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Gone Native

Three approaches to eating wild in modern Idaho

By Nicholas Collias

Wild plants made our ancestors sick. On the other hand, they also helped them get better, made their hair stand still and protected them from unintentionally impregnating each other, among countless other uses.

For our state's early residents, the availability of useful plant products--either medicinal plants, staples like camas root, or seasonal delicacies like Indian potato or wild fruit--determined, well, pretty much everything. Plants dictated where the tribes of Idaho and the Great Basin lived, died and labored, since those plants made up 80 to 85 percent of their diets, according to Dr. Mark Plew, Boise State anthropologist.

Now, here's the surprising part: Even with a whole new world of manufactured products to make us queasy, coifed and childless, not everyone has given up entirely on wild foliage and moved on to higher forms of vegetation such as a McDonald's Bacon Ranch Crispy Chicken Salad.

For this year's food issue, *BW* turns its hungry gaze back to the wilds--and in particular, to what are historically perhaps the three most popular plant foods in the West: camas, wild huckleberries and pine nuts--to see how grazers strive to make wild foods work for today's population. The challenges they face range from cultural indifference, to overwhelming corporate interest, to a government that would rather just simply buy the same thing from China, but the goal in all three cases is the same: to stay wild.

Author's Note: Many nutritious, sorta-delicious wild plants look a lot like other plants that will, as the kids say, kill you dead. The author does not claim to be an authority on this matter, and this article is not meant as a field guide. If you're interested in learning the fine art of grazing, follow the links at www.boiseweekly.com to a host of experts who are confident in their judgment of whether that's a camas or a deathcamas in your hand.

ROOTS: KEEPING CAMAS WILD

Any discussion of the history of wild plant harvesting in Idaho must begin with roots--and more specifically, the Western camas. This is somewhat unfortunate, because white writers have historically had great difficulty in both explaining the taste of this Native American staple and in digesting the plant itself.

Lewis and Clark provided the first written record of the camas in 1805, when the Nez Perce tribe gave roasted camas bulbs to the half-starved explorers and their crew soon after they passed over the Continental Divide. Lewis noted at the time that the flowers were the color of "a lake of fine clear water" and called the Nez Perce version of camas, wherein the root is cooked for three days in an earthen oven, a "sumptuous treat." He noted later, however, that it had made his men violently ill for days afterward.

Scottish explorer and botanist David Douglas had equally bad luck, but gave a more precise description when he tried camas in Oregon in 1826. After his first sample, Douglas said the root tasted "much like a baked pear" but felt like a hurricane.

"Assuredly, they produce flatulence," he wrote. "When in the Indian hut, I was almost blown out by strength of wind." The next time around, however, Douglas changed direction: After a hard day of hiking, he called the camas his men were eating "sickly sweet" and said it made him throw up all night.

But even if pioneers had mixed feelings, their livestock did not. When the first settlers came to Moscow in the late 1860s, they initially labeled the area "Hog Heaven" because their pigs were so fond of digging up and eating camas roots. Once Chief Joseph surrendered at the Battle of Bear Paw in 1877 and the Nez Perce were sent to reservations in Kansas and Oklahoma, pigs soon had much of the camas to themselves, and they reportedly ravaged the crop. Much of the rest of the camas prairie was soon converted to world-renowned wheat fields, until today, according to Nez Perce tribe member Gwen Carter, the "isolated pockets" of camas in central Idaho are harder to find than ever.

Carter and her family still search out and dig camas bulbs at least once a year, and they roast them in the same pit they've used for four generations. But along with her own roasting, Carter has also worked as a camas evangelist of sorts, introducing local schoolchildren to the traditional--and surprisingly healthy--dish, as well as giving demonstrations of how to cook it at the annual Camas Festival in nearby Weippe. In recent years, Carter has also worked with the Moscow-based Palouse-Clearwater Environmental Institute to plant thousands of new bulbs in the Palouse area and, in particular, on the Nez Perce reservation north of Grangeville.

This last project, she notes, wasn't wholly well-received by her fellow Nez Perce at first. Some felt wild food like camas was a gift from the creator and shouldn't be planted. Others, Carter says, objected that "it's a lot of non-Indians" who were pushing camas restoration onto the tribe. And still others, well ...

"A lot of tribe members don't like camas root," she says. "We're too used to it, I guess." But Carter has gathered camas since her childhood, she likes the flavor and still eats roasted roots several times a month, so she wasn't willing to give up. She says that the tribe has slowly started to support the camas restoration, especially after 2005, when she and a group of 18 volunteers rescued 15,000 (actually, it was 15,001, according to the institute's Web site) camas bulbs that were going to be plowed under for an expansion of Highway 95 near Moscow. The institute has given away most of these bulbs, which Carter and other volunteers hand-plant in annual restoration projects.

"It's hard work," she admits. "Not only do you have to plant it, you have to dig it up and prepare it, which can take 30 days." On the other hand, having an active harvest has more health benefits than just those that come from the food itself, she adds. "It was a staple of our diet, and a lot of our health issues, the diabetes and the obesity, and all of that, is from being inactive and not being able to go out and gather traditional foods anymore."

And the taste? Carter says it's a lot like a sweet potato in both taste and consistency, although she says most non-Indians tell her camas tastes like figs.

FRUIT: SAVING THE WILD HUCKLEBERRY BY TAMING IT

Idaho's state fruit is delicious, free to pick on public lands and a major source of antioxidants. Even beasts, from the bear to the blue grouse, dine on it regularly during the summer and fall. But the berries' wide appeal is exactly the problem, historically. In Idaho, Montana and Washington the huckleberry is a case study of what happens when a plant everybody likes grows in a place everyone can get to--but no one wants to regulate.

Explorers and pioneers have mentioned huckleberries--and other fruits mistakenly labeled as such--in continental temperate forests across the United States and Canada since the 1600s. Lewis and Clark noted them in their journals in both present-day Montana and Idaho, although Lewis didn't share the enthusiasm of early pioneers for the fruit, remarking while he was among the Flathead tribe in Western Montana that the berries "did not appear to satisfy my appetite as they appeared to do those of my Indian friends."

He was right, however, to note the huckleberry's importance to Native American diets. The Yakima tribe in Washington, for instance, valued the berries enough that control of picking grounds figured prominently into the tribe's treaties with the U.S. Government. Tribes around the Northwest also historically burned large patches of forest specifically to encourage huckleberry growth--and the camas as well--in a prescient method of early forest management. That model wasn't quite so popular to white populations in lumber-loving Idaho, but forest managers here did wonder aloud as far back as the 1930s whether their government was favoring a less-valuable crop by focusing on lumber rather than berries.

Still, those few isolated objections aside, "for the most part, the Forest Service has only managed tall skinny green things called trees. Not much of anything else," says Idaho's wild huckleberry swami, Dr. Dan Barney, a horticulturist at the University of Idaho Sandpoint Research and Extension Center. The reason, he says: "I've been told by National Forest rangers that they simply are not interested in other forest products."

With the administrative eye turned solely to logging, Idaho's berry patches--particularly around Troy and into Montana--were host to mini-booms, busts and heated conflicts galore as local pickers competed for the best bushes with armies of migrant pickers whose population ebbed and swelled as market prices fluctuated. The only constant between the two groups was often the medieval-looking contraptions they both used to harvest as many berries--and often branches and leaves--as possible.

This still-ongoing berry frenzy has left many historic berry groves barren and over-harvested, Barney says.

"In two days, graduate students gathered one-half of a handful of berries," he said of a recent trip into the forest. "Commercial pickers had been there before us and stripped it clean. This was an area that, in former years, you could sit down without standing and have one to two gallons."

Of course, part of the huckleberry's appeal is that there can seem to be a bottomless supply. In Idaho, the berry's range extends from the state's right toe near the Utah border up to the Continental Divide at the Bitterroot Range, then arches west to the Cascade/McCall area and unfolds northward toward the Canadian border. In other words, wherever the snow line is receding in high elevation coniferous forests in Idaho, look for huckleberries--and for people from outside of Idaho harvesting them, usually to put in products ranging from syrups and preserves to skin lotion. Seasonal workers harvesting for commercial berry purchasers is nothing new, says Barney. It's just that the quantities they're seeking seem to be on the rise.

"I take calls from the United Kingdom or France, or from the Eastern U.S., from food processors or brokers looking for a million pounds of berries at a time," Barney says. "We're seeing a lot of raw fruit being shipped out of our region with no economic return to our region, and no money coming back in to help manage or protect those [areas]."

A lifelong wild-huckleberry picker who learned to harvest from his grandfather near Warm River in Eastern Idaho, Barney has responded to the calls by looking closely at the respective demands of both wild huckleberries and the companies who love them. For the berries, he logged long hours in the lab to determine what soil and sun conditions they require to thrive and what human practices---such as careful tree thinning and controlled burns--would help to support existing berry reserves. Figuring out what the purchasers wanted wasn't nearly so scientific: more berries, consistent quality and a predictable supply chain.

So, with help from some USDA funds, Barney says his office has created 97 domesticated--he calls them "improved"--versions of wild huckleberries. Within the next two weeks, Barney says, he'll send 13 of these varieties to other researchers or to commercial nurseries. Next month, he'll also take his huckleberry conservation and management findings to managers at Gifford Pinchot National Forest in Washington, home of the Yakima nation's famed Sawtooth Berry Fields.

"We'll do work with the Forest Service and anyone else in the world who wants to change this," he says. "What we would love to do is to keep the wild stand up there for the recreational pickers and the native peoples and the small mom and pop producers, locally owned processors and so on. For the very large scale purchasers, let's produce them in managed forest stands on private land, or in fields, like we do other food crops"

And the taste: Barney says his Frankenberries are consistently darker and richer-flavored than wild huckleberries. They're delicious, he insists, although he adds that his favorite way to serve huckleberries is still just to throw a handful of wild ones into pancake batter before cooking.

NUTS: ENDING FOREIGN DEPENDENCE ON PESTO

If the huckleberry is the much-lusted-after belle of the ball when it comes to wild food, then pine nuts are a hard-luck version of Cinderella who missed the dance entirely because she was locked in her stepmother's basement. And that stepmother is a big fat cow--literally.

Nuts harvested from pinecones of both the Colorado pinyon pine (which isn't native to Idaho) and the single-leaf pinyon pine (which is) were a crucial fat and protein source for indigenous American tribes across the West, just as pine nuts in Russia, China and the Mediterranean have been staples for the last 6,000 years. Single leaf pinyon nuts were also a crucial trade item for early white settlers--especially Mormons--since the nuts were one of the few valuable commodities that could be easily harvested from the desert landscape. For the first third of the twentieth century, the nuts seemed poised to blossom into a major domestic crop, as the U.S. exported 8 million pounds of pine nuts in 1936 alone. Yet today, almost all of the pine nuts available on the U.S. market are imported from China, and the few from the United States are high-end local delicacies. What happened in the interim?

The BLM happened. The bureau was created in 1946, and land managers began managing pinyon-heavy high desert rangeland exclusively for cattle grazing. For many ranchers and managers, this meant the pinyon trees were just taking up space. So, they used old anchor chains to pull up thousands of the trees across Nevada, Utah, New Mexico and, to a much smaller degree, Idaho. Ironically, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the deforestation made the rangeland less productive for grazing, as the range became drier, more prone to range fires and less nutrient-rich for other plants.

More recently, however, mainstream demand for pesto-based dishes, as well as positive press about the health and supposed aphrodisiac qualities of pine nuts, has caused resurgence in the market. With no American suppliers able to deliver large quantities, the demand for imported pine nuts--usually of Korean or Siberian varieties, which are frozen or preserved in lye in China and shipped to the U.S.--has risen to around three million pounds annually, according to the Department of Commerce.

But here's the "Aw, nuts!" part of that story, which should be no surprise to anyone who has ever paid \$8 for a baggie half-full of puny, shriveled nuts: According to the USDA, managing western rangelands for fresh pine nut production, rather than cattle, would produce approximately 100 times more financial value per acre. That's the kind of potential that quickly brought idealistic prospectors like Penny Frazier out west.

As the proprietor of the Web sites PineNut.com and WildCrops.com, Frazier sells wild teas, fruit and nuts over the Internet. Her customers range from curious individuals (who may have seen her on the Fox reality show *Trading Spouses*) to retailers, to an increasing number of cosmetics companies that are looking to include more organic and natural materials in their lotions and fragrances.

Over the phone from her 12-acre wild farm (an oxymoron that she can laugh at) in Missouri, Frazier told *BW* that American producers are missing out on one of the premier high-end agricultural products by ignoring wild nuts. But the former lawyer says her initial goal when she started harvesting nuts in the southwest and Great Basin wasn't just to make money--it was to save the environment by making money.

"I asked, 'How do you get enough value from humans to economically justify keeping lands wild?'," she said. "It's very well-documented that this is the highest value use for the land."

While Frazier's enthusiasm--she gives herself the nickname "Pinyon Penny" online--is unique, her entrepreneurial vision is shared by an increasing number of people in the West and for an increasing amount of wild products. Eric Jones, the co-director of the Portland-based Institute for Culture and Ecology, is at the forefront of trying to put those people and products together throughout the Northwest.

"It really doesn't make sense, from an environmental perspective, with all these resources around us, to be so dependent on importing the same resources from abroad," Jones says. "[Pine nuts] are probably just one of many things that could occur there, if you were to look closely at that landscape" He says that the lack of infrastructure for plant, nut and even mushroom harvesting on the public lands makes it hard for Idahoans to get started in the business, and he doesn't believe that pine nuts or any other single product can work as a "magic bullet" to kick-start the industry into mainstream legitimacy. Instead, his organization works to inform manufacturers, native populations and policy makers through online articles, workshops and immense books like his 2002 release *Non-Timber Forest Products of the United States*. But as someone who made extra money in his youth by picking mushrooms, and who was in Oregon during the heady \$100-per-Matsusake mushroom days of the early 1990s, Jones says he expects that the value of forest products will ultimately make the government take notice.

"It's just a matter of time," he says. "We just need to channel it to a sustainable management strategy and away from haphazard opportunism. Our stakeholders and policy makers need to get together with land managers and say, 'How can we help you do this?'"

In the meantime, Idaho's own small community of pinyon pines, all of which are located south of Burley near the City of Rocks along the Utah border, remain a healthy but relatively unrecognized resource. According to BLM state office botanist Roger Rosentreter, the trees here were largely spared from chaining and deforestation in the 1950s, and they haven't been as subject to the intense droughts and bug infestations that have ravaged the Nevada and New Mexico populations. Not surprisingly, harvesting pine nuts on BLM and Sawtooth National Forest is also free and unregulated, as long as it's for personal use (although rangers contacted by *BW* stressed to keep it "within reason.")

Oh, yeah--and the taste? It's approximately the difference between a fresh banana and a dried banana chip, Frazier says.

"The [single-leaf] pinyon is a huge nut compared to most species, and it's really sweet and fruity and juicy," she says. "A fresh pinyon makes what you're buying in the grocery store taste like cardboard."

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