

# First Nations of North and South America Food Contributions



# Introduction

- For thousands of years First Nations people cultivated plants for food and medicine.
- Some had domesticated animals, such as the lama in the Andes, sheep by the Navaho, mostly for textile purposes, and the turkey by the Aztec.
- People developed a relationship to the land and animals
- They knew food sources, locations and availability

# First Nations of North and South America



Before 1492, the North and South American population including Alaska was well over 200 million with over 500 tribes and linguistic groups. The most populated were the tribes of the Andes and the Mayan.

First Nations people were familiar with the foods available to them throughout the year, and adjusted their diet accordingly. People were accustomed to the climate and the land. They never went hungry, as they were skilled hunters, food gatherers and agriculturists.

The near extinction and diminished populations of many tribes occurred as a result of diseases and later their relocation to areas that were near inhabitable on land called reservations.

While they were forced by governments to live on reservations and restricting their movement they became disconnected to the land and animals they relied on for sustenance.

Adjusting to new and unfamiliar land was a challenge for many and they experienced hardship and suffered from ill health, disease and death.

## EAST REGION

To the east and south of and around the Great Lakes the people had a diet of the smaller game animal, and relied on the life of the deer for sustenance.

They have much in common with the people of the North – West. They are known for their skills in trading goods as well as food. They are excellent woodsmen, using forestry to build their homes. They developed small villages and settled in long houses. They are excellent gardeners as well as hunters , trappers and fishermen.





## SOUTH REGION

The wide open prairies of the south central United States and Central Canada is home of the grazing buffalo. The young men (fire keepers) had domesticated the land with which they observed produced rich growth after a fire. This provided the natural habitat for the buffalo.

The people had developed a relationship and depended on the life of the buffalo as their main source of food.

Other main meat staples included, the hare, turkey and prairie chicken.

The Dakota and Lakota people originate in lower Minnesota and had trading relations with people along the Mississippi.



## WEST REGION

To the west of the Great Lakes the First Nations people relied on migratory birds and animals. Their lives were rich with planning and preparation for relocating to spawning areas of fish and landing grounds of ducks and geese. They lived in close proximity to the animals needed for their daily diet.

The beaver became a main staple as its furs were desired by the Hudson's Bay Company.

The moose was central in their lives for the meat and provision of hide for clothing.

They used methods of preserving and curing foods. Fish was dried and made into a powder for prolonged use as well as smoked moose meat.



## NORTH REGION

In the north and all along the North and North West region the people moved extensively and migrated with the animals.

They also know the spawning grounds of fish and moved according to their availability.

The caribou and the elk migrated to and from and along the upper northern region

The goose is central to their lives and celebrations surround the arrival of the goose to the North.

An example of the impact of relocation is when the people on the east of James Bay near Quebec were forced to move up North. They were disconnected to their land and adjusted to a new cultural environment with the help of people that were already settled there. They were Dene and adopted the Inuit culture.





# Traditional Foods

Diets consisted mainly of meat, birds, fish, plants, berries, nuts and roots which varied by geographic region and climate.



A knowledge of the life cycle and reproduction of plants and animals was necessary to live in relationship to the land.

Respecting the life of animals, observing their life and waiting for the animal to be fully nourished from the plants and trees before taking their life.

Observing plants and ensuring their continued growth by gathering in cycles, also leaving seeds and seedlings for future growth.





Corn was widely grown in the south-east where warmer climates supported its growth. A dough called “masa” was made in a process of soaking dry corn in lime water to soften and make bread. Corn was prepared in a variety of ways to make cereals, breads and soups.



Wild rice , a main staple of the Great Lakes region was cooked in a variety of ways, mixed with berries or broth for added flavor.





# Traditional Foods continued

Beans and squash varieties were grown as well as pumpkins and a variety of roots were eaten. Potatoes originate in the Andes of South America.



## MAPLE SUGAR

It comprised 10% of the diet and was basic for flavoring stews, teas, berries and vegetables.





Many tribes relied on and preferred herbed beverages and a variety of teas were made for regular use and medicinal purposes.

Herbal teas provide essential vitamins and nutrients. Rose hips for example is a source for vitamin C and fiber intake. Teas from nature are an excellent source for health benefits

Labrador Tea , wild mint and Cedar Tea, and teas made with berry leaves.

Edible plants include morels and wild mushrooms, rose hips and clovers.



## FOODS FROM NATURE

Choke cherries  
Saskatoon berries  
Blueberries  
Strawberries  
Raspberries  
Cranberries  
Plums  
Apples  
Gooseberries  
Thorn berries  
Hazelnuts





An estimate 60% of the world foods originate from crops domesticated by First Nations of North and South America. Everything from amaranth to zucchini

- Corn
- Chili peppers
- Avocado
- Cocoa
- Papaya
- Peanuts
- Pineapple
- Potato
- Tomato
- Vanilla

- Pumpkins
- Squash
- beans
- Beets
- Sunflower
- Amaranth – Mexico- banned and reintroduced in 1970
- Quinoa – Andes- banned and reintroduced in 1986

In the Andes, farmers produced 3000 different varieties of potatoes. A huge contrast to the 250 varieties grown today.

First Nations people cultivated over 300 food crops with some having at least 12 variations.

This contributed to the world diet in both quantity and quality of foods.

## Food for Ceremonial Purpose

The sacred foods for ceremonies include the organ meats and blood broth of the bear.

The Blackfoot tribe used berry pemmican for sharing at ceremonial feasts.

The Lakota and Dakota tribes used boiled buffalo tongue in their sun dance ceremony, while boiled moose tongue is a delicacy for some in the Ojibwa tribes.

The Lakota-Dakota also used ground corn with bison blood broth as a spirit food offering.

Wolves and coyotes were the only animals that were not hunted, they were held sacred by all tribes.



# Conclusion

In marriage ceremonies, food was exchanged. The man gave meat and the woman prepared plant food such as corn to symbolize the provision of nourishment for the family.

This exchange demonstrates the support and dependency for each others for survival.

The sharing of food symbolizes unity, love and respect within Nations to support life and survival for all.



Prepared by:  
Teresa Trudeau-Magiskan  
Traditional Healing Coordinator  
Anishnawbe Mushkiki  
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