The Cahuilla Kitchen

From sweet mesquite beans and palm fruit to savory meat, the food of the ancient Cahuilla is as varied and rich as the land they called home.

PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

MILLICENT HARVEY (MORTAR HOLES), ETHNOBOTANY PROJECT: ROSE RAMIREZ & DEBORAH SMALL (MESQUITE MEAL, MANZANITA BERRIES)

TOP: Mesquite meal was often mixed with water to create a sweet drink or formed into small cakes. ABOVE LEFT: The early Cahuilla would grind plants and seeds over the rocks, eventually creating these carved holes, or mortars. ABOVE RIGHT: The Cahuilla gathered manzanita flowers and berries to use for food during the summer months. OPPOSITE: Dolores Patencio uses a stone pestle to grind corn into meal.

The early morning sun rises, warming a large, flat rock dimpled with mortar holes of different depths and situated at the mouth of Andreas Canyon in the Indian Canyons in Palm Springs.

Imagine a long-ago Cahuilla village here, dotted with dome-shaped, frond-covered *kishes*, beginning to stir as birds twitter and swoop from beneath the fan palm skirts, and the soothing sound of water bubbling over streambed rocks invites early risers for a cool drink before daily tasks begin. The territory of the early Cahuilla extended from these villages in the mountains of Palm Springs all the way to a bygone lake on the eastern end of the Coachella Valley.

GRINDING

This ancient mortar rock site, still in existence and easily accessible within the Indian Canyons, is where Cahuilla women once gathered to grind mesquite beans into flour with stone pestles, heat rocks for boiling water, grind acorns, and teach their daughters-in-law how to leach out the acorn's bitter taste to make a hearty mush.

WATCH A VIDEO ON THE TRADITION OF AGAVE ROASTING AT WWW.AGUACALIENTE-NSN.GOV.

You can imagine the gentle sounds of talking and laughter wafting through the warm morning air over the rhythmic sound of grinding stone.

"Each family had their own hole for grinding," says Tribal Ranger Ralph Rodriguez, as he stands near the mortar rock.

There's much to learn about the ancient Cahuilla kitchen.

"Generations of families used the same mortar hole, and each had their own mesquite stand for gathering beans," he explains.

He gestures to a large bushy plant overgrowing onto the rock.

"Look, on this branch, a young mesquite bean," he says, as he delicately touches the long green pod hanging by a thin stem. "And over there, on that branch, are more beans. They will turn golden brown when they're ripe in the summer."

Mesquite is one of the most important trees the Cahuilla harvested. They used it for food, firewood, and building materials. The seed pods were ground into a course meal and either formed into small dry cakes, eaten as a warm mush, or mixed with water for a sweet drink. With an earthy sweetness, mesquite has been described as slightly fruity with honey or caramel undertones. Cahuilla children used to suck on a honey mesquite bean like candy.

LEFT: A Cahuilla woman and children grind food. BELOW: Cahuilla woman with acorn granary. OPPOSITE ABOVE: Yucca blossoms. OPPOSITE BELOW: Prickly pear fruit.

The most common variety of mesquite found here is honey mesquite, which can grow up to 30 feet, and the more shrub-like screwbean mesquite.

"This mesquite would have been cultivated by a Cahuilla family," Rodriguez says. "All the growth underneath would be cleared out to form a cave or hollow for gathering the beans. The elders would take a willow stick, which is flexible like a fishing rod, and beat the pods off the trees. Then the young boys would go inside the hollow and pick up the beans."

It was also important to take the thorns off the branches so the youngsters would not get hurt, he explains.

ETHNOBOTANY PROJECT: ROSE RAMIREZ & DEBORAH SMALL (YUCCA BLOSSOMS, PRICKLY PEAR FRUIT)

MALKI MUSEUM (ACORN GRANARY) COURTESY OF AGUA CALIENTE CULTURAL MUSEUM. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED (WOMAN AND CHILDREN)

GATHERING

During early spring, green fruits and buds began to ripen in the desert and hills, making abundant, delicious food available within a short walk from the village.

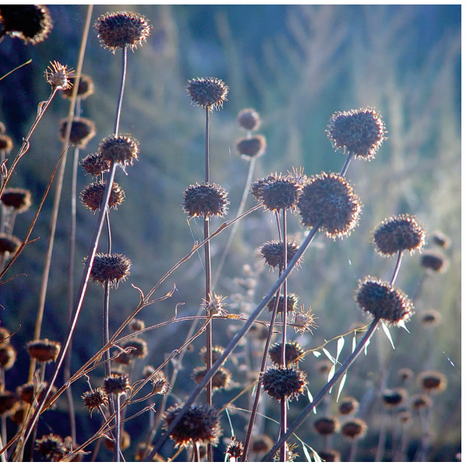
According to the book *Temalpakh, Cahuilla Indian Knowledge and Usage of Plants* by anthropologist Lowell J. Bean and Katherine Siva Saubel, the Cahuilla gathered wild onion; flower stalks and yucca blossoms; the fruit of barrel or prickly pear cacti; goosefoot leaves and fresh ocotillo flowers for salads; and young, unripe cat's-claw beans in April and May.

The busiest gathering time, generally done by women in small family groups, was during the summer months. In June and July, abundant honey and screwbean mesquite pods were ready for gathering. The Cahuilla would store large quantities in ollas or granaries for the coming year. They also collected manzanita flowers and berries, Spanish bayonet fruit, and cacti from the surrounding foothills.

With their roots in the cool running stream, head crowns thrust in the blazing heat, and shaggy coats providing shelter for wildlife, the *Washingtonia filifera* palm trees create biologically diverse oases that traverse the Indian Canyons and were another food source for the early Cahuilla.

From summer to early autumn, the palms produce dozens of fruit clusters weighing from 5 to 20 pounds. The dark blue pea-sized fruit has a large seed coated with sweet flesh that tastes similar to a raisin or date. The Cahuilla ate the palm fruit fresh off the trees or dried it in the sun to be stored and later ground into flour. As most of the fruit was out of reach, the clusters were lassoed with rope and pulled from the tree or snared by a long, notched willow pole, much like a citrus picker, to disengage it from the stem.

Late summer and early autumn marked the beginning of another series of food harvesting during August and September.

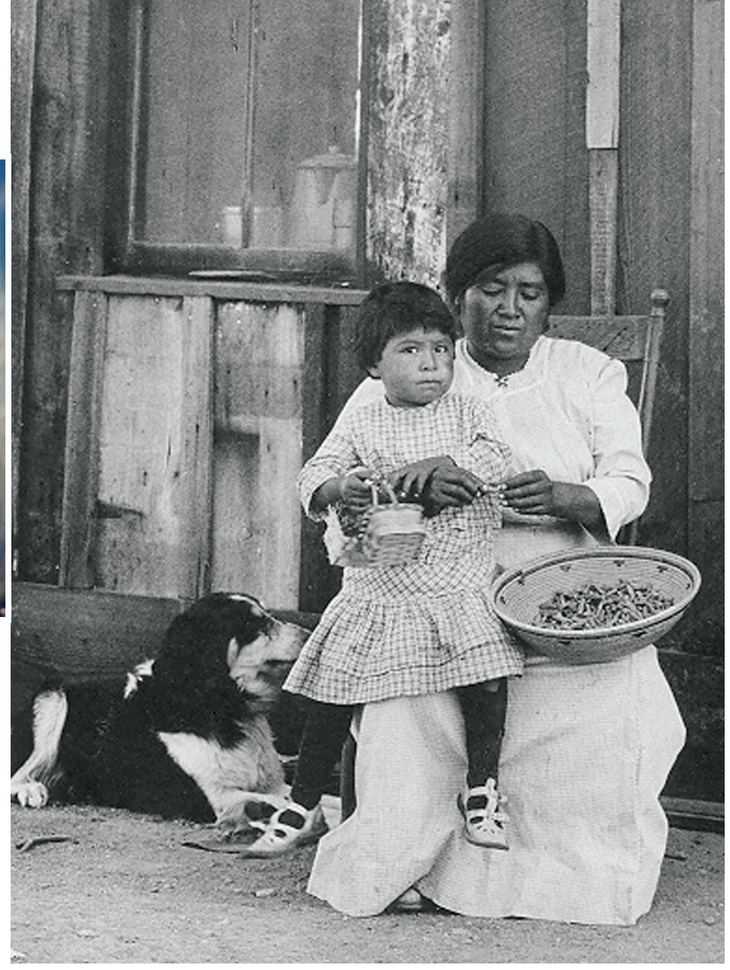


In higher elevations, located within a few hours of the village, grass seed, chia, saltbush seed, pinyon nuts, thimbleberry or wild raspberries, blackberries, juniper berries, and chokecherry were found. Larger family groups went as teams to collect the nuts and berries from pinyon and juniper trees, bringing home the harvest in their beautifully woven baskets made from deer grass.

The last gathering season was in October and November when acorn ripened in oak stands some 5 or 10 miles away. Such trips lasted several weeks, and acorns by the tons hauled back meant celebration in the village.

Winter ceremonial and religious observations during late November and December prepared the Cahuilla for regeneration for the coming year.

By late December, the food cycle started again as men and boys began searching for agave plants. This was a job primarily for the men, as it took great physical labor to prepare and harvest the sometime 100-pound agave crowns. Most of the agave is edible, and the Cahuilla would roast the plant in rock-lined pits. Its tough fibers were used to make nets, string, and shoes.



ABOVE LEFT: Chia, an important source of energy for the Cahuilla, was ready for gathering in late summer and early autumn. ABOVE: Agua Caliente Tribal Member Guadalupe Arenas, with Della in her lap, works with seeds or pods gathered by the Tribe. OPPOSITE: Mesquite pods ready for grinding.

Agave nectar is very popular today as a low-glycemic sweetener instead of sugar and tastes like honey or maple.

HUNTING

The dramatic climate zones where the Cahuilla lived — low and high desert, foothills, and high mountains — also offered a wide variety of animals that could be hunted for food.

Before hunting in the canyon for deer, bighorn sheep, and sometimes antelope, the Cahuilla men would undergo a purification ritual by washing with lavender or white sage, which removed their human smell, Rodriguez explains.

The men would ascend the canyon in a line and station themselves at various posts from which to startle the deer or sheep, to keep the prey running until it became exhausted. Their hunting weapons included bows, arrows, and curved wooden throwing sticks.

"Going on a hunt used up a lot of calories," Rodriguez says. "So it was important for men to conserve their energy. That is why they made the animal run and not themselves."

Closer to the village, men and boys hunted small game such as rabbits, squirrels, lizards, quail, ravens, and other birds using nets, pit traps, or snares.

To capture rabbits, the men would slowly drag agave nets across the ground, listening carefully so they could tell the youngsters from which bushes to flush out the rabbits.

"After the rabbits were gathered into nets, each family would take only what they needed and let the rest go," Rodriguez says. "No one ever took more than they needed."

FISHING

An enormous lake teeming with fish and life occupied the east end of the Coachella Valley until around A.D. 1700. In *Prehistoric Native American Responses to Ancient Lake Cahuilla*, archaeologist Jerry Schaefer, Ph.D., estimates that this freshwater lake — three times the size of the present-day Salton Sea — flooded at least four times in 1,300 years, with each flood lasting up to several hundred years.

The Cahuilla who settled near the lake likely survived on a different diet than those who inhabited the desert, foothills, and mountains. For example, they could fish and hunt ducks and geese instead of deer and bighorn sheep. Geologists exploring the dry lake bed in the mid-1800s found freshwater mollusk shells, which would have provided the Cahuilla with an excellent source of food. Along receding shorelines, still visible on the slopes of the Santa Rosa Mountains, are ancient fish traps used to capture bonytail chubs and razorback suckers that were also in abundance then but are now nearly extinct.

Imagine the beach of this vast, blue, freshwater lake in early summer. Cahuilla families gathered around fire pits dug in the sand to fry fish and steam clams as the sun sank behind the mountains, bringing an evening sky that turned from turquoise to dark blue, filled with stars.

With the advent of settlers and the establishment of trade routes in the late 18th century, many traditional Cahuilla cooking methods were replaced by more modern techniques acquired from the non-Indian newcomers. Though the Cahuilla no longer rely on the day-to-day requirement of grinding acorns on a mortar rock, gathering palm fruit and pinyon nuts in the mountains, hunting wild game, or fishing in the ancient lake, their descendants still hold on to the care and quality that went into every Cahuilla meal.

Today, some Cahuilla Indians still enjoy traditional foods. "I use mesquite and dandelion powder in my morning blended coffee every day as my first food," says Tribal Member Moraino Patencio. "When I desire something more substantial I mix it in a bowl with chia to make a porridge. I also take my kids into the Indian Canyons to teach them to harvest mesquite so they will know how to find and collect food in our nature preserves."

In addition to incorporating plants like mesquite and chia into daily meals, Tribal Members also harvest agave for an annual agave roast.

At the Tribe's Annual Cahuilla Learning Day, Tamit Enanqa, there is an overnight agave roasting and tasting. "The highlight is a tasting of the sweet, decadent, roasted agave, which helps to remind our people that we didn't just survive on traditional foods — we thrived," Patencio says.

— PAMELA BIERI

MESQUITE BARS

1/2 cup organic honey
1/3 cup water
3 tablespoons organic butter
1 1/2 cups organic whole wheat flour
1 1/2 cups mesquite flour or meal
1 tablespoon baking powder
2 teaspoons cinnamon
touch of nutmeg
1/2 cup organic nuts
1/2 cup organic raisins

1 Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly grease two 8-inch square pans.

2 In a large saucepan, slowly heat the honey, water, and butter until the butter is melted and the honey is liquid. Mix the flour, mesquite flour/meal, baking powder, and spices in a medium bowl, then add to the honey mixture and stir until well combined. Stir in the nuts and raisins.

3 Divide the batter between pans and spread evenly. Bake for 20–25 minutes. Overbaking will make the bars very hard.

4 When properly baked, a straw or toothpick will come out clean. Let cool in pans. Then slice into bars.