



## FOOD FROM DESERT PLANTS

### FARMERS AND FORAGERS

The Salado lived in the Tonto Basin from about AD 1300 – 1450. They collected about half of their food from plants growing on the mountain slopes.

Based on studies of plant remains in their dwellings, archeologists believe the Salado diet included cactus fruits, mesquite beans, jojoba nuts, juniper berries, and the flower buds of agave, beargrass, yucca, and sotol. They also cultivated corn, beans, squash, and grain amaranth.

The people maintained small gardens on the level areas between the mountains and valley floor. Larger farms thrived along the floodplain.

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### DESERT ENVIRONMENT



Although desert plants seem an unlikely food source, an astonishing variety of edible wild plants grows in this area. Changes in elevation from the Salt River to the cliff dwellings put the Salado within reach of several microenvironments. Mesquite and prickly pear are common at low elevations; saguaro, jojoba, and walnuts grow midway up the slopes, while juniper and pinyon pine once covered the upper slopes.

While the climate was much the same then as now, a richer environment existed for plant collecting. Lush grasses and trees covered the slopes before overgrazing in the late 1880's changed the environment. Water was also more abundant.

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### SAVVY SURVIVORS

Without modern technology, few of us would survive in the desert. To imagine doing so helps us appreciate Salado food gathering skills. It speaks of a high level of intelligence and a long cultural tradition. The Salado needed to know which of the hundreds of plants were edible. They had to know when to harvest and how to process plants. Most important would have been skill in preparing food so it could be stored against times of scarcity.

Why the Salado left the area still mystifies archeologists; depletion of resources is one theory. Some archeologists surmise that overpopulation, evidenced by the number of dwellings in the Tonto Basin, pressured the people to strip the desert of its resources. Poor farming methods would have contributed to the damage. If so, the Salado would have been vulnerable to disease and starvation. They may have fought among themselves as they competed for scarce food.

## THE SALADO KITCHEN

**Fire** -- The Salado rotated a vertical stick in a broader socketed hearth stick until the sawdust burst into flame.

**Cooking Vessels** -- Baskets were waterproofed using pine pitch or lac secreted by insects.

Clay pots sat on rocks or on pot rests of shredded yucca leaves or coils of bluestem beargrass.

**Utensils** -- The Salado used a mano and metate to grind corn and other seeds into flour.

Fine-grained stone, chipped to sharp edges, served as knives.

## Cooking Methods

**Parching:** Seeds were put in baskets, which were placed on hot rocks.

**Roasting:** Foods were placed on coals in a shallow, clay-lined pit and covered with earth and grasses.

**Simmering:** Stones were heated and then dropped in liquid.

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## THE SALADO SUPERMARKET



**Mesquite** (*Prosopis juliflora*) -- The beans were eaten raw, cooked, or ground into flour, and made into bread or mush. Dried pods could be stored for later use.

**Saguaro** (*Carnegiea gigantea*) -- The fruits were dried or eaten raw. They could also be made into jam, syrup, flour, and drinks. The pulp and seeds were molded into cakes, which may have been Salado trade items.

**Cholla** (*Opuntia sp.*) -- Buds were de-spined, dried slightly, and pit roasted with greens. They could also be thoroughly dried, stored, and boiled when needed.

**Agave** (*Agave chrysantha*) -- The hearts were placed in a fire pit, covered with earth, baked, and eaten like artichokes. The fiber could be eaten raw, or pressed into cakes to be stored for later use.

**Jojoba** (*Simmondsia chinensis*) -- Nuts were parched or eaten raw. They could be ground to the consistency of peanut butter and used as a spread.

**Palo Verde** (*Cercidium microphyllum*) -- The seeds were eaten raw or mixed with mesquite bean meal as an extender and flavor enhancer.

**Yucca** (*Yucca baccata*) -- The Salado ate buds, flowers, and fruits. The fruit was eaten raw, or sliced and sun-dried for storage. Roasted fruits were pressed into cakes and dried.