W. Vick. **Hillbilly Cookin**. Clinch Mountain Lookout, Inc.

GATHERING, GARDENING, AND AGRICULTURE: PLANT-BASED FOODWAYS IN THE SOUTHEASTERN UNITED STATES

This **5th grade social sciences curriculum** was developed by the Arkansas Archeological Survey and is available for FREE on our website at <https://archeology.uark.edu/gga/>. Aligned with Arkansas Department of Education Social Studies frameworks, this curriculum offers lessons and activities to help teachers and students explore pre-Columbian societies and early European exploration, while highlighting specific sites and events in Arkansas. Archeology is a scholarly discipline that integrates elements of social studies, humanities, and science to reconstruct and study past human communities. Because of its interdisciplinary nature, many upper elementary and secondary educators find archeology an engaging way to teach social studies, history, and science.

Picture Credit: The image of Indian villagers on page 2 is a painting by Dan Kerlin showing Archaic lifeways, including hunters bringing home game, fishers using a net, and a woman getting ready to grind gathered nuts on a stone mortar. A man in a canoe is probably hunting ducks. On the lake shore is a heap of mussel shells. Gourds grow in the foreground. Courtesy of The University of Arkansas Museum Collections.



Native American Recipes

Quapaw Stew

(compliments of Carrie Wilson)

- 1 pound ground meat of your choice
- 4 medium potatoes, washed, and cubed, with the skin still on
- 1 large sliced onion
- 1 can of corn

Brown the ground meat and cook together with the sliced onion in a heavy skillet until the onion is clear and the meat is done. Add the potatoes and corn, and enough water to cover, and cook until the potatoes are done. Add salt and pepper to taste.



Fry Bread—Quapaw

(compliments of Carrie Wilson)

- 3 cups all-purpose flour
- 3 teaspoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 1/2 teaspoons sugar (can omit)
- 1 tablespoon shortening
- 2 tablespoons powdered milk

Mix all dry ingredients together, including dry milk. Add 1 cup warm water to soften dough. Roll out to 1/2–3/4 inch thick. Cut into squares. Deep fat fry until golden brown.

Grape Dumplings—Quapaw

(compliments of Carrie Wilson)

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| Dumplings: | Heat to boiling: |
| 2 cups flour | 2 quarts (1/2 gallon) grape juice |
| 1/2 tsp salt | 1/4 cup sugar (optional) |
| 3/4 cup milk | |
| 2 teaspoons baking powder | |
| 1 tablespoon sugar (can omit) | |
| 1/4 to 1/3 cup shortening | |

Mix dry ingredients, sift twice. Work in shortening with pastry mixer, fork, or finger tips and add milk gradually. (Or substitute cold grape juice [3/4 cup] for the milk.) Roll out on a floured board and cut in strips, then in squares. Drop the dumplings into the boiling grape juice. (If desired, use the sugar to sweeten the grape juice to your taste.)

Nut Butter (do not use acorns!)

Grind 1 cup or more of shelled, dried nuts or seeds into a paste. Use a mortar and pestle, or a blender or food processor. If it isn't sweet enough, add a little honey, or maple syrup. You can use this the same way that you would use margarine, butter, or oil. (Use pecans, walnuts, or hickory nuts for this recipe.)



Sunflower Pudding—Zuni

(a kind of vegetable stew)

- 6 ears of corn, grated off the cob, with the cornmilk
- 1 1/2 cups of finely ground roasted sunflower seeds, hulled
- 1 1/2 cups of finely chopped summer squash
- 3 cups water
- 1 roasted and peeled mild green chili, finely chopped (2 tablespoons)

Place corn kernels, corn milk, sunflower seeds, and squash in a heavy saucepan. Add water and cover tightly. Simmer one hour. Remove cover and gently cook off any extra water. The mixture should have the consistency of a pudding. Remove from heat, salt if necessary, add the chilis, and serve.

Sunflower Seed Cakes

(makes 15 cakes)

- 3 cups shelled sunflower seeds
- 3 cups water
- 6 tablespoons fine cornmeal
- 2 teaspoons maple syrup
- 1/2 cup oil

Simmer the seeds in the water in a heavy saucepan, covered, for one hour. Drain and grind. Mix cornmeal and syrup into the ground seeds, 1 tablespoon at a time, to make a stiff dough. Shape into firm, flat cakes 3 inches in diameter. Brown the cakes in hot oil in a heavy skillet on both sides. Drain on paper and serve.

Sofkey or Sofkee—Creek, Choctaw

- 6 cups water
- 1 cup coarse grits

For every 6 cups of water add 1 cup of coarse grits and cook in an iron pot until it looks milky. Serve hot, dipping from the pot with large wooden spoons. This is almost a drink with chewy lumps of grits in it.

Succotash

- 1 onion, chopped
- 1 green pepper, chopped
- 1 cup water
- 2 cups shelled lima beans
- 2 cups yellow corn
- 2 tablespoons nut butter (or bear fat if you have it)

Simmer all ingredients together in a large covered kettle for 20 minutes. Serve hot.



Making sofkey. Painting by Acee Blue Eagle. The time period depicted is the late 1800s. Courtesy of the Gilcrease Museum.

Baked Acorn Squash

- 1 medium to large squash
- 2 tablespoons butter or margarine
- 4 teaspoons honey or maple syrup

Slice the squash in half, remove the seeds and strings, and trim the round side slightly flat so you can set the squash pieces upright in a shallow metal pan without them rolling around. Put 2 teaspoons of honey or syrup in the hollows where the seeds had been, and add 1 tablespoon of butter or margarine. Put a little water (about 1/2 inch) in the bottom of the pan. Bake uncovered at 350 degrees for about 45 minutes or until the squash is tender.

