

Tradition, culture, heritage tied to Native foods

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In Din Food For Thought

The elderly women of the village clans held an equivalent doctorate degree in botany. Her word and advice was law. Seasonal migrations of harvesting the native foods depended entirely upon the elderly women.

Time of harvest were gauged by weather conditions, perhaps observing the tell tale signs of the moon. In the Columbia River, salmon appearance in the river was probably the ultimate indicator for the time table for edible root harvest for the Wasco and the Tenino Sahaptin. The Tygh Sahaptin, the appearance of the Stone flies (salmon flies) and swallows welcomed the advent of the Chinook salmon and root harvest. Wildlife, like the deer antler, started to emerge could possibly be another indicator of the seasonal conditions. The migrations to the harvesting area, had to be at the right places and at the right time of the year.

Germination of root food seeds grow best where soil constantly disturbed (digging). It was the elderly women who caused the roots to flourish. Because of their constant return to the accustomed gathering places. It was the elderly women who retained the botanical information. She knew of all the edible roots, leaves, barks, mushrooms, berries and stems. She also held a vast knowledge of pharmacology (Tautnuk) & the science of drugs) of which barks and roots to use for known disease cures and control. She was a physician (doctor). She extracted the poison of rattlesnake for abortions. She was also the one who administered it. "Some pharmacologist believe that American Indian people's knowledge of herbal medicines equaled or maybe even surpassed modern man's expertise with natural drugs excerpt from Native Americans." She was the master burn ecologist of which forest to burn for an abundant return of the huckleberries. She sometimes was the psychiatrist (priest, Indian doctor Twa-te). She definitely was a historian. Her wisdom and knowledge was held in high regard within the family clan.

Lewis and Clark observation in their journals were focused upon her speech with great attentiveness. She sat in the chief places of the lodge. They (clan members) made mention that she was well taken care of, when asked her age, the reply was: she had lived over a hundred winters, related the journals.

With God's abundant temporal gifts (foods), there never was such a thing as going hungry. If there was such a thing, then it was considered a very grave and shameful situation.

Indian foods, specifically celery (xamsi) and the Chinook salmon was on this wise. The harvesting of xamsi usually followed the spring run Chinook salmon as they migrated to their accustomed places of spawning. When the springs run Chinook salmon in the Mid Columbia River was nearing the end of the runs, roots and xamsi could be found maturing on the flat benches overlooking the Columbia River between Mosier and The Dalles, Oregon. About three weeks later as the salmon migration progressed to the Shears Bridge. Xamsi and roots are now emerging on the Deschutes Canyons east of

the river. Approximately mid April and early May, salmon are present in the Warm Springs River area. Xamsi is starting to sprout at this place. When the Spring Chinook salmon have reached their destination in June. Xamsi harvesting is coming to a close at the Log Springs area, Northwest of Simnasho, Oregon. If one desires the taste of Xamsi at this time of the year; they will have to go to the ceded area east of the reservation in the Shaniko, Oregon area. In the semi-meadowed high elevation valleys, xamsi could be found. Which began to mature about mid June and ended near July. In the mid August to early September. Both Xamsi and the Chinook salmon have propagated. Thus, a new cycle.

Xamsi was not the only food of high calcium, magnesium, and zinc value. But was also used as a mystical avenue into the supernatural world. The method used was somewhat the urim and thummin of the Israelites of the Holy Bible, when put to the urim & Thummin a question of yes or no. The Israelites were given an answer supernaturally by means of this method. It was about 1938 when I was how this was done with the xamsi. Grandmother made an inquiry into the supernatural world about the fish and the eel run of the Tenino area along the Columbia River. The answer came in a positive yes. A few days transpired, my uncle Leonard Polk Sr., came with several sacks of salmon and eels to our strawberry harvesting camp at Sandy, Oregon. Every tribal member in camp rejoiced because of the fresh eels and salmon.

In later years about spring of 1956, I demonstrated the xamsi phenomenon to my wife which resulted in an astonishing accuracy of the answer. With this mystical activity of the xamsi there are specific types of the xamsi must be used to activate this practice elaborate description of the procedure is too long.

When harvesting xamsi, Grandmother often showed me which of the xamsi was the most succulent, she would often tell me in Indian not to pick any Ush-wy-ni tasting the red stemmed Ush-wy-ni often resulted in a bitter tasting experience.

Black lichen (alectoria species), Indian (K'unch). This was moss taken off the small pine trees. It went through an elaborate process of which I don't know. The journals of Gabriel Franchere 1810-1814, say this of this particular food: "At such a time there chief food is only pine moss, which they boil, and which they reduced to a kind of paste or black dough, thick enough to take the form of a loaf or of a biscuit. I had the curiosity to taste of this bread and I thought that I had put a piece of soap in my mouth! However, people who have this paste tell me that when it is fresh, it tastes rather good with meat." Too bad Gabriel didn't have some sugar or some dried huckleberries mixed in with it. HaHaHa. This experience happened to the French trader in the High Okanagon area of Washington, near the Canadian border. Surprisingly, the analyzed nutrient value is highest in the calcium, iron, magnesium, zinc and thiamin.

Camas: (camasia quamash) Indian Waq'amu harvesting of this bulb has to come to a full bloom before harvesting. Because there are two kinds, one has a blue blossom and the other has a white top. Beware of the white blossom. It is a deadly poison. Boy! this bulb is delicious when barbecued In-din style. Has high energy value, fat, carbohydrate, fiber, calcium, iron and riboflavin.

Mint: (mentha arvensis) Indian shuxashuxa. This wild tea grows where a spring is expelling it's water or sometimes in a swamp. To use: boil the leaves like you would

tea, sweeten a little with sugar and you'll think you have spearmint gum in your mouth. Nutrient value is high on riboflavin and ascorbic acid. The plant and stem reach a height of three feet.

Biscuit Root: (Lomatium Cous) Indian name Xaush. The place of harvest that I know of was on the plateau between Wolford Canyon and mum-ye-tut Canyon. It has the highest energy value (kilo calories) carbohydrate and calcium is very high also.

Canby's Desert Parsley: (Lomatium Canbyi) Indian name Lukwsh. The place of harvest is nearly all over the arid part of this reservation. When it's dried, it's very good. Especially eating it while hunting on foot. It has a very high carbohydrate and calcium content.

Bitterroot (Lewisia Rediviva parsh) pronounced Piaksi. Can be found on the reservation at Webster Flat, Pauling area, and Shaniko area. Very good when cooked with salmon combination. Has high energy value, carbohydrate, calcium, thiamin, ascorbic acid. All these nutritive values are high in content. I saw this root at the plateau of flaming Gorge National Park between Wyoming and Utah. Mr. Whalawitsa (my brother-in-law) tells me it grows in Colville reservation.

Pine Nut (pinion?): There is a type of this nut found at the base of the Ollallie Butte. It was somehow baked or roasted with a smoked taste of which I will never forget.



This incidental food was prepared by Jasper Tufti, who was a descendant of the mol-Lah-lish tribe. It is a valued food among Utes and Paiutes.

Acorn (Indian name Wawachi): was the fruit of the oak tree; consisting of a thick walled nut usually set in a woody cuplike base. Lewis & Clark saw this nut used at the John Day Sahaptin village October 21, 1805. This was one of the Wasco's chief foods. Gabriel Franchere journals 1810-1814; nuts of acorn hazelnuts were eaten by the natives, the trappers adopted this diet from the natives to prevent scurvy, proved to be very effective. This is also a principle food among California Indians.

Indian Carrot (Perideridia Indian name-Sawitk): This root grew in moist meadow type near the ponderosa tree timberline. Very good when eaten raw, can be stored in container of dry dirt for about three to four months. Drying is done in same manner as Lukwsh. Highest calcium content for Indian roots, has iron, highest in magnesium, some zinc, high in thiamin, high in riboflavin. I saw this root at the Uinta Mountains in Utah.

Chokecherries (prunus demissa Indian name-T'msh): eating it fresh will make you speak Wasco better. Beaten or ground, seeds and all, to a pulp and made into a patty and dried. The vitamin C content of the fruit is 50% greater than that of cultivated cherries.

Huckleberries Indian (vaccinium species) eaten fresh, frozen, canned in earlier times of preparation was drying around a campfire. Harvested from July to October. Has a high vitamin C content. Makes superb filling for a baked pie. I saw this berry in the woods of

Wisconsin and SE Alaska.

Garlic or wild onion (Indian-Shamamui): this root is harvested about two weeks before the biscuit root (lukwsh) matures. It grows in hills among deeper soil of sagebrush and junipers. When ready to harvest it has the distinctive garlic smell. The stem and bulb can be added to a mulligan stew for flavoring. This bulb was used by an Indian Doctor on an ill French trapper who was stricken with an advanced case of scurvy. It has a tranquilizing effect for relaxing the body. Can be eaten raw, very good when sandwiched with any kind of bread.

Blueberry (Indian name Ilimukw) This is not of the blue berry of the high elevation. It used to be found in the low mountain meadows (Iilmuk) around Schoolie ranger station, north of the Warm Springs river. The bush is eight to twelve inches high. The berry is very small, has same leaf characteristic as the common huckleberry. It looks like a miniature huckleberry. It has a very sweet and delicious taste. This blueberry patch may have been destroyed because of the very heavy logging in that area. This is an incidental food. It was harvested about mid June.

Savvies berry (Indian name-Cheha): was usually found on river bottoms, was at one time abundant in the Schoolie Ranger Station area on the Warm Springs River. The berry grew on small trees of about 7-10 feet. The berry was blue and resembles the high elevation blue berry in color. Harvest two weeks in June.

Blueberry (Indian name-xuushi): was found in high elevation, mountain meadows (Iilmuk) looks same as huckleberry. The berry is powdery looking, has a sour taste. Harvest time same as high elevation huckleberry.

Eel (pacific lamprey-Indian-Asm): high protein and thiamin content. Harvested from spring to late fall. When dried it is very good, when picking huckleberries (will keep you from eating all the berries). Skewed up like shi-ka-bob roast over open fire, oven baked is also very good.

Venison (deer & elk meat Indian Ya'amash): very high protein, thiamin and iron content. It is delicious when fillet thinly and thrown directly on the coals of alder. Try it, you'll like it. Can be dried, smoke dry, pemmican crushed.

Crayfish (crawfish Indian K'astila): a fresh water crustacean (Mini-lobster). This was an incidental food, mostly used by Cascade, Wasco and lower Chinook clans. Harvested in the lower Columbia River from June-September. An abundance of them can be caught in Lake Billy Chinook. A very expensive white man dish.

Sturgeon (Acipenseridae Indian Wilaps): it's roe (eggs) was a delicacy, valued as a source of caviar about 6 gallons of roe can be gotten out of an 8 foot sturgeon. The edible flesh had to be thoroughly cooked because it was a bottom feeding scavenger. Nutrient value probable parallel the salmon. Harvested by Wascos in the Tenino area by use of long line and setnet.

Smelt (Osmeridac): it was called candle fish by Lewis & Clark because it can be set afire when is was dried. Upon Lewis & Clark's return to the eastern states, they met a party from the above tribes (Wasco) with a canoe. This was probably a harvest mission by the upper Wasco clans. In the journal of Gabriel Franchere 1810-1814 states: "Smelt is the chief nourishment for the natives during the months of April, May, June. Those who live up the river buy them from others." Relate the journals. The smelt can be rendered for the grease, one teaspoon of the grease added to dried salmon siwi (backbone) and m'ula (dog salmon) will make you lick your chops for more.

Buffalo (Synerus caffer Indian-Suuyum): Journal of Gabriel Franchere 1810-1814 states "The natives of the Upper Columbia River (Sahaptin) commencing at the Falls (Celilo) differ fundamentally in language, customs and habits. Nomadic in nature, male and female can always be seen on horseback, and they are as a rule, good horsemen. They hunt deer and range as far as Missouri to kill buffalo, the flesh of which they dry and carry back on their horses to provide principle food during winter." "They travel with their families and often their calvalcade grow to include two thousand horses." state the journals. These river people probably traded with the river Sahaptin and Wasco for the processed salmon. Nutrients are probably the same as deer meat. Note: all wild game flesh has a very high iron content.

Salmon (oncorhynchus Indian-nusux): caught from April to late fall. Has high energy value, protein carbohydrate calcium highest of all Indian flesh foods, thiamin so valuable was the salmon in 1806 Lewis & Clark could not persuade some of the river Indians to sell them some. Lewis & Clark party had to settle for eating dogs and horsemeat. In the journals they described the storage of the salmon in this way: twig baskets are used, lined with grass and fish skins. The stone crushed fish is packed tightly into the twig baskets of about a hundred pounds. It was covered with fish skin and laced, probably like the huckleberry basket. They were told it lasted a very long time. The salmon skin can be softened by throwing it on coals or the surface of a stove. Add a little salt, eat and you will wish for some more. Other storage preparation are: ch'lai a pemmican flavored with a touch of sugar. Oil rich heads are split and dried for winter use. The bellies are salted, heavy body parts dried, backbones dried.

Fowl: geese, ducks, quails, grouse. These will all be lumped into one. The methods of harvesting is unknown. But it was a known food source. The harvesting of quails was done at night when the game bird roosted on trees and slept.

Bear: This animal was not sought after as a principle food. However, when an animal was taken the preparation was ground barbecuing. In later years; my grandfather would crawl into the bear's hibernating cave, take his pick and pull it out of the cave with a rope and horse.

Burying animals: ground squirrels etc. squirrel was eaten whenever it became available. Preparation burn off hair in open fire, gut it out, squew it up and roast over the open flame.

Woodchuck: same preparation as ground squirrel. Can be baked or boiled. A food used by Ute and Paiute.

Pharmacology: will be omitted in this writing. The barks, shrubs, leaves may already be listed in the whiteman's pharmacopoeia.



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