

Foods Eaten By the Lenape Indians

When we talk about the foods the early Lenape people ate we must remember that there were no supermarkets at which to buy the foods, and there were no refrigerators in which to store the food. The food had to be eaten very soon or it had to be prepared in various ways for storage so it could be eaten later.

Men and boys knew that hunting and fishing were very important. Deer, elk, black bear, raccoon, beaver, and rabbit were among the animals hunted for meat, skins, and sinew, and the bear's fat was melted, purified, and stored in skin bags. Turkeys, ducks, geese, and other birds were killed for meat and feathers. To prevent spoilage, some meat and fish were smoked and dried in the sun. Dried meat lasted for a long time. Dried meat could be chewed, or it could be cooked in a soup or stew. The Lenape always shared their food so no one ever went hungry as long as there was food in the village.

Birds were hunted, trapped, and their eggs were eaten. Marsh birds such as geese and ducks were killed with bows and arrows. They were also caught in traps and nets. Turkeys were favorite game birds that lived in the forest. Their meat was good to eat, and Indian women liked to make colorful robes and mantles with the turkey's feathers. They tied the turkey feathers on to a hand-made net backing that was then fastened to a skin cloak worn over the shoulders.

Passenger pigeons were another favorite game bird. Thousands of these birds once flew over the land in great flocks. The Indians caught passenger pigeons in nets. They took the eggs and young squabs out of their nests and ate them too. Later, white hunters killed so many passenger pigeons that they are extinct.

Fishing

Fishing provided much of the food eaten by the Lenape. Some lakes and rivers had fish all year. Other fish such as herring, shad, salmon, and sturgeon spent the cold months in the ocean and returned to the rivers during the spring to lay their eggs. Each year, thousands of shad swam more than three hundred miles from the Atlantic Ocean into the Delaware, Raritan, Passaic, and Hudson Rivers, to lay their eggs. The Indians used weirs or fence like traps and long nets to catch these fish. Some fish were easy to catch, but sturgeon were harder to land because they grew more than six feet long and weighed as much as two hundred pounds or more. Harpoons made out of deer antlers were sometimes used to spear large fish.

Fresh fish were cooked over a fire. The women also wrapped fish in clay and baked them in hot ashes. The clay acted like an oven. When the fish was ready to eat, the clay was broken away and all the skin and scales came off with it. When the Lenape caught more fish than they could eat, they dried them in the sun, or smoked them over a wood fire. This preserved the fish so that they could be stored and eaten at a later time. Fish eggs or roe were a special treat.

Shellfish & Crustaceans

Clams, oysters, and scallops were gathered from the ocean shore and bays, and the Lenape who lived near the shore harvested and ate thousands of shellfish. The Lenape who lived along lakes, rivers and streams, gathered and ate freshwater mussels. Crayfish, a freshwater crustacean that looks like a small lobster, were caught in rivers and lakes, and these were eaten as well.

Wild Plant Foods

Women and children went into fields and forests to gather plants, roots, berries, fruits, mushrooms, and nuts. Most of this food was eaten as soon as it was ripe. Sometimes there was so much plant food that the surplus could be dried and stored for the wintertime. In the spring there were wild strawberries, blueberries, and blackberries. The roots of cattail plants and water lilies were eaten, and persimmons, cranberries, and wild plums were also gathered. Nuts such as walnuts, butternut, hickory nuts, and chestnuts were gathered in October and November.

Oak trees supplied many acorns, but some acorns have a bitter taste. Lenape women discovered that they could remove the bitter taste by roasting the acorns, or by crushing these nuts in a wooden mortar and rinsing them in hot water. These leached acorns could be cooked in a porridge, or pounded into flour to make bread.

Cooking oil was made from nuts that were crushed and cooked in boiling water. The nut oil floated to the top of the water where it was scooped off with spoons or ladles made from turtle shells or clam shells. The nut oil was stored in gourd bottles or clay pots until needed.

Garden Plants

In their gardens the Lenape Indians planted corn, beans, and squash. Sunflowers, herbs, and some tobacco were also planted. Vegetables were eaten as soon as they were ripe, or some were also stored away for the wintertime. Ears of corn were tied in bundles and hung from the ceilings of the houses to dry. Corn kernels and beans were removed and stored in skin bags. Pumpkins and squash were cut into rings. These rings were put on a stick and hung up to dry in the sun. As long as these foods were kept dry, they would not spoil. When a Lenape woman wanted to use dried food, she cooked it in water. The water made the dried food swell up and become soft enough to eat.

Some Lenape also dug deep, wide holes or storage pits into the earth. Dried meat, dried fish, nuts, and other dried foods were placed in these storage pits. Stored foods helped the Lenape survive the cold winter.

Present-Day Foods

Like most modern Americans the Lenape of today eat all kinds of food—pizza, steak, fried chicken, hamburgers, and so forth. There are some special occasions where Indian foods are served, and usually you will find foods like frybread, corn and meat, and grape dumplings.

Recipes

Salpon (Frybread)

Flour: 3½ cups

Water: lukewarm

Salt: ½ teaspoon

More flour

Baking powder: 3 teaspoonsful, heaping

Grease

Mix the first three ingredients with enough Water until like pancake batter. Let stand a few minutes while heating enough grease for deep-fat frying.

In a large bread mixing pan have more flour. After making a depression in the flour, pour into it some of the mix, and knead it. Knead until about like biscuit dough.

Make round cakes, about 5 inches in diameter and 3/4 inch thick.

Use a "tester" (a small piece of dough) to test the heat of the grease. When hot enough, the dough will first sink, then immediately rise.

When the grease is hot enough, the bread can be fried. Turn it and remove with a spoon or tongs. Never pierce the bread with a fork.

Shëwahsapan (Grape Dumplings)

Grape Juice: 48 oz

Butter: a dab

Sugar: ca. 1 cup, to taste

Grape juice; 1½ cups

Flour: 3 cups or as needed

Place grape juice and sugar in a large saucepan and heat, but hold out ½ cup grape juice as the liquid for the dumplings.

Mix the remaining ingredients until a bit thicker than biscuit dough.

On a floured board roll out four circles each being about 12 inches in diameter and 1/4 inch thick. Cut these into 3/4 inch wide strips, and cut the strips into 3 inch long pieces.

When the juice is boiling, add the dumplings, one at a time. Boil slowly for about 15 minutes.