

# NATIVE AMERICAN LIFE



## NATIVE AMERICAN COOKING



*Anna Carew-Miller*

SENIOR CONSULTING EDITOR DR. TROY JOHNSON  
PROFESSOR OF HISTORY & AMERICAN INDIAN STUDIES  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY

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**EUROPEANS AND NATIVE AMERICANS**

**HOMES OF THE NATIVE AMERICANS**

**HUNTING WITH THE NATIVE AMERICANS**

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**NATIVE AMERICAN TOOLS AND WEAPONS**

**WHAT THE NATIVE AMERICANS WORE**

# NATIVE AMERICAN COOKING

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**A Native American woman from Nicaragua cooks beef with local vegetables, yucca, and banana leaves.**

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Printed and bound in the United States of America.

CPSIA Compliance Information: Batch #NAR2013. For further information, contact Mason Crest at 1-866-MCP-Book

First printing  
1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Carew-Miller, Anna.  
Native American cooking / Anna Carew-Miller.  
pages cm. — (Native American life)  
Includes bibliographical references and index.  
ISBN 978-1-4222-2968-2 (hc)  
ISBN 978-1-4222-8855-9 (ebook)  
1. Indians of North America—Food—Juvenile literature.  
2. Indian cooking—North America—Juvenile literature. I. Title.  
E98.F7C27 2013  
641.597—dc23

2013007471

Native American Life series ISBN: 978-1-4222-2963-7

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# INTRODUCTION

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For hundreds of years the dominant image of the Native American has been that of a stoic warrior often wearing a full-length eagle feather headdress, riding a horse in pursuit of the buffalo, or perhaps surrounding some unfortunate wagon train filled with innocent west-bound American settlers. Unfortunately there has been little written or made available to the general public to dispel this erroneous generalization. This misrepresentation has resulted in an image of native people that has been translated into books, movies, and television programs that have done little to look deeply into the native worldview, cosmology, and daily life. Not until the 1990 movie *Dances with Wolves* were native people portrayed as having a human persona. For the first time, native people could express humor, sorrow, love, hate, peace, and warfare. For the first time native people could express themselves in words other than “ugh” or “Yes, Kemo Sabe.” This series has been written to provide a more accurate and encompassing journey into the world of the Native Americans.

When studying the native world of the Americas, it is extremely important to understand that there are few “universals” that apply across tribal boundaries. With over 500 nations and 300 language groups the worlds of the Native Americans were diverse. The traditions of one group may or may not have been shared by neighboring groups. Sports, games, dance, subsistence patterns, clothing, and religion differed—greatly in some instances. And although nearly all native groups observed festivals and ceremonies necessary to insure the renewal of their worlds, these too varied greatly.

Of equal importance to the breaking down of old myopic and stereotypic images is that the authors in this series credit Native Americans with a sense of agency. Contrary to the views held by the Europeans who came to North and South America and established the United States, Canada, Mexico, and other nations, some Native American tribes had sophisticated political and governing structures—that of the member nations of the Iroquois League, for example. Europeans at first denied that native people had religions but rather “worshiped the devil,” and demanded that Native Americans abandon their religions for the Christian worldview. The readers of this series will learn that native people had well-established religions, led by both men and women, long before the European invasion began in the 16th and 17th centuries.

Gender roles also come under scrutiny in this series. European settlers in the northeastern area of the present-day United States found it appalling that native women were “treated as drudges” and forced to do the men’s work in the agricultural fields. They failed to understand, as the reader will see, that among this group the women owned the fields and scheduled the harvests. Europeans also failed to understand that Iroquois men were diplomats and controlled over one million square miles of fur-trapping area. While Iroquois men sat at the governing council, Iroquois clan matrons caucused with tribal members and told the men how to vote.

These are small examples of the material contained in this important series. The reader is encouraged to use the extended bibliographies provided with each book to expand his or her area of specific interest.

Dr. Troy Johnson  
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**This photo shows some traditional Native American foods. Many foods that people everywhere now take for granted originated in the New World. Such foods include tomatoes, corn, potatoes, and chocolate.**

# 1 Native American Cookery

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What did the original inhabitants of the Americas eat? Their diet was made up of foods that they grew, hunted, or gathered from the wild. The territories of some native peoples teemed with rich and varied sources of food. Other peoples had to work hard to feed themselves. However, no matter where they lived, from the tundra to the forest, from the desert to the tropics, all tribes developed ways to eat well in their homelands.

Native peoples did not take food for granted. They had a spiritual connection to the plant and animal world. They knew their food came from both the bounty of the natural world and the knowledge acquired by their ancestors. As a result, their stories and oral traditions show how grateful they were for what they ate.

Hunting and gathering wild foods provided the mainstay for many Native American peoples' diet. Such foods included fish, **game**, berries, roots, **tubers**, herbs, seeds, and nuts. Some of the things native peoples ate might be surprising, like insects or moss. But some native wild foods are part of the everyday diet of North and South Americans today.

In contrast to tribes who got most of their food from hunting and gathering, many of the native peoples of the Americas were farmers. Agriculture, the raising of crops for food, was important to tribes all over the New World. In fact, almost half of all crops grown today were once wild plants **domesticated** by Native Americans.

Two New World crops, corn and potatoes, are among the most important staples in the world today. Staples are foods that form the basic source of nutrition for humans.

When did the native peoples of the New World learn how to grow their own food? It is believed that around 8,000 years ago, the natives of northeastern Mexico began to cultivate squash and its close cousins, pumpkins and gourds. Corn was developed from varieties of wild grasses more than 7,000 years ago in central Mexico. Beans were domesticated around the same time that corn and squashes were. Native Americans traded the seeds of these plants, spreading them along trade routes throughout North and South America over thousands of years.

These three crops became the cornerstone of the diets of agricultural tribes. In fact, the Iroquois tribe of northeastern North America called corn, squash, and beans the "Three Sisters." The "Three Sisters" balanced essential needs for proteins, minerals, and carbohydrates in the human diet. Good nutrition was important for nonagricultural tribes, too. They managed to find ways to eat well, hunting for meat and gathering nutritious and tasty wild plants.

Over thousands of years, native peoples developed healthful diets, preparing the foods of their homelands to create delicious dishes for their families. With colonization by the Europeans, many Native Americans lost their homelands and access to traditional food sources. Some native peoples adapted their lifestyles and eating habits to the changes brought about by colonization. Others, however, suffered the loss of a way of life and the healthful diet of their ancestors.



**This 16th-century illustration depicts Native Americans preparing food. Though some of what they ate may seem strange today, the diets of the various tribes evolved over centuries and supplied the people's nutritional needs from the available resources.**

**Beans are good for the soil, replacing nutrients that other crops, such as corn, take out of it. In addition, beans are nutritious because they are high in protein, minerals, and fiber.**

Scientists now study the nutrition found in the traditional foods of native peoples. Native Americans who eat modern, processed foods often have a high rate of diabetes and other nutrition-related diseases. Those who eat their traditional foods are much healthier. By making traditional native foods more available, scientists hope to restore the delicious and varied menu that once nourished Native Americans. §



**Mounted Indians close in on a grizzly. Hunting large animals such as bear, moose, and buffalo could be dangerous, but meat provided the main source of protein in the diets of many tribes.**

## 2 Northeastern United States and Canada

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The climate of the northeastern United States and Canada ranges from gentle to severe. For every tribe, the cycle of the seasons offered different ingredients for their diets. In this cycle, most tribes hunted game in the winter, harvested maple sugar in the spring, fished and gathered wild foods in the summer, and harvested their own crops in autumn.

In the northernmost region, in Maine and Canada, native peoples were forest hunters and fishermen, but they also harvested maple sugar. In the southern area, south of Maine, tribes depended on agriculture for food. Like other tribes, the staple foods were corn, squash, and beans. The seeds of these crops had slowly made their way up from Mexico along trade routes.

This journey of seeds is reflected in the oral traditions of some tribes. For example, the Narragansett tribe of Rhode Island told this story about where corn came from: Crow brought them a grain of corn in one ear and a bean in the other. These seeds came from the great god Kautantowits. He had a field in the Southwest, from where all corn and beans came.

Archeological evidence shows that the cultivation of corn and beans is at least 1,000 years old in southern New England. By the time the first colonial settlers from Europe arrived, the Northeastern tribes were skilled farmers. In fact, the “Three Sisters”—corn, beans, and squash—fed the first colonial settlers who came from England. They would have starved to death if the native peoples had not saved them. These tribes showed the colonists how to grow and prepare these unfamiliar foods.

Making sure that there was enough food for the tribe was a huge undertaking, one in which men and women had specific tasks. In Northeastern tribes, women were the gardeners, and many of them became strong tribal leaders because they performed such an important job. In fact, women were the ones who owned the fields and crops. They decided when the crops would be harvested and organized groups of families to travel to the fields for harvest.

Men were expected to hunt. They hunted deer, bear, moose, and wild birds in the forests and marshlands. They fished in lakes and rivers and, in coastal regions, gathered shellfish.

Men and women both worked to gather wild foods, such as seeds, berries, and tubers. A wild food important to Northeastern tribes was cranberries. These berries were not just food, however; they could heal some internal and external ailments.

Northeastern tribes also harvested maple sugar and syrup. They used it not only as a sweetener, but also as a preservative. Maple syrup could be added to wild berries, roots, nuts, vegetables, and game dishes. Maple sugar was also mixed with parched corn, and Indians carried this mixture in small leather pouches while traveling.



Comme l'arinde boucquant ou totissou le poisson  
à la chair

Les Indiens font un grand feu de bois et le bois est escomé en  
charbon prenant que de fougères de bois et les figes en fait et metten  
plusieurs batons de bœufs de bois l'oy fourchettes de hauteur du feu de  
pied et deux ou trois et estendent sur poisson et charbon et font  
la chaleur du feu la fumée de la viande qui tombe dans le feu fait  
bouillir ou fait le poisson et poisson et est un bon mélange et le  
viande s'en fait de plus qu'il ne brule de l'oy le poisson et poisson  
Cuide et fait à la volonté de l'arinde

This page from a 16th-century French manuscript depicts an Indian roasting or smoking fish and meat. Though exact recipes have for the most part been lost, much is known generally about the way Native Americans prepared food.

Varieties of clams were a staple food for many coastal tribes, which made seasonal migrations to harvest shellfish. European settlers in New England found huge mounds of clamshells, evidence of these migrations.

Food was stored in cache pits or houses. Cache pits were deep holes in the ground lined with grass and bark to keep corn and seeds dry. When full, the pit was covered and hidden so enemies couldn't find the tribe's food supply. In the rafters and ceilings of houses, tribes stored pumpkins and squash that had been cut into strips and dried. Beans were stored in clay jars. After a good harvest season, Northeastern tribes could depend on their stored food to last through the winter and into the spring.

No cookbook exists that could tell us exactly how the tribes of the Northeast prepared the foods they grew, hunted, and gathered. However, we know what they ate and how they prepared it from the records of the earliest colonial settlers. Also, some recipes have been passed down within each tribe from mother to daughter for generation upon generation.

Modern Americans would feel right at home eating much of the fish and shellfish that the coastal tribes ate. Shellfish were eaten raw, steamed, smoked, or dried. Fish might have been baked in hot coals or roasted over flames. Other than turkey, most of the game that the Northeastern tribes hunted such as deer, bear, and moose, probably wouldn't taste familiar to us today. However, the method for cooking the meat wouldn't seem strange. Sometimes, meat was roasted over an open fire on a twisted string that rotated as it unwound, like a rotisserie grill. The meat and fish of Northeastern tribes tended to be mildly seasoned with wild herbs or maple syrup.

Many traditional recipes were shared with European settlers and passed down to modern times. Succotash, called *ogonsaganonda* by the Iroquois, is a mixture of corn, squash, and beans. Another food eaten for generations by Native Americans and European settlers alike was johnnycakes. The Narragansett people of Rhode Island called johnnycakes *no-ke-chick*. They used a thin batter of cornmeal, which was poured onto a hot soapstone slab. Today's version is cooked like pancakes on a hot griddle. Almost every region of the New World where corn is eaten has its own version of this flat corn bread, although it is called many different names.

European settlers arrived in the Northeast in great numbers during the 17th and 18th centuries. They expected Native Americans to share much more than their food and knowledge. Tribes were pressured to give up their traditional farmlands through both negotiation and outright war. This loss of land for farming caused many hardships. Tribes who struggled to live peacefully alongside the European settlers often had to leave the homelands of their ancestors. If they stayed, treaties left them with rocky soil unfit for growing food.

By the 19th century, the tribes of the Northeast had lost nearly all of their traditional lands. What was left of many tribes had moved further west, joining with tribes of the Great Lakes region. But some native peoples stayed on in their homelands, adapting to life among the European colonists. Fortunately, their traditional foods did not disappear.



**Native Americans take surplus fruit and vegetables to a village storehouse in this 1591 engraving. The storehouse is located along a riverbank so that its contents will stay cool. In the colder climate of the Northeast, tribes dug cache pits to store the extra food they gathered during the summer months.**

Native recipes evolved to include the foods that Europeans had brought with them. To ancient recipes, native and white cooks added ingredients from livestock—including pork, dairy products, and lard. What were once Native American preparations are now considered classic American dishes. Barbecues, clambakes, chowders, and cornbread were all once part of the Native American menu, prepared from foods gathered and harvested in the Northeast.

Northeastern natives also gathered and ate the Jerusalem artichoke, an important tuber that is not often eaten today. Also known as “sunchokes,” these nutritious tubers taste a bit like potatoes, water chestnuts, or carrots. §





**During the Green Corn Ceremony, held each summer, Native Americans danced and gave thanks for their food. For the Creek Indians and other tribes of the Southeast, green corn also symbolized a fresh start.**

### 3 Southeastern United States

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The Southeastern United States enjoys a mild climate and a long growing season. This gave the native inhabitants of that region a great abundance and variety of food. They farmed, hunted, fished, and gathered wild foods from their native forests, rivers, and coastline.

Most tribes of this region were successful farmers. They cultivated corn, beans, squash, melons, sunflowers (for seeds), and tobacco. In the far South, corn could be planted and harvested twice a year giving the native tribes an ample supply of their staple food to get through the brief winter.

Southern tribes did not take the abundance of their natural resources for granted. Their spiritual life was full of acts of thanksgiving for food. In the summer, most tribes had a Green Corn Ceremony in some form or another. For the Creek tribe, it was the most important rite of the year. They called this ceremony *boskita*. It was a time of purification, cleaning houses, and fasting. Then, they celebrated the new corn with feasting and visiting. At the end of *boskita*, a ceremonial new fire was lit in the hearth of every home. For the Creeks and many other tribes, green corn symbolized a fresh start.

Southern tribes also took advantage of nature's bounty in the wilderness. They gathered nuts, berries, and other wild foods. One kind of nut that people continue to think of as a Southern food is the pecan. However, these nut trees are native to the Ohio and Mississippi river valleys. Not only the native peoples, but also the European settlers, learned to value these nuts as a tasty source of fat and protein.

Native wild herbs, tree bark, and leaves were sought for both seasoning and healing properties. Sassafras, from a **deciduous** tree native to the East, was used in cooking and for medicine. Its roots and bark taste like anise, fennel, or cloves. The green leaves of the sassafras tree contain a thickening agent used in stews. After the leaves were gathered, they could be dried, ground, and stored as a powder for use in the winter season.

The Southern tribes added variety to their diet of grains and vegetables by killing wild game whenever possible. The men hunted bear, deer, turkey, wildfowl, and even alligator in the far South. Game was often prepared in the form of a stew, which was cooked in clay pots. Meat and vegetables were also sometimes baked in clay pots buried in the ground and covered with hot coals.

The Jamestown settlers in Virginia gave the name "Brunswick Stew" to a game stew that they learned to make from the women of the Powhatan tribe. This stew was prepared from leftover bits of game. Squirrel, rabbit, or turkey might have been mixed with produce from their gardens, such as corn, beans, and tomatoes, to make this tasty dish.

Other favorite dishes of the Southern tribes included bear ribs, hominy, corn cakes, and corn soup. Hominy was a kind of processed corn. It was made by soaking dried kernels of corn in water that had been mixed with ashes. This made the corn whiter and puffier. Fermented hominy was made into soup or fried with meat and vegetables. Hominy could also be dried and pounded into grits. Corn cakes were another corn dish. The women would mix cornmeal with ashes to make the dough rise and to give it flavor. Then, they would wrap the dough in corn husks or grape leaves and bake it in the ashes of a campfire. The Choctaw called these corn cakes *bu-na-ha*.



**Seminole men spear fish, an important part of the Florida tribe's diet. Note the weir, a fence-like trap, at the left of the picture.**

With the arrival of European colonists, many changes came to the Southern tribes. By the 18th century, Southern tribes began to adapt to European farming methods. The biggest change was the introduction of livestock. At first, native people didn't like to eat meat that had been kept in pens—they thought livestock was dirty. Eventually, however, Native American farmers kept livestock, as overhunting by white settlers made wild sources of meat scarcer.

The traditional farming lifestyle of these tribes made it relatively easy for them to live side by side with their white neighbors. However, pressure from white landowners to acquire more land meant that these tribes kept getting pushed farther to the west. By the mid-19th century, many of the tribes of the South had been forced to leave their homelands. The United States government removed these tribes to reservations in Oklahoma, known as Indian Territory.

Southern tribes took food traditions with them to Oklahoma, adapting their tribal recipes to the new region in which they had to live. In Oklahoma, many tribes from different areas lived near one another. As a result, they learned other tribes' traditions, including food traditions. These displaced tribes also had to invent new traditions, as their old ways of doing things, especially growing and cooking food, had to adapt to a drier climate and a shorter growing season.



**An Indian cultivates crops in this late-16th-century illustration. Most Native American tribes were neither pure farmers nor pure hunters but instead combined hunting, gathering, and agriculture to supply their nutritional needs.**

**For the Cherokee tribe, gathering food provided a basis for understanding the cycle of the seasons. For the Cherokee, *gogi*, the warm season between April and October, was a time to plant and harvest. *Gola*, the cold season, was a time to collect nuts and hunt for game.**

Because reservations often did not have good land for agriculture, tribes depended on the U.S. government for some food. New kinds of staple foods emerged from this situation. For example, fry bread became the staple food of the reservation. Fry bread was the invention of reservation women, who were given foods that they didn't know how to use, such as flour, lard, baking soda, and white sugar. Even so, fry bread evolved into a tasty Native American dish, one that is still eaten on reservations and throughout homelands today.

One food Southern tribes had harvested from the wild in their native lands that they could still find in Oklahoma was wild onions. Gathering wild onions near the beds of creeks and rivers continued as tradition. Today, some tribes, such as the Creeks and Cherokees, sponsor wild onion dinners in early spring. These dinners are social gatherings that raise money for churches or clubs. They often begin with a group outing to gather onions. The wild onions are prepared by washing them, cutting off the roots, and chopping them into small pieces. Usually, the onions are mixed with eggs and fried. Traditional native foods from the South, such as cornbread, sassafras tea, and huckleberry pie, complete the meal. §



A Navajo woman carries an armful of corn she has just picked. For the Navajo people, corn—a vital part of the traditional diet—is sacred.

## 4 U.S. Southwest and West

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The West and Southwest include an amazing range of environments, from desert to mountain to coastal regions. In each region were native peoples who had adapted their lifestyle to the natural world around them. Some tribes were **nomadic** and survived in lands that couldn't support agriculture by hunting and gathering. Other tribes lived in villages and farmed successfully with **irrigated** fields—some for more than 1,000 years.

In the Great Basin region, which includes Wyoming, Nevada, and parts of Idaho, food was scarce. There was no staple food, and the tribes living in this region survived by eating a wide range of wild foods. Whenever possible, they hunted deer, antelope, mountain sheep, rabbits, rodents, and reptiles. They fished mountain streams and collected everything edible, including insects, roots, berries, seeds, nuts, mesquite beans, and **agave** plants.

One important food source was pine nuts. These nuts were gathered from piñon trees, which are found in the dry **mesas**, canyons, and foothills of the Great Basin and Southwest regions. These rich, oily nuts have a lot of protein. They were eaten raw, roasted, parched, or boiled in many different recipes. Today, the Paiute tribe of Nevada celebrates a Pine Nut Festival, paying tribute to this important traditional food.

In California, most tribes had more natural resources from which to draw their supply of food. They did not grow their food. Instead, coastal tribes fished and collected shellfish, such as abalones. They gathered wild food, such as seeds, birds' eggs, fruits, nuts, roots, berries, **yucca**, and sage. They also hunted elk, deer, birds, reptiles, rodents, and insects. For many tribes in California, acorns were the staple food. More than 60 species of oak are native to this region, so acorns were like corn for these tribes. Acorns are rich in oils and carbohydrates, which made them an important source of nutrition.

To harvest acorns, men climbed oak trees to shake the nuts down. Women collected them and processed the acorns for eating. They pounded the acorns into meal. First, however, the bitter tannic acid, which is bad for the human digestive system, was leached out with water. The nuts were given several soakings lasting at least half a day. The acorn flour was then boiled into gruel or baked into bread. Acorns took the place of corn for California tribes that depended on wild foods.

In the desert and mountain regions of the Southwest, native tribes also gathered wild foods, but they depended on agriculture for at least part of their food supply. The ancestors of the Pueblo tribes, known as the Anasazi, adapted the crops of ancient Mexico to their desert homeland. Corn, squash, beans, chili peppers, and gourds have been grown in the Southwest for more than 2,000 years.



Some Native American tribes collected birds' eggs whenever they could find them. Eggs are a good source of protein.



**Women of the Moquis tribe of Arizona prepare food inside their house in this drawing. Many of the foods used in traditional Southwestern cooking, such as corn, beans, and peppers, have been grown in the region for thousands of years.**

Because of the wisdom of their ancestors, the Pueblo tribes were excellent farmers. They carefully placed their community fields near water sources and used sophisticated methods of irrigation. They also shared their knowledge of agriculture with Apache and Navajo peoples when those tribes arrived in this region in the 14th century.

In addition to growing food, these tribes hunted antelope, deer, elk, and rabbit. They gathered a variety of wild foods, including pine nuts, berries, the fruit of cacti and yucca, juniper berries, mesquite beans, wild onions, wild herbs, and honey. Like other native peoples, they gathered seasonings and made teas and healing tonics from these wild foods.

Because agriculture was so difficult in the desert, the spiritual and cultural life of these tribes was closely tied to their supply of food. Much of their spiritual life focused on the growth of corn, the staple food in this region. To the Hopi, corn pollen is sacred. The four colors of Hopi corn represent the four sacred directions in their spiritual world. Corn is sacred for the Navajo people, too. When a Navajo couple marries, the bride's grandmother gives the bride and groom a basket of cornmeal. The couple exchanges a bit of meal, receiving from each other the blessings of the spirit world through the corn.

Unlike the tribes in the eastern part of the United States, for Indians in the Southwest, tending the fields was men's work. Much of the women's day went into food preparation. They ground corn into meal using a *mano*, a handheld stone, and a *metate*, a stone grinding basin. Many traditional recipes are based on corn preparations. For example, the Pueblo tribes enjoyed blue cornmeal mush, a major staple that is still eaten as a breakfast cereal, soup, or side dish at dinner. From their diverse food supply, the women created cuisines that were both delicious and healthful.

The tribes of the West and Southwest experienced contact with Europeans first through the Spanish, who arrived in their homelands during the 16th and 17th centuries. Although this cultural confrontation was sometimes violent, for many tribes, it was an opportunity to expand their range of



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