

Give native plants a chance

ONE OF THE myths of our modern food system is how much choice we have. True, we can buy a seemingly infinite variety of processed foods, but they are all made from a handful of plant ingredients. And while we can eat a wide range of fruits and vegetables yearround, the total number of plants that we consume is usually less than 50. Many people eat less than 30 kinds of plants their entire lives.

This is miniscule compared with the thousands of plant species eaten by many Native Americans. One of the tragedies of our modern age is how thoroughly we have forgotten just how many plant species can be harvested and eaten.

A small but growing group of people are doing their best to reverse that trend.

"Imagine how sustainable our diets would be if we simply ate what the land provided," says Alrie Middlebrook, president of the California Native Garden Foundation, at a recent native food banquet she organized with indigenous food chef John Farais. The banquet was the culmination of an Eating California class taught by Middlebrook and Farais, which combined information about growing, harvesting, cooking, and eating native foods.

The meal was ambitious in scope, with seven courses that included more than 25 California native foods. Farais hit the ground running with an amuse-bouche of mesquite-seared rabbit served over acorn tortillas. He didn't stop until he had served two rounds of dessert (counting as one course), including both elderberry and elderflower sorbets, acorn brownies and "mesquite snaps."

Dr. Kat Anderson, an ethnobotanist from UC Davis and author of "Tending the Wild" (University of



AARON FRENCH
EcoChef

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California Press, \$21.95), gave some background on the feast. One of the principles Native Californians had when they collected wild foods, she said, was to always leave some behind, ensuring a supply of food in the future.

For example, their collecting technology did not uproot the wildflowers and grasses when they collected seeds. Instead, they developed special "seed beaters" and baskets. Humans became both seed collectors for food and seed dispersers — scattering the seeds to grow back in the following years.

These traditions all but disappeared as immigrants flocked to the area for the Gold Rush of 1849. Immigrants brought with them new plants to grow and new foods to eat, and over time these took over.

More than 150 years later, the availability of native foods has been drastically reduced. Chef Farais laments, "The

NATIVE FOOD ALTERNATIVES:

Chef John Farais offered this list of available native alternatives to commonly eaten Mediterranean foods. While many of the foods can be directly substituted, some recipe alterations may be necessary.

Trade couscous (pasta) for Quinoa (a whole grain).

Mediterranean Ingredient	Native Alternative
Couscous (pasta)	Quinoa (whole grain)
Arborio Rice	Wild rice (It's actually a grass)
Polenta	Yellow, white, blue, cornmeal
Fava Bean, Flageolet	Lima bean, anazasi bean
Pistachios, Almonds, Walnuts	Pine nuts, hazelnuts, pecans, peanuts
Sundried Tomatoes	Dried chiles
Wheat Flour	Amaranth, corn, acorn flours (non gluten)
Arugula	Epazote (Ancient Mayan green)
Pomegranites	Prickly pears (cactus)
Beef	Bison (less fat, more protein), deer, elk
Squab	Quail

biggest challenge with trying to use California natives is that (they are) practically nonexistent." To find some sources of edible natives, Farais looks far and wide.

For example, mesquite flour was once a staple food in Southern California and throughout the Southwest. Today, it is almost completely unavailable from U.S. sources. However, it is still commercially milled and utilized throughout South America and is starting to be imported from countries such as Argentina and Peru.

And while oak trees producing acorns are plentiful, acorn nuts or flour are virtually unmarketed in the United States. In Korea and other parts of Asia, however, a fine acorn flour is commonly used to make an acorn jelly called *dotori mook*, eaten with soy sauce and other flavors. As a result, acorn flour is readily available in Korean supermarkets.

The goal now, says Ander-

son, is to "bring the natives back." They are not only tasty and nutritious, but are extremely drought-tolerant, as they have adapted over thousands of years to live in this climate.

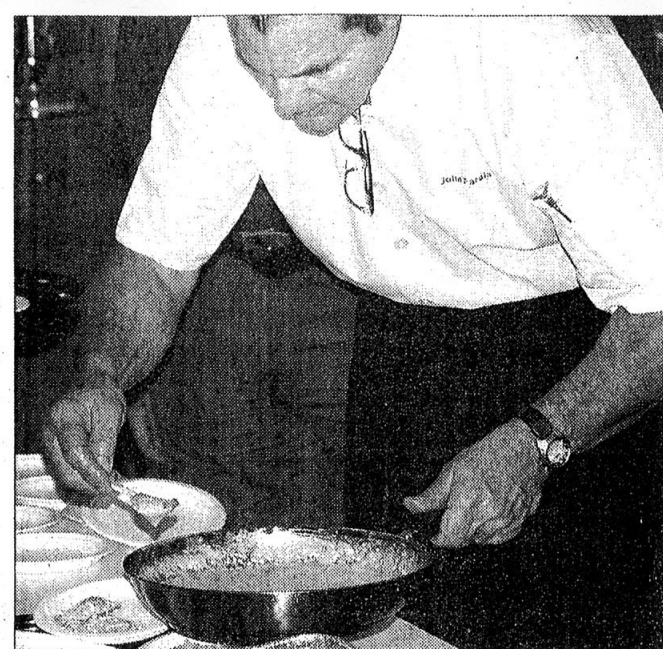
Indeed, the goal of the California Native Garden Foundation is to do just that — by planting them in your garden. Compared with a traditional lawn, a native garden uses 80 percent less water and can produce food for you and your family, as well as the birds, butterflies and other wildlife.

"Traditionally, people were all over the land in a truly interactive way," Anderson says. Now it is our challenge to "learn from the place in which we live, and incorporate native plants back into our lives."

For more information:

■ California Native Garden Foundation is starting another "Eating California" class starting Sept. 27.

■ "Tending the Wild: Na-



AARON FRENCH

MESQUITE-SEARED RABBIT

Serves 4

1 rabbit, whole or cut into pieces

1 cup amaranth flour

1 cup hazelnut flour

½ cup mesquite flour

Sea salt and pepper, to taste

3 tablespoons sunflower oil

3 cups chicken stock

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees. Combine amaranth, hazelnut and mesquite flours into mixing bowl. Heat a large skillet on high flame and add oil.

2. Dredge each piece of rabbit through flour, making sure to get inside the crevices and under legs, if leaving whole. Carefully place rabbit in pan and sear each side, top and bottom, until brown, about 4-5 minutes each side.

3. Take out of skillet and place into a baking pan. Sprin-

kle liberally with salt and pepper. Add 2 cups of the stock and put into oven. Turn down heat to 325 degrees. Cook 1½ hours for a whole rabbit, or 45 minutes to one hour for rabbit pieces.

4. Transfer rabbit to a serving platter. Pour the remaining 1 cup of broth into the roasting pan and stir to deglaze. Pour broth into a gravy separator and serve on top of rabbit meat if desired.

— Recipe by chef John Farais, from the California Native Garden Foundation's "Eating California" class

Per serving: 740 calories, 63 g protein, 35 g carbohydrates, 39 g total fat, 6 g saturated fat, 150 mg cholesterol, 550 mg sodium, 5 g fiber. Calories from fat: 350.

— Staff analysis

tive American Knowledge and the Management of California's Natural Resources" by Kat Anderson.

■ "Designing California Native Gardens: The Plant Community Approach to Artful, Ecological Gardens,"

by Glenn Keator and Alrie Middlebrook, (University of California Press, 2007).

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