



Photos by David Campiche

LEFT: Steamer clams ingredients, including clams and soba noodles. **RIGHT:** A traditional salmon bake on cedar staves aside an alder pot fire.

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Unlike the Lewis and Clark party that followed a decade and a half later, the Chinook gathered up nearly every known creature, walking or swimming. In handsome woven baskets, they gathered many of the natural plants: wapato, wild celery, rhizomes, shoots, stems, roots, wild carrots, skunk cabbage, and—not to be forgotten—wild onion and the tender-peeled stalks of devil’s club.

The supple stubs of alder were peeled and chewed like gum. Dozens of plants and herbs were used as healing medicines and salves, like salal leaves and its berries. Many varieties of wild berries were picked too: cranberries, salmonberries, elderberries, strawberries, blueberries, huckleberries and the mealy salal berry.

Crab, clams and mussels were often boiled along with succulent Willapa Bay oysters, which can also be seared over a campfire in their shells, then devoured with their natural nectar. Not a drop of brine was wasted.

Clam broth was drunk or transformed into thin soups which could be enhanced with natural vegetables and plants, delicacies such as fiddlehead ferns and nori kelp.

Foods were often prepared in handsome reed baskets by first dropping red-hot stones into salt water. Some foods were steamed. Other foods, mostly meats, were roasted over the open fires. Foods were

also often staked and splayed in halves on cedar staves, particularly Chinook salmon.

Other popular meats included eel, venison, bear, elk, steelhead, trout, sturgeon, flounder, crab, halibut, ducks, geese, rabbits, grouse, seal and whale blubber.

Smelt was also favored. The fish’s oil, called eulachon grease, was traded for a thousand miles up and down the coastline. The grease was a natural preservative.

The Corps of Discovery would have been pleased to eat a steady diet of elk or venison seven days a week. They nearly did. Their skin turned the pallor of a slab of hanging beef, like Rembrandt’s painting of a butchered and hanging cow.

The rainy days hurled along. Heavy wind cursed the boys in buckskins. The soldiers dreamed of beef steak and kidney pie. They ate salmon and steelhead only when necessity demanded (starving times at Dismal Nitch or Hungry Harbor).

You get the point. Eating a clam would be much like forcing your 8-year-old to swallow their most hated vegetable.

A modern dish

The southwest wind is blowing the brittle boughs of cedar and spruce into

‘RAINY DAY PEOPLE DON’T HIDE LOVE INSIDE, THEY JUST PASS IT ON.’

‘Rainy Day People’ by Gordon Lightfoot

the yard in mounds. A wood fire burns on the hearth. Rain drums the roof like the base of Ray Brown’s quartet.

We prepare a simple meal of steamed littleneck clams, homemade bread, and salad of tomato and mozzarella cheese with fresh basil. I choose what is a more traditional summer salad because it brightens up the winter offering and adds freshness to the palate.

We slurp up the clam nectar like the hungry soldiers of the Lewis and Clark party when they were forced to share a couple of rabbits between 32 men, and Sacagawea.

Unlike us, the explorers refused to eat clams. And from time to time, they complained of their dining options. Not too much of that is mentioned in the journals.

Well, there’s this: “It would be distressing to a feeling person to see our situation today.”

Clark is talking about a sou’wester that bruised the corps for 13 days. Too bad they didn’t know what they were missing; that they didn’t confer with the Chinook.

Ahead of them was a 2000-mile return trip to St. Louis. Hungry, the rain contin-

ued to fall.

Steamed clams and accompaniments

In a large cooking pot, add the little neck or manilla clams, say two pounds, shells intact.

Add a half-stick of butter, a half-glass of white wine, fresh herbs like oregano, fennel and parsley, and a few stems of scallions.

Then, steam the clams until they open. A quarter teaspoon of hatch chili powder or Cayenne adds a nice kick.

Save the broth to drink, or for a chowder or clam fettuccine the next day. The nectar lays a base that is impossible to beat. If you want an alternative, try preparing your chowder with little neck clams. Steam the clams open first, reserving, of course, the pungent broth.

The only real trick for a good caprese salad is to reduce balsamic vinegar by half. Pour the vinegar over the stacked tomato, cheese and basil, and then drizzle virgin olive oil over both.

Consider buying whole wheat or 9-grain bread. If you do choose a baguette, garlic bread is a pleasant option, as is cornbread. The bread should be wrapped and oven-baked until warm.

Nothing will drink better than a Pinot Gris with this meal. Unless maybe, champagne.

This is rainy day food at its best.