

Cultural Survival

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A SALISH FEAST

ANCIENT ROOTS AND MODERN APPLICATIONS



Seven Foods Feast, including oolichan (in the foreground). Photo courtesy Center for Traditional Medicine.

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and Leslie Korn*

The knowledge traditions of Salish country are neither old fashioned nor out of date. Indeed, this body of knowledge collected in the people, stories, songs, and the land has the most modern application: prevention and treatment of chronic diseases that now afflict growing numbers of native peoples as well as non-natives living in Salish country. We use “Salish country” to identify a region of coastal northwest United States and southwest Canada and parts of their interior where peoples as similar and different as the Wuikinuxv, Wenatchee, Semiamoo, Skagit, Quinault, Clatsop, and Siletz live. What these peoples and their immediate neighbors share are rivers and other water pathways connecting them and languages rooted in what the linguists call Salish. These connections fostered cultural ties that have existed over the millennia and to the present day.

The Salish cornucopia includes a great abundance of roots, greens, berries, nuts, apples, seeds, flowers, honey and tree sap, tree bark, fresh plant sprouts, spruce tips, deer, elk, bear, pheasant,

ducks, geese, freshwater eel, bullheads, trout, bass, and sea foods including seaweed, crab, seal, whale, sea urchins, mussels and clams, salmon, cod, halibut, and the small fish they call the oolichan. Together these foods and medicines provided a healthy balance of nutrients.

In addition to the types of foods, the ratio of food categories reflect the needs of indigenous peoples living in their original territories. For the Salish, both proteins and fats predominate, with seasonal access to roots and berries, which are also dried for the winter season. The abundance of protein from sea and land animals and the fats from fish and sea mammals are a source of balance. The berries, rich in blues and reds, provide anthocyanadins, which are important preventive antioxidants that protect cell growth and essential fatty acids.

One of the most important Salish foods is the oil of the oolichan (*Thaleichthys pacificus*). Along with salmon, seal, herring, eel and whale, the oolichan (also known by names like candle fish and smelt) is a source of rich oil

used to flavor bland vegetables or meats or enhance the flavor of fruits and berries; and to preserve them from spoilage. This important oil is available only from the silvery oolichan that come up coastal rivers in Salish territory. Like salmon, oolichan live nearly all of their lives in the ocean and return to their native rivers to spawn the next generation. They have historically come in such large numbers that they were easily captured in large nets or in weirs by the thousands. The sharp decline of the oolichan because of habitat destruction has for many Salish people been a source of great concern.

Oolichan oil is a favored condiment for dipping foods and binding dried fish cakes or berry cakes, and it is also a powerful salve for burns, insect bites, abrasions, and chronic skin conditions. As a waterproofing agent there are few substances that can compete with oolichan oil. It was traditionally used with moss to help seal cracks in canoes, to soften leather and protect it from water damage, and to seal leaky roofs. Oolichan grease also was added as a preservative,

Below are two modern recipes that reflect the Salish tradition.

Four Legged Stock

Recipe: Rudolph Ryser
Preparation Time: 1:30

Ingredients

4 lbs	elk/deer marrow and knuckle bones
3 lbs	meaty rib or neck bones
4 quarts	water
1/2 cup	vinegar
3	onions - coarsely chopped
15	wild carrots (3 carrots - coarsely chopped)
10	wild celery (3 celery stalks - coarsely chopped)
2 sprigs	fresh thyme - tied together
1 tsp.	juniper berries - crushed
1 bunch	fresh parsley - wild

1. Place the knuckle and marrow bones in a very large soup pot with vinegar and cover with water. Let stand for one hour.
2. Meanwhile, place the meaty bones in a roasting pan and brown at 350 degrees.
3. When well browned, add to the soup pot along with the vegetables.
4. Pour the fat out of the roasting pan, add cold water to the pan, set over a high flame and bring to a boil, stirring with a wooden spoon to loosen up coagulated juices. Add this liquid to the pot, bring to a boil.
5. After you have skimmed excess fat, reduce heat and add the thyme and crushed juniper berries.
6. Simmer stock until done. Just before finishing, add the parsley and simmer another 10 minutes.
7. Remove bones, and strain the stock into a bowl. Let cool.
8. Transfer to smaller containers and to the freezer for long-term storage.



Deer Meat Stew

Recipe: Rudolph Ryser
Serving Size: 8
Preparation Time: One hour

Ingredients

2 1/4 lbs	deer meat - cubed
1 1/2 lbs	wild carrot (carrots - coarsely chopped)
1 1/4 lbs	quamash (camas)
1 1/2 lbs	onion - coarsely chopped
4 stalks	wild celery - coarsely chopped
1 tsp.	thyme
1 tsp.	sage
1/2 cup	cattail flour - defibered
1/2 tsp.	sea salt
1 1/8 gals.	water
1 cup	rice milk
1/4 cup	arrow root

1. Dip deer meat strips in rice milk and then dredge in mixture of cattail flour and arrowroot. Bring water to a boil in a cast iron or stainless steel pot and drop pieces in keeping the water at a rolling boil.
2. Add carrots, celery, onion, quamash root, thyme, sage and sea salt.
3. Reduce heat and simmer stew at a medium low temperature for 1 hour or until meat is tender and carrots are tender. The stew should be thick and rich, but if more water is needed to just maintain moisture, add to thin just a little.

binder, and flavoring to dried berries like salal or choke cherries to form large cakes, which become food for the winter, a time when no berries are available. Oolichan oil has a relatively high docosahexaenoic acid (DHA) content—a remarkable 1,500 percent increase after ripening and rendering. DHA repairs and builds material for the brain nerve synapses and is an important substance for replacing the sticky surface of blood cells with a slippery coating, thus reducing the tendency of blood cells to clog the arterial system. Oolichan oil and other marine sources of DHA and eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA) are now used to

treat depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, addictions, auto-immune diseases, childhood learning disorders, and chronic pain at the Center for Traditional Medicine clinic in Olympia, WA.

Only in recent decades have some of these foods been restored as a result of Salish peoples protecting and re-establishing some plants, fish, and animals in the wild. Monica Charles, a community activist from the Lower Elwha tribe on the Olympic Peninsula, participated in the Seven Sacred Foods Feast held at the Nisqually Tribal Elder's Center in 2001 and returned home to organize community feasts. Today more than 600 people

from all over the coast and peninsula bring traditional foods to celebrate at Lower Elwha twice a year.

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