

Native American Technology and Art

Nupa Acorn Soup

Offered by Kimberly R. Stevenot (aka Billierose)

~ Northern Sierra Mewuk (Miwok) Tuolumne Rancheria, Tuolumne, CA ~

...Who's family has been making it for generations

Ingredients:

Black Oak Acorns - cleaned about 20 pounds

Water

Cedar or redwood bows

A lot of time and hard work

Preparation:

Acorns are gathered in the fall, right now we are in the peak of the season. Usually the first fall of acorns we disregard. They are normally the wormy ones. Sometimes we will gather these "Pehepes", and use them in our dance regalia. These "Pehepes" are acorns that have been infested with worm larve, and they make the acorns form looking like hunchbacks. They make interesting necklaces and there is a story about "Pehepes" and why we use them, but that again is another chat...

My family and I have been known to gather tons of acorn. In the past my Great Aunt Mary had a room in her house where we would deposit all of the acorn we gathered. This was a 10'x12' room, with a four foot board across the doorway. This room was always full of acorn. As children we used to fight for the right to jump into the acorn and stir them up. Anyone bigger than a child would crack the hulls. This had to be done twice a week so that moisture didn't build up and that the acorn dried properly. Traditionally our people stored acorn in 'Chukas', acorn graineries made of cedar and California laurel. These are cylinder in shape and raised above the ground on stakes about three feet. Lacking a spare room for my acorn, I store mine in gunny sacks and hang the filled bags from the rafters in my garage. My sisters living on the rez, use the huge army surplus bins my parents bought. They keep them covered and stir them twice a week. No matter how you store your acorn it is essential that you add a generous amount of California laurel with the nuts. Laurel or bay leaf is a natural insect repellent and keeps the bugs away from the acorn.

We let the acorn dry or season at least for a year, this assures that the nuts are well dried. We then crack and hull the acorns. We then spread the acorn meats to allow any additional drying. On the acorn is a red skin, the skin is thicker in the crevices of the nut, it is very important that all of this skin is removed. Otherwise when cooked it is like trying to swallow the chewy part of popped corn. When the nuts are dried this red skin has a tendency to really cling to the nuts. If you sprinkle a little water on them when they are dry it

lifts the skin making it easier to remove. We use an open twined winnowing tray in this process of removing the husk skin.

Once the acorn is cleaned thoroughly and dry, we begin the hard work. The acorn now needs to be pounded. It is not ground. We do not have grinding rocks, we have pounding rocks. We also have granite mortars and pestles. The pestles are raised above the hole in the mortar rock and allowed to slide through your hands into the acorn in the mortar. Some folks use a 'hopper basket' which catches the acorns as they hop up and allows them to roll back into the mortar. The basket is a conical shape, like a funnel. Of course this is a very time consuming process and you develop wonderful arm muscles. But, let's face it folks, this is 1998. Today for smaller batches you can use an electric coffee grinder, a Veggiemeal, mill and juicer works wonders for medium batches. For large batches like my sister and I do, we use an electric flour mill. The acorn flour should have the consistency of wheat flour mixed with very fine corn meal.

Once you have your flour ground, you can begin your next step. This process is called leaching. In this step you are washing out the tannic acid in the flour. Tannic acid is bitter to taste, if you can digest enough it is toxic. Only cattle, pigs, deer and rodents are known to eat them raw. Though in California there are documented cases where in a heavy acorn fall cattle ate too much acorn and dropped dead in the pasture.

Traditionally we would go to the nearest stream and find a sandy area. Here we would form out a leaching bed and spread out the acorn flour on top of the clean sand. We would then form a channel bringing the water to the bed and allowing a steady stream to flow over the acorn. Cedar bows are used to allow the incoming water to flow evenly over the flour. You would allow this to continue for at least 8-10 hours, depending on how much and how deep the flour is, after 8 hours you would make a taste test to determine if it was ready. Today we have a raised table made of boards and chicken wire, which we cover with a thick bed of fresh pine needles, and then a clean cotton sheet. On top of this we spread the acorn flour and leach it using a water hose placed on top of a spread of fresh cedar bows. It still takes 8-10 hours. When the leaching process is complete, the flour will no longer have a bitter taste, but rather a slightly sweet taste.

When it is ready we pick it up off the leaching bed. It comes up like globs of wet clay. Using the traditional method of a sand bed you would gently wash off any sand with water. Because acorn is high in oils not much adheres to it.

The leached acorn flour is then mixed with water, usually a 2-1 ratio for a thick soup or a 3-1 ratio for a thinner soup. This is an approximate measure, as my sister and I mix the flour and water with our hands and know what we are looking for. My sister and I still cook acorn in the traditional method, using baskets and hot rocks. The baskets used for cooking are three rod coiled cooking baskets. They are water tight. In order to use these baskets for cooking they must be soaked in water overnight. This allows the basket material to soak in the water and makes the basket water tight. Before cooking acorn we take a little of the leached flour and rub it into the weave of the basket to assure no leakage. We then mix the leached acorn flour with water in the basket.

The morning we are going to cook the leached acorn we build a large fire in the cooking fire pit. The fire is built upon a stack of cooking rocks. They can be either basalt rocks or soapstone any other type of rock will burst and crumble. Whatever you choose to use, you always count them before building your fire. Your fire is a clean fire, built of clean wood. No use of petroleum products to start your fire, and never, never throw trash of any sort into a cooking fire.

We use only oak or manzanita wood, as these are hot burning woods and leave little ash. We keep this fire burning hot for at least a couple of hours. When we are ready to cook, the cook's helper will lift the cooking rocks out of the fire one at a time, using large sticks called 'pinita', they resemble oversized chop sticks, made of young cedar or oak saplings. Each rock is dipped into a vessel of water to wash off the ash, then a second vessel to assure it's cleanliness. The rock is then placed on the cooks waiting cooking paddle or stirring loop. The cook then gently lowers the rock into the mixed acorn flour, one at a time. It takes approximately four to six rocks the size of an adult fist to bring a basket full of acorn soup to a full rolling boil. The cook keeps the rocks in constant motion. This assures that the basket is not scorched or burned. This cooking process takes about 15-20 minutes. The baskets used are about as large if not larger than a large stock pot. This is a very efficient method of cooking. When the acorn soup, or 'nupa' is done, the cook removes the hot rocks from the soup. Sometimes the cook will drop the rocks onto clean cedar bows and allow the acorn adhered to it to bake, making what my kids call acorn chips. Other times the cook dips her hand into clean water and cleans off each rock as she takes it out of the soup then drops it onto the earth to allow it to cool and bake clean itself. This is how we cook acorn soup, or 'nupa'. The other way we serve it is in little water dumplings or 'ulay'. For this we cook the acorn into a very thick soup, when it is done cooking we use a small basket and individually dip a basketful of the thick acorn soup into very cold running water. It immediately solidifies into like a gelatin dumpling. Many elders prefer this older style of cooked acorn. This is how my people, the Northern Sierra Mewuk (Miwok) prepare acorn. Acorn is high in protein and contains almost every essential vitamin. This we know because we had to have it analyzed before the doctors at Oak Knoll Naval hospital my grandmother was in prior to her passing would allow her to have it. They were amazed at it's

Note: A little background on myself: Here in California I am referred to as a Traditionalist, that is I still practice the traditional ways and ceremonies of my people. I am a basketweaver, I make coiled and twined Mewuk (Miwok) baskets. I am a founding Board Member of the California Indian Basketweavers Association, and served on the Board for the last eight years. I am an artist, I work with oils, acrylics, pastels, watercolors, pencil and pen. I make jewelry, a view of my work can be seen in the May 1997 issue of Ornament Magazine in an article announcing the opening of a Beadwork show at the American Indian Contemporary Arts Gallery in San Francisco. For those of you who are wondering what I look like, if you have a copy of the Time/Life Series, Indians of America, in the Indians of California book, you can see me, on page 54, there is a photo of me cooking acorn.

Servings: Eleven +

Thank you Kimberly, for sharing Nupa Acorn Soup with us!

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