

Food and Animals

By Indra Kay and Adriana Rush

Nikola Tesla STEM High School, 4301 228th Ave NE, Redmond, WA 98053

Northwest natives have had a rich history with abundant and variety-full food. Access to fish, berries, and animals to hunt gave natives a strong social culture present in virtually no other hunting and gathering societies, comprised of distinct social classes each with different tasks. Food was used for more than simply calories—eating could be a social activity during formal feasts, for medicinal use especially through herbal remedies, and ritualistically important such as the common First Salmon and First Berry rituals. As white immigrants came from Europe and began to force native peoples onto smaller land areas with less ability to wander and fewer recognized and near food resources, the ability to make traditional dishes became more and more diminished. Through the white man's effort to Europeanize the Natives, many recipes were at least temporarily lost. More recently, there have been efforts from tribes and tribal members to reclaim aspects of their traditional culture that had been lost or suppressed, including in traditional native food preparation.

Generally, hunting and gathering cultures are standard in having simple technologies and fairly egalitarian communities. The exception to this is in the Northwest natives. Due to the abundance of foods like the healthy salmon population and consistent berry harvests it actually requires less work to hunt, gather, and fish than was required of most stable farming groups. The free time and free people made possible by the ease in feeding allowed for specialized tasks and social stratification, each group made up of three general classes each containing multitudes of subclasses almost distinct for each individual. Because not everyone had to be devoted to food gathering, technology grew more rapidly and significantly than in many other tribal areas. Baskets were woven so tightly they were waterproof, and could be used to boil and cook things by dropping in hot stones. Free time was also used toward creating art, both 2 dimensional like paintings and 3 dimensional like totem poles. In essence, the entire culture of northwest tribes sprouted from the food they ate and how they obtained it.

The difficulty in preserving traditional food culture began not soon after Europeans began consistently living in large groups in the northwest area. There were initial isolated bouts of struggle between natives and whites. Europeans, unsure of how to farm for themselves in a new climate with new food crops, would simply steal the crops and resources of the Natives. Unsure of how to properly maintain these foods, they would often destroy the resource in a single year's harvest, leading to hunger the next year and more struggle between the groups. Food became further from its traditional role and appearance when Natives began being removed from their homeland and forced onto reservations, often areas with few natural resources and scarce food growing outlooks. Whereas before people knew where to look for certain plants where they had grown for years before, and had access to foods from wide swaths of land through easy trading and widespread movement and gathering, now they had to make do with the limited options within their small allotted section. Foods like frybread began to pop up out of necessity, the limited food rations provided by Europeans as treaty fulfillment allowed for little else. Herbal medicines had always been very carefully used, the healing properties of each plant known

Food and Animals

By Indra Kay and Adriana Rush

Nikola Tesla STEM High School, 4301 228th Ave NE, Redmond, WA 98053

intimately. Once being removed from the land and plants they recognized, the ability to self-treat also went down, becoming more reliant on plants that could be found in most areas like nettle. Essentially, the cultural robbery committed by immigration Europeans stole not only land but access to the traditional foods that had sewn and allowed for the northwest native culture.

The foods eaten by the natives were as varied as they were plentiful. Diets were comprised of mainly berries, fish, and mammals with some herbs, birds, and shellfish supplementing the staples. Archeological records have found around 70 different plants consumed by the Salish tribe alone, some for flavor, some nutrition, and some additional health benefits. A staple for natives was quamash (also known as camas), a bulb rich in carbohydrates and usable as both a food in itself and as a sweetener. Salal berries (also known as bear berries) were another staple food, appreciated not only for their nutritional value but for their ability to help coughs, tuberculosis, diarrhea, and bladder inflammation. Salmon was distinctly important in the northwest food chain, an incredibly bountiful food that could be eaten fresh or dried and stored for times when food was scarcer. Salmon were chosen based off their fat content for drying—the more flavorful salmon was great to be eaten fresh, but the high fat content could cause spoiling relatively quickly and so had to be limited. Knowledge and understanding of what foods could do for health made northwest natives into a remarkably healthy group. Nettles for example, were drunk as tea or eaten cooked to help provide essential vitamins and minerals and generally promote health. Skunk cabbage was used for more specific purposes, cleansing blood and the bladder, treating wounds, easing childbirth, and acting as a mild sedative. A deep tie to the land and to what they were putting into and onto their bodies allowed natives to live not only with enough food but with the right kinds of food.

As the wrongs done to natives are finally beginning to be recognized and they are regaining some of the autonomy lost with the taking of their land, many are seeking to connect with their ancestry through the revival of traditional foods. Unfortunately, the impact of explorers arriving in America did not stop when native people were once again allowed to step onto their ancestral lands. In some ways, accessing traditional foods has become more difficult. Pollution has made many of the waters that home foods such as salmon and shellfish unsafe to eat from. The Duwamish River, for example, is a superfund site—which is to say, it is polluted to the point of absolute unsafety. Land that used to grow berries and other plants has now become paved over, ruining the ecosystem for the foods. The allure of ‘modern’ food cannot be ignored either. Many find it more tempting to drive to the grocery store or to fast food than to go hand harvest their own foods, especially as lifestyles become faster and more busy all the time. Despite these hardships, people have invested their lives into bringing native food back, reclaiming their culture and reclaiming their health simultaneously. Tribal cookbooks have started being published with more frequency. Many take into account adapting resources and adapt their recipes because of it, foods still holding onto the ideas of natural and local sourcing, but incorporating things like new seasonings or modern cooking techniques into their recipes. Some

Food and Animals

By Indra Kay and Adriana Rush

Nikola Tesla STEM High School, 4301 228th Ave NE, Redmond, WA 98053

community members are hosting classes where they teach interested native people about the culture of food, specific recipes, and how they can reconnect with their history through what they eat. There are groups that go out together to do things like harvest nettles or quamash, making the idea more accessible. As health of many natives is falling due to the high availability of fatty sugary foods, the importance of traditional food is even more obvious.

Food is literally what makes us who we are. Without it we would not be able to survive at all. It is one of the best ways to bridge gaps between cultures and celebrate shared ideas, hence the global prevalence of the feast. Native people have systematically had their culture try to be taken away from them. Food is one of the best ways to help new generations feel connected to their past. Natives historically had access to tons of foods all used for different reasons to create a healthy diet, and they are trying to reclaim that despite the difficulties surrounding doing so. Through utilization of local foods and the use of ancient cooking techniques, that difficult task is being accomplished.

Citations

“HistoryLink.org.” The Free Online Encyclopedia of Washington State History - HistoryLink.org, www.historylink.org/.

ICT Staff. “Native Food! 16 Photos of Traditional Cooking, the Salish Way.” Indian Country Media Network, 25 July 2017, indiancountrymedianetwork.com/culture/native-recipes/native-food-16-photos-traditional-cooking-salish-way/.

Pauls, Elizabeth Prine. “Northwest Coast Indian.” Encyclopædia Britannica, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 22 Sept. 2017, www.britannica.com/topic/Northwest-Coast-Indian.

“Salish Bounty: Traditional Native Foods of Puget Sound.” Burke Museum, University of Washington, 25 Apr. 2017, www.burkemuseum.org/blog/salish-bounty-traditional-native-foods-puget-sound.

Segrest, Valerie. “Feeding the Spirit.” Feeding the Spirit, 2011, feedingthespirit.wordpress.com/.

Food and Animals

By Indra Kay and Adriana Rush

Nikola Tesla STEM High School, 4301 228th Ave NE, Redmond, WA 98053

“Traditional Plants and Foods.” Northwest Indian College, Aug. 2010,
www.nwic.edu/community/traditional-plants-and-foods/.