



U.S. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE  
Glen Canyon National Recreation Area



INDIAN COOKING

Methods of food preparation among the Indians of the Southwest are many and varied. However, archeologists find that the basic dietary habits of the specific tribes have not been changed in centuries. The crops cultivated by the Indians are: maize (corn), pumpkins, beans, squash, and melons. Meat is added to this diet when available, as well as wild vegetables, berries, and seeds.

The wild plants found in the desert have many unknown uses. Teas, seasonings, and delicious berries may be found on Indian lands which often seem hostile and barren to the white man. Only those who are familiar with desert plant life should sample her wares. A few of the plants which the Indian discovered to be delicious are:

Chiff Prickly Pear Cactus: (Opuntia Rhodantha)

Some species of this cactus produce edible fruits which the Indians consider to be a delicacy. Early pioneers also harvested this fruit and today it is used to prepare a delicious jelly. The juicy pear-shaped fruit of several cactus species are called "tunas" or "cactus apples".

Kanab Yucca: (Yucca Kanbensis) and Datil Yucca: (Yucca Baccate)

Both are also known as banana yucca. The pulpy fruit of this plant was an important item in the diet of the early Indians who roasted them for immediate consumption or dried them to supplement the winter food supply.

Parry Agave: (Agave Parryi)

Long ago, the Indians cut the stalks of this rugged plant (also known as the Century Plant) and roasted them in stone lined pits. The bud stalk of the Agave, when roasted, was considered a rare treat.

Today, most of the "wild" ingredients for recipes are long forgotten. Modern supermarkets carry the items necessary for the preparation of any meal. The recipes for Indian foods are often handed down by word of mouth and measurements will oftentimes be according to the "handful" rather than the cupful.

The Indian diet differs, usually, according to the particular tribe. For instance, the Navajo diet consists of fried bread, potatoes and some kind of a mutton dish. Pinon nuts are roasted and eaten by the handful when they are ripe. Ground cornmeal is an important part of Hopi recipes and is also an integral part of the Hopi religion and culture. A paper bread or "Piki bread" is also quite common with meals or as a snack. The Apache feasts mainly on meat, deer, fish or beef; the Pima and Papago Indians prefer highly seasoned beans and fresh green chilies.

The following recipes are fun and easy to prepare. The results may be surprisingly tasty as well as distinctly native.

A lot of hard work goes into preparing any kind of cornmeal dish! The corn will first have to be ground to a very fine texture with a stone metate and mano. A modern cornmeal grinder is easier and gets the job done faster. Next, gather a juniper branch--the one with the most red berries--burn it, and sift until only the fine white ash is left.

#### Blue Corn Meal Mash

1 cup Juniper Ash  
1 cup boiling water  
3 cups water  
4 handfuls Blue Corn Meal

Mix 1 cup of Juniper ash with 1 cup boiling water. Put 3 cups water into a pot. Boil. Strain the ashes into the 3 cups of now boiling water. Stir. Add 4 handfuls of blue cornmeal. Stir. Boil for 30 minutes. Stir. Take off heat and stir. Serve hot or cold with fry bread.

#### Blue Corn Bread

1 cup Juniper Ash  
1 cup boiling water  
3 1/2 cups water  
6 cups Blue Corn Meal

Mix 1 cup Juniper ash and 1 cup boiling water. Put 3 1/2 cups water into a pot and boil. Strain the ashes into pot. Stir. Add 6 cups Blue Corn Meal. Knead until dough is soft and firm. Shape the mixture into two or three loaves. Bake in hot ashes for one hour. Brush off the ashes and wash off. Serve warm with butter or jam.

#### Kneeldown Bread

Corn is picked while still in the fresh, milky stage, shucked and the kernels scraped from the cob. The kernels are ground on a metate until mush-like. Add a pinch of salt. The mixture is then formed with the hands into cakes about 3 inches long, 2 inches wide, and 1 inch thick at the center. These are then covered with corn shucks which have been steeped in hot water until soft. The shucks are folded over the mixture with the narrow ends turned under. This gives the bread the appearance of someone "kneeling".

To prepare a pit: Dig the pit about 2 feet square and 9 inches deep. A fire is made in the pit, and when it is thoroughly heated and the fire is raked out, the cakes may be placed carefully into the pit. Place one layer of corn cakes on the bottom of the pit, with succeeding layers over it. Put wet corn husks on top, and then a sheet of aluminum foil. Then replace the dirt and hot ashes over the foil. Build a small fire on top and let cook slowly until done (preferably overnight).