

An Ick-quired Taste?

■ To the initiated, lamprey is traditional, and tasty, Native fare, but to newcomers, intestinal fortitude is required.

By Ron Karten

The summer interns at Natural Resources were bathed in blood. It was all over the counters and walls.

Heads and gills of lamprey breathed their last in a giant bucket, the offal of an awful lot of fish about to become a traditional feast.

It looked like a crime scene on the overcast afternoon of July 24, but the cleaning was really a traditional prelude to the roasting and, on this day, a not-so-traditional tasting of the longstanding food staple of Northwest Native peoples.

Maligned for being oily, and often boiled first to extract some of that oil, lampreys have long been an

important food

for Natives

— particularly

because of that

oil — as long

as they've both

been here in

the Northwest.

"Oil is ener-

gy," said Natu-

ral Resources

Fish and Wild-

life Coordinator Kelly Dirksen, who

earlier in the day, with Tribal member

Greg Archuleta, returned to Willamette

Falls to harvest yet another

batch of lamprey, the ones now being

prepared in a kitchen unit behind the

Natural Resources building.

"They don't eat for a year when

they return to fresh water to

spawn," Dirksen said. "That oil

sustains them for that year, and

they use it to develop their eggs."

Without bones, lamprey shrink

during the year, Dirksen said,

making it difficult to tell adults

from juveniles.

"They've never gotten the atten-

tion that salmon gets, but they're a

very important fish," he said.

Like salmon, lamprey swim out to

the ocean and return each year to

spawn. During many seasons, when

salmon are scarce, predators turn

to lamprey for food instead of wip-

ing out the salmon, Dirksen said.

"In the old days," said Chinook Tribal member Greg Robinson, "oils was what it was about."

Robinson is a cultural resource, designer of the Chinook longhouse at Ridgefield, Wash., and the main chef for the day's lamprey and salmon feast.

"When the fish cooked and dripped their oils, Indians used to put shells underneath to catch the oil because it was that important a source of energy," he said.

And it helped Native peoples regulate themselves, balancing the effects of roots and other vegetation on their digestive system, Robinson said.

With salmon and lamprey slow-cooking by the fire pit, the big question about tasting the delicacy remained. There wasn't any doubt in the mind of Oregon

Public Broadcasting's Ann Dornfeld, who was back to complete the story she'd started weeks earlier at Willamette Falls.

"It's good," said Dornfeld after her first taste. She looked at a blackened piece where she first bit into the lamprey and took another bite. "It's like a cross between a pork chop and a mackerel."

But for the work crew and at least one *Smoke Signals* reporter, it took a dose of barbecue sauce before an attempt could be made. And when the time came, the fish did taste something like a cross between pork chop and mackerel, and the lamprey did require another look and another bite.

In the end, however, a big question hung in the air.

"Who wants to take the leftover lamprey home?" asked Tribal Public Affairs Director Siobhan Taylor.

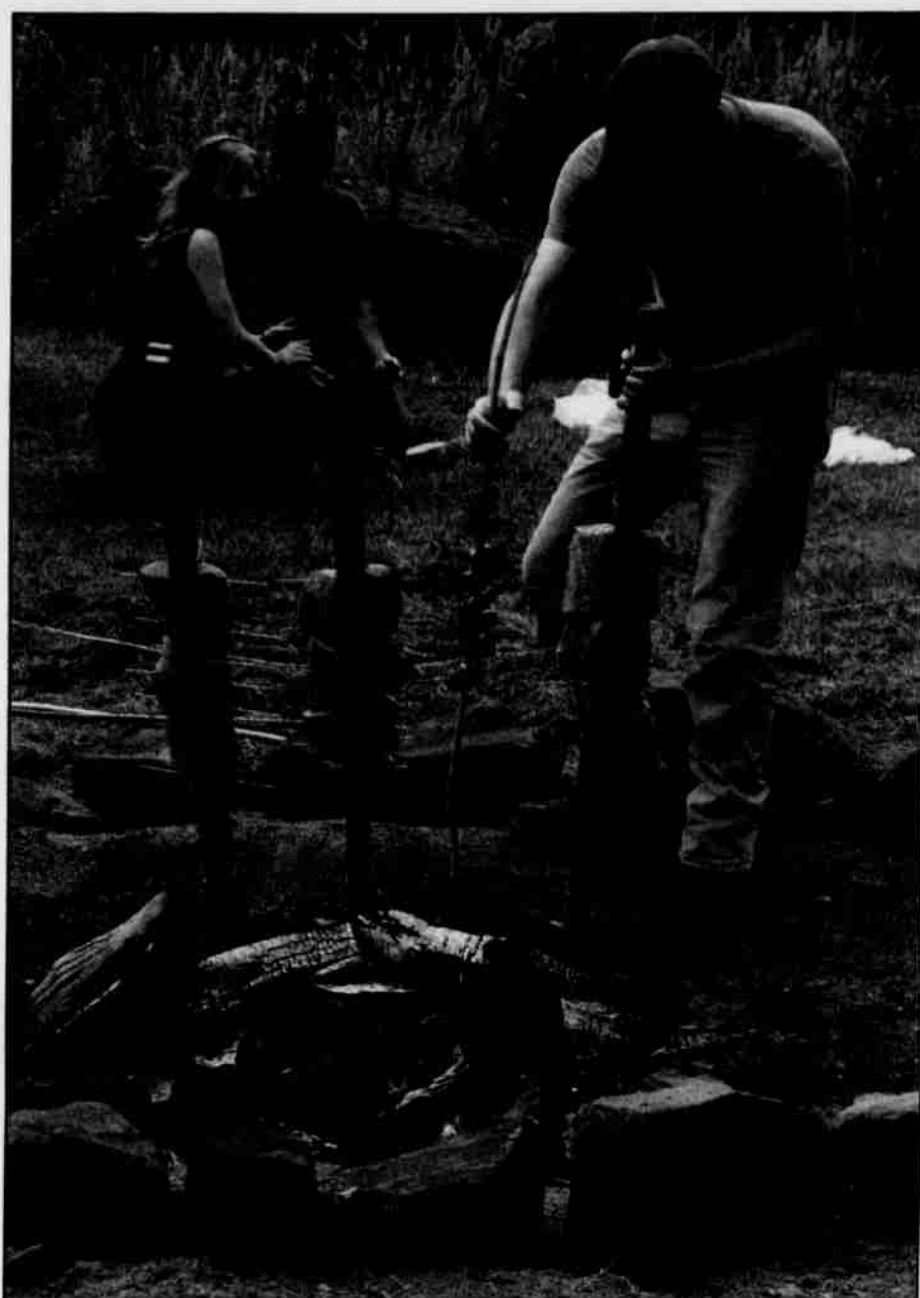
Nobody answered. ■

"It's like a cross between a pork chop and a mackerel."

~ Ann Dornfeld of Oregon Public Broadcasting after tasting a lamprey



Traditional style for cooking lamprey and salmon.



Above, Chinook Tribal member and Culture Specialist Greg Robinson sets a stick of lamprey pieces to cook at the side of the traditional alder wood fire where the salmon, held straight between pieces of cedar with little skewers, has already started cooking. In the background, Tribal member Greg Archuleta and Oregon Public Broadcasting reporter Ann Dornfeld watch.



To the right, Dornfeld tries the lamprey for the first time.

Below, Archuleta cuts a lamprey into chunks and Robinson forces the chunks onto skewers made of green cedar branches.

