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Revisiting Forgotten Foods: A Case Study from California

Food localization means cultivating a sense of place—a deep awareness of the land we call home. It is a process that depends upon science and indigenous traditional knowledge as well as the continuing exchange of new ideas on sustainable interdependence within the native habitat.

The groups interested in the movement towards wild food are diverse: organic food consumers interested in new foods that are free from pesticides and GMOs, local food enthusiasts wanting fresh, community-sourced food; gourmet "foodies" looking for an exotic taste adventure; gardeners landscaping with drought-tolerant, habitat-friendly plants; advocates of indigenous culture conservation; and environmentalists concerned by changes in biodiversity and climate.

In a small northern California town, community members are once again enjoying the berry of an abundant, drought-tolerant shrub called Manzanita, or "little apple" in Spanish. Used by the original inhabitants of the region, the Maidu, as well as tribes throughout California, it was typically consumed as a beverage, made by crushing the berries and then steeping them in cold water. Just two hundred years ago, an indigenous Californian's diet would have included about one thousand species of plants, with each region enjoying food from several hundred local varieties. Devastated by the effects of the gold rush and forced off of their lands, the local indigenous community of Maidu lost much of their plant knowledge and access to traditional foods.

In building relationships and gathering the names and uses of the plants in the three Maidu dialects for my book, a thread of continuity was re-established. I learned traditional processing methods and began drinking Manzanita cider with my family each summer. I worked with an indigenous family and other locals to gather enough berries to start creating new recipes. We found differences between the sweetness of berries from shrubs growing in distinct areas and developed new ways to efficiently gather the berries and grind them into a powder that we could use not only as the traditional beverage but also as a flour substitute.

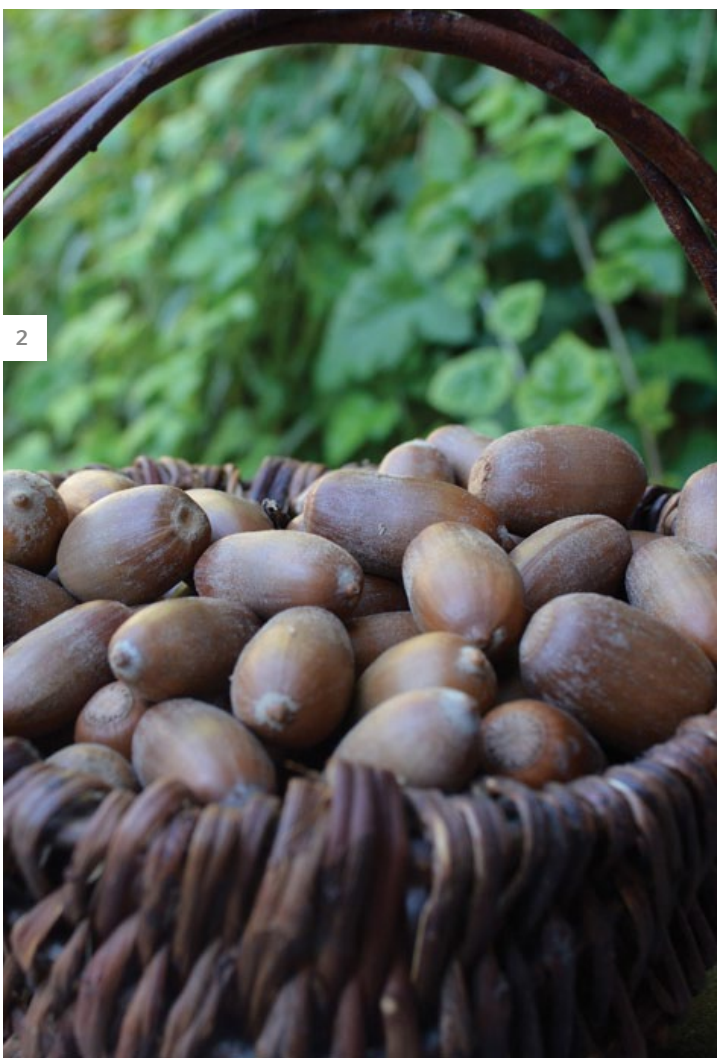

Photo captions:

1. The author gathering spicebush blossoms.

2. Oak nuts (acorns) have more omega-6, vitamin A, folate, and potassium than whole grain wheat flour, without the gluten.

3. California natives such as Manzanita (*Arctostaphylos viscida*), Elderberry (*Sambucus nigra*), and Madrone (*Arbutus menziesii*) berries have been shown to contain more than three times the amount of antioxidants as blueberries and pomegranates.

4. Manzanita vinaigrette

3

4

2

Curious about how the health benefits of this native food compared to commercially popular fruits, I sent samples to a laboratory for testing. We found that our local Manzanita berries and two other native berries contained more than three times the antioxidant compounds as blueberries and pomegranates and require no supplemental water.

Local restaurants and natural food stores began using Manzanita in recipes—including in vinaigrette and as a cracker. After several hundred years of ignoring the native foods growing in our backyards, we have taken a step toward once again enjoying a truly local food.

The declining diversity and nutritional content in commercial food crops, the transfer of the genetic control of food from farmers to multinational corporations, disappearing indigenous knowledge systems, and unpredictable climate change make it imperative to encourage regional, wild food sources, through cultivation and sustainable wild harvest. With a collaborative approach designed to share information and resources, communities can grow and gather nutrient-dense, independent food crops that protect habitat diversity.