

The Discovering of America



Topic 1
Food

Chapter 1

Section One

Topics 1-5

**FOOD—
AMERICAN
INDIAN
STYLE**



VOCABULARY

Resourceful: clever in finding and utilizing resources

Algonquians: (pronounced “algonkin”) an Indian nation that lived in present day New England

Skewered: meat stuck on a sharp stick for cooking

Estuary: the mouth of a river, subject to ocean tides

Staple: important dry food items regularly kept on hand, such as beans or grain which do not spoil easily

Plains Indians: tribes who occupied the Great Plains regions

Migrated: moved from one region to another

When was the last time you ate corn, pumpkin pie, or squash? What about sweet potatoes, baked beans, clam chowder, chili con carne, cornbread or popcorn? Do you enjoy meals which include peanuts, tomatoes, berries, rice or barbecue? These and many more are contributions by American Indians.

Hundreds of Indian tribes and cultures were spread across what is currently the United States, each adapting to its own geographic conditions, hunting, farming and trapping their food in different ways. How they prepared their food and what spices and herbs they used depended on what was available.

Eating just one meal a day, usually around midday, was normal among American Indians. Food was served at once when the male head of household or any visitors entered a home. Indians were **resourceful** with the materials around them, and this was certainly true for mealtime. Bowls were made from maple *burls* (rounded outgrowths on tree trunks). The bowl's interior was shaped by burning and scraping. Trays, ladles, and spoons were fashioned from wood, clay or bones.

Black and leathery smoked meat and fish were regularly eaten by east coast Indians such as the **Algonquians**. (The famous Indian princess, Pocahontas, was part of the Algonquian nation.) Young Indian boys hunted rabbits and birds. In some tribes, boys had to find and kill their own breakfast, or remain hungry. Fresh meat, often deer, was **skewered** on green sticks and cooked over an open fire, boiled or fried.

Women farmed corn, beans or squash, while the men fought tribal enemies, hunted and fished. Indians did not have guns until after English and Spanish colonists arrived; so, hunting was done primarily with bows and arrows.

Fishing was a main source of food for Indians in coastal areas or regions dotted with rivers, bays, and **estuaries**. Salmon, shad, sturgeon, pike, and even eel were speared, hooked or caught by other means. For example, to catch eel, Indian men built a fenced enclosure around the eels' underwater dens. The

VOCABULARY

Collaborate: work with another

Tapered: to become gradually smaller at one end

Causeway: a wide raised or walled pathway

Buffalo run: a trail regularly used by migrating buffalo herds

fence had a narrow opening leading to a shallow area, trapping the eels when they swam out. Indian women skinned, cleaned and smoked the eels for eating.

Wild rice was a **staple** food of the Chippewa tribe who lived near the Great Lakes. Using their canoes, the Chippewas harvested the rice which grew in shallow, fresh water. The Chippewas processed the rice by smashing the grain heads and spreading them out to dry. Rice was later threshed and stored in baskets.

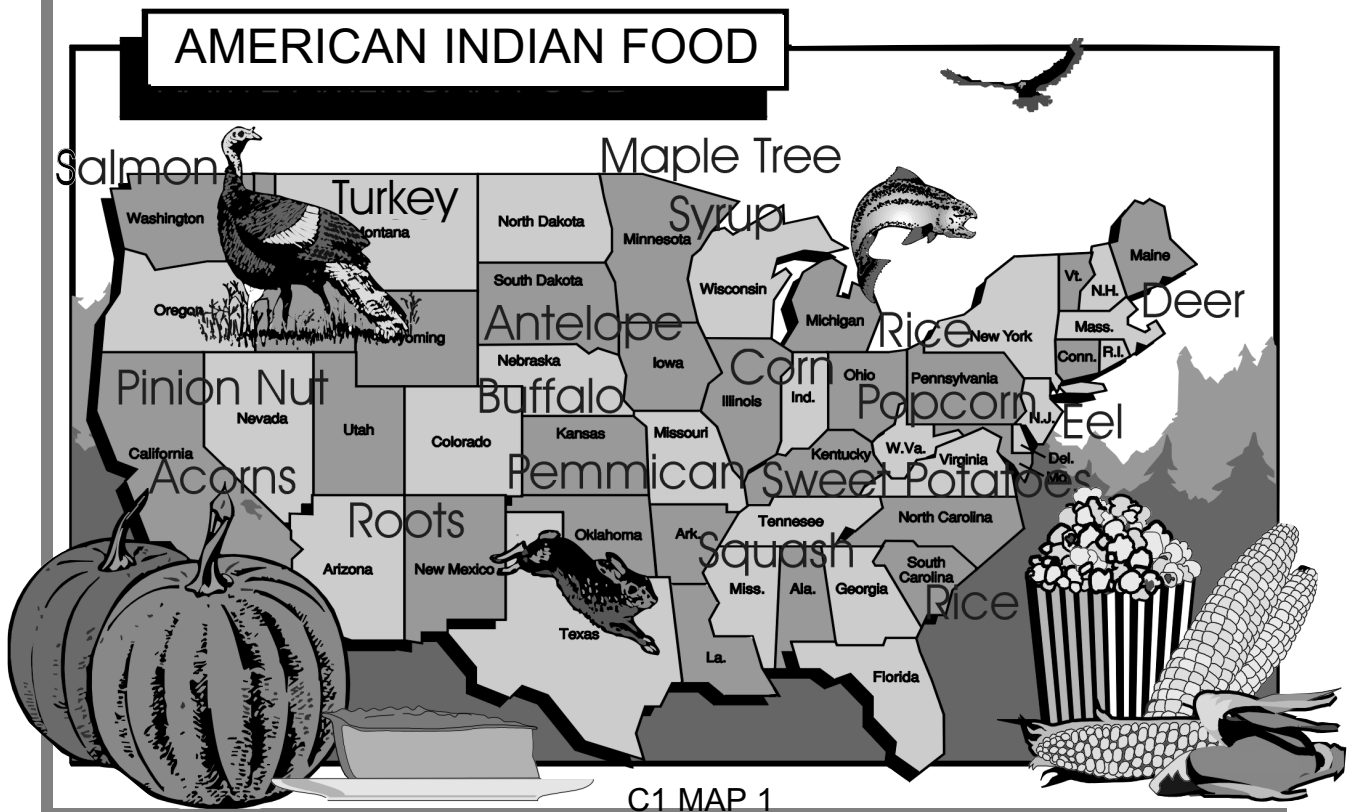
Indians in the Great Lakes region also harvested maple tree sap to make syrup and sugar to sweeten their foods. Children helped their mothers cut gashes in the bark of maple trees which allowed the sap to drip into a wooden trough. The sap was boiled for syrup or hardened to form sugar.



Women in canoe gathering wild rice

Many Indians raised beans, corn and squash which were prepared in various ways. Corn was ground into cornmeal by pounding slightly cooked corn kernels between two

AMERICAN INDIAN FOOD



C1 MAP 1

stones. The cornmeal was either boiled to make a thick porridge or baked into pancakes and served with meals, similar to the way we eat bread and rice today. Hominy was also



Woman grinding corn

made from corn which was prepared by boiling the entire corn cob in wood ashes and water to loosen the kernels which were then washed and reboiled with beans, squash, animal fat and a bone before being eaten.

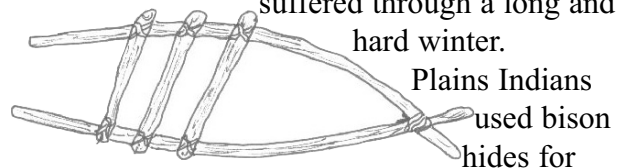
Farming in the Southeast was a family affair. Along with the corn and squash also grown by their northern neighbors, the Muskogee (later called “Creeks” by the English) grew sweet potatoes and melons. Fields were divided into family plots, but were worked cooperatively. Men walked to their gardens each day with hoes made of stone or animal shoulder blades; women followed with food. Children scared crows away from newly planted seeds. Families sang or chanted tribal songs as they worked.

While Northeast and Southeast Indians relied heavily on vegetables and small game, the 20 or more tribes of the **Plains Indians** were meat-eaters. Bison (buffalo) was the main meat source. An estimated 60 million bison roamed the Great Plains of America’s heartland in the current states of Montana, Wyoming, North and South Dakota, Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Texas.

To ensure a steady food supply, Indian families **migrated** with the buffalo herds, using various techniques to hunt them. One method was for young men of neighboring tribes to **collaborate** in constructing a **tapered** pathway between stone walls. The **causeway**,

often up to two miles in length, would begin on the prairie near a **buffalo run** and end at the edge of a cliff. The Indians would conceal themselves near the entrance of the pathway and wait for the buffalo to approach. When the herd came near, the braves would leap from hiding, shouting and waving weapons. The startled buffalo would stampede along the path and plummet over the edge of the cliff to their deaths. Another hunting technique was to surround a herd of bison, then set fire to the prairie grass on three sides of the area. When the bison saw the flames and smoke billowing toward them, they ran terror-stricken for the open fourth side, where warriors were waiting with arrows and lances. If the hunters’ plans succeeded, there was enough food to sustain several tribes. If the hunt failed, the Indians

suffered through a long and hard winter.



travois Plains Indians used bison hides for clothing and tepee housing.

Hides were also stretched over the frames of *travois*, which were instruments for hauling items and people, such as children, the sick, injured, or the elderly. Buffalo bones were used for tools and ornaments, and “buffalo chips” (dried manure) for fueling fires.

When a bison was killed, the hunters immediately feasted on the raw heart. The remainder of the meat was shared with other members of the tribe and was cut into strips, dried, and smoked as jerky. The work of skinning, cleaning and cutting up a bison was usually done right where it fell. The hunter who killed it kept the hide and some of the choicest meat parts, such as the tongue, heart and liver which were considered delicacies.

Some of the meat was made into a mixture called *pemmican*, a mainstay of the Plains Indian diet. The meat was dried, pounded into small pieces, and then cooked with berries in hot fat. Stored in the bison's

cleaned, large intestine, the mixture stayed fresh for months. Pemmican was an important and nutritious food during winter months when other food was scarce. On cold winter days, a handful of pemmican might be an Indian's only meal.

For American Indians west of the Rockies, food came from wild seeds and roots, small animals such as rabbits, and large insects like grasshoppers and crickets. Indians in desert areas prized the large, fleshy roots of plants that stored water and were given the nickname "Digger" because of their constant digging for roots. A mainstay of southwestern Indians was the pinion nut, the sweet edible seed of the pinion pine. A herd of antelope would be a special find, or a *wapiti*, the Shawnee Indian word for elk. Often, when bigger game was not plentiful, Indians relied upon squirrels, gophers and rats.

Dozens of small groups of California Indians survived

on seeds, roots and occasional fish or mussels. The main food source for these Indians was acorns. Although bitter with tannic acid, acorns became edible when boiled and crushed into meal and flushed with water to leach out (or take away) the tannin. The meal was then made into a tasteless but nutritious mush.

The most common beverage for all Indians was water—the reason most villages were located near lakes, streams or rivers. Tea-like drinks were also produced from plants and used for refreshment or medicine.

The next time you sit down to a piece of fresh pumpkin pie, a bowl of steaming hot chili, or corn on the cob,

remember the American

Indians. Their resourcefulness and survival skills allow us to enjoy some of America's favorite foods.

In the next topic, we will explore Indian family life before America was settled by Europeans.



Women drawing water from stream

LIFE PRINCIPLE

"He who works hard today will have food tomorrow."

-Anonymous