



## Contacts and Connections - 1541 to 1670

### Educator Content Introduction: Native American Cooking and Foodways

Like other aspects of proto-historic lifeways, a lot of what we know about Native American foodways comes from **ethnohistoric** research, combining information from multiple sources, including modern Native American practices, oral histories, observations written down by Europeans, and archaeological excavations. When we talk about **foodways**, we are referring to more than just what people ate or how they cooked. Foodways consist of everything having to do with food, such as:

- Methods for growing, collecting, and hunting food.
- How food is prepared and cooked, what ingredients go together, and the recipes used.
- The containers made or used to cook, serve, and store food.
- The disposal of food, including leftovers, scraps, or spoiled foods.

Foodways are also about the meaning behind eating foods together with other people (whether in small groups or large groups), celebrations with food during certain occasions or times of the year, or the rituals surrounding certain meals. It is a common practice among people and cultures all over the world to share food, but how that is done depends on the practices within a specific culture. For example, in our society today, we eat most meals with close family members at home. However, during the holidays people often share meals with extended family members, friends, and members of their community. Certain recipes or dishes may be reserved for special occasions, such as baking a cake to celebrate someone's birthday. Therefore, what we eat, who we eat with, and when/where we consume certain meals can all be surrounded with meaning.

The meanings of foodways can also be shaped by **beliefs**, or understandings about the world, and can determine the relationships people have with food. Beliefs within a culture can also designate some foods as **taboo** or forbidden and polluting. Among Native Americans, some combinations of different plants and animals used in cooking were considered taboo, depending on which realm they were from. For Native Americans, the world was viewed as having three realms: The Upper World, where there was perfect order; the Under World, composed of disorder and change; and This World, where humans lived, and which existed as a mix of perfect order and complete chaos. Native peoples believed these worlds should be kept separate, which included cooking. For example, meat from four-footed animals could not be cooked with bird meat, since four-footed animals came from This World and birds came from the Upper World. Some Native American groups believed people would turn into snakes if they ate polluted foods that mixed animals from different realms together (Hudson, 1976, pp. 123-124, 165).

Native North Carolinians gathered and ate a wide range of wild plant food resources. Different wild foods were available each season of the year. For example, in the spring Native



people collected a variety of edible wild greens, like lambsquarter and ramps, which they ate either raw or boiled. Summertime fruits included strawberries, blackberries, and hawthorns. In late summer into early fall, persimmons, pawpaws, grapes, and maypop fruits were collected. Hickory nuts, acorns, hazelnuts, walnuts, and chestnuts were important fall food resources. The edible roots of many wild plants were collected throughout the year, including those from cattails, sunchokes, and groundnuts.

Many plant foods could be harvested fresh when they were in season, then dried to keep over the winter. Nuts were stored after being lightly boiled or **parched**, or roasted, to kill insects and to help them preserve better when stored. Corn was dried and kept in **corn cribs**, which were storage houses propped up on stilts. When spring came around, the fresh greens and other wild foods were a welcomed change of pace from eating wintertime stores of preserved foods (Hudson, 1976, p. 300).

Native Americans in the southeastern U.S. did not raise food animals, however they did hunt many wild animals, including deer, bear, turkeys, rabbits, and squirrels. Hunting large animals was primarily done by men, who would travel away from the village in winter on extended hunting trips. Women, children, and elders primarily worked together to tend and harvest crops and **forage** for, or find and collect, wild foods, but they would also hunt small animals. To do so, they used blow guns or set up traps in areas where animals like rabbits and squirrels were common, such as in gardens, or at the **forest fringe**, which consist of the grasses and bushes at the edge of fields and villages, between cleared/open areas and the dense woods. Men and women would fish using traps and spears, and collected shellfish from the rivers (Hudson, 1976, p. 273).

There were two main methods for hunting large animals like deer and bison, depending on whether villagers needed one animal or many. In the first method, the hunter would sneak up and get close to the animal. To get close without scaring their **prey**, or the animal they are hunting for food, Natives would sometimes disguise themselves by draping the **hide**, or skin, of an animal they were stalking over their body, making it look like they were a member of the herd. Once close enough, the hunter used a bow and arrow to take down the animal. The second method was carefully coordinated with other villagers to hunt a whole herd at one time. Women, children, and elders often participated in this method by driving the animals towards hunters using noise or smoky fires to frighten them. Hunters then surrounded the herd or trapped them using fire. After the hunt, the women of the village cleaned and prepared the animals for cooking, or **dressed** them, by removing the hide and cutting it into portions of meat. Most of the animal was used in some way, creating very little waste. Hides were made into various items, including bags, blankets and clothing. Bones and antlers were also used to make things like tools and jewelry. The dressed meat was then taken back to the village and cooked while fresh, or cut into thin strips and dried over a fire to preserve it for later (Hudson, 1976, p. 300; Lapham, 2006).



Another big animal hunted by Native were bears. However, they were hunted and dressed a little differently. Most bear hunting happened in the late fall to early spring, when they were most likely to be found hibernating in their dens. They were also more docile during this period, and so easier to hunt. Bears **hibernate**, or conserve energy by being dormant over the winter, since there is very little food available during the winter months. Hunters tracked bears by looking for signs of bears, like their prints in the ground and claw marks on the bark of nearby trees. Before hibernation, bears eat a lot of food and develop a thick layer of fat to sustain them over the winter. Bear fat was highly prized by Native peoples, and was the primary reason they hunted bears. Bear fat was removed during butchering and cooked in earthen pots to extract its oil. This oil was then stored in large pots and gourds for later use as a cooking oil and condiment to flavor dishes. Lean bear meat would be eaten or dried like any other meat (Hudson, 1976, p. 300-301; Waselkov, 2020, pp. 22-23).

Another major source of for Natives came from oily nuts. Based on ethnohistoric and archaeological evidence, we know that nuts, particularly hickory nuts, were very important to Native Americans. However, cracking hickories to extract their nutmeats is a time-consuming process, and often not worth taking the time to do so. Instead, people crushed the nuts and boiled them until the oil floats to the surface. Hickory oil was then skimmed off of the water surface, then stored and used similarly to bear oil. In another preparation, Native Americans made a soup from cracked hickories. First, they crushed the nuts, which made them very sticky. Crushed hickories were then pressed together—nutshell and nutmeats—forming a ball that could be easily stored or carried when traveling away from home. The **hickory ball** was then added to water, creating a rich broth to which any other available ingredients were added. When boiled, the nutshell in the hickory ball sinks to the bottom of the pot, and the nutmeats and oils float to the top. This was an efficient way to use hickories that did not involve a time-consuming process of cracking and removing the nutshell (Fritz, 2001; Scarry, 2003, pp. 60-61).

In addition to eating wild foods, Native Americans cultivated a number of plants. When Europeans arrived, the staple foods of Native diets consisted of corn, beans, and squashes. Corn was the main crop grown by Native Americans and was used to make many different kinds of dishes. Corn, beans, and squash were eaten together as a succotash, which provided a complete protein and balance of vitamins and nutrients. Corn came in three varieties: early corn, or the first to mature, which was similar to popcorn; flint corn, with hard smooth kernels used for making hominy; and dent corn, which was ground into a flour, or cornmeal. Flint was made into **hominy** by soaking and boiling the kernels in water with **lye**, and alkaline substance Native Americans extracted from wood ash. This process of making hominy is called **nixtamalization**, which not only softened corn kernels, which is easier to eat, but it also becomes more nutritious. Nixtamalization makes certain nutrients in corn digestible, especially **niacin**, which is a B vitamin that helps your body turn food into energy (Swanton, 1946, p. 296).



European explorers often commented that Native American women were excellent cooks and made a wide variety of dishes and drinks. Something was always cooking on the **hearth**, or central fire in the house used for cooking and warmth, and food was available to household members and guests throughout the day. Meals were eaten out of bowls made of pottery, gourds, or carved wood, and people used either their fingers to eat with, or spoons made from gourds, wood, or bison horn. A lot of Native dishes involved boiling ingredients together to make soups and stews. In one dish, fresh corn would be ground into a pulp and added to boiled venison to make a sort of hash. Bear or deer meat was often boiled with squash and corn kernels. Various meats, vegetables, nuts, fruits, and greens were added to soups and flavored with oil. Seasonings likely consisted of salt, along with flavorings from various plants and fruits. Meats, fish, and vegetables were also roasted over the fire. Native Americans made bread out of cornmeal, to which they added other foods like beans, dried fruit, or chestnuts. Bread was sometimes boiled, similar to dumplings, fried in bear grease, or baked in the fire of the hearth. Native cooks made a sort of oven in the fire by placing a large bowl over the dough while it cooked. In addition to cornmeal, acorns or chestnuts were ground into a flour and made into bread. Cold drinks were made from various sweet fruits, like maypops or honey locust pods. A slightly fermented cold drink was also made from a corn-based porridge. Warm drinks were made from herbs, fruits, and roots. Sassafras roots, for example, were made into a fragrant hot beverage in the spring, during a time when the roots have the strongest flavor (Hudson, 1976, pp. 301-305, 309; Swanton, 1946, pp. 265, 285, 354).

Native peoples grew, hunted, and collected a wide range of foods and often had plenty to eat, but occasionally crops would fail or wild food resources were scarce. However, Native peoples were **resilient**, or tough during hard times, and had recipes for eating less-desirable foods, like snakes, lizards, frogs, snails, and insects, when needed. Cherokee women today still pass down recipes for making a soup out of yellow jacket larvae and for frying locusts. When corn and nuts were not available to make enough flour, women were resourceful, and would grind rivercane into flour to make bread (Hill, 1997, p. 40; Hudson, 1976, p. 309).

### **Possible Essential Historical Questions:**

#### Middle grades

- How did Native Americans hunt large animals?
- What is nixtamalization?

#### High school

- Define *foodways* and explain how this term applies to Native Americans.
- How did beliefs shape Native American foodways?



**Keywords:**

belief

corn crib

dress

ethnohistory

foodways

forage

forest fringe

hearth

hibernate

hickory ball

hide

hominy

lye

niacin

nixtamalization

parch

prey

resilient

taboo

**Resources:**

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