Bitter Medicine Is Stronger

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It may be tempting to think of acorn harvesting, an iconic practice for the Pomo people of Northern California, as an element of "lost culture." Yet knowledge of making acorn mush exists in the minds of elders and those who use mixed methods, blending time-tested practices with contemporary adaptations. In writing down a recipe, much more than measurement and ingredients is involved. We must consider the path both native people and oak trees have taken (or been herded into) over the decades. And we must consider the roles played by oaks, acorns, and the mush that strikes our palates in an ongoing healing of the land and its many long-standing inhabitants.

Oaks and Pomo people have shared what we now call Northern California for at least six thousand years, by academic reckoning, and longer if we listen to tribal elders. Movements across the land, from the valleys and hills surrounding Clear Lake to the ocean to the west, can be traced through the genetics of promiscuous oaks and the artifacts and stories of small and distinct bands of Pomo people. Together, these entangled networks of matter and meaning point to dynamic relationships among people, among oaks, and between the two groups of beings. Grindstone rocks, covered in smooth depressions where acorns were cracked and ground, mark clearly where human and acorn came together. Blackened middens are traces of where Pemos may have helped oaks thrive with controlled burning of coastfires.

Cries of "gold" in the area changed the dynamics considerably. By the 1850s, calls for the extermination of Indians were everywhere, and white settlers traded Indian heads for payment by local governments. Ranchers grabbed Indian men, women, and children for forced labor, in part to clear away oaks and other trees to open rangeland. Official genocide gave way to displacement, land and resource alienation, social isolation, and repression of cultural practices. Well into the 1960s, one could still find "no dogs or Indians allowed" in storefront windows in Mendocino County. Meanwhile, ranches gave way to orchards and, later, vineyards, leaving still less space for the odd oak tree and more fences between Pomo people and those oaks.

But Pomo people and their relations, the oaks, have hung on. A reservoir of biological, social, and cultural strength has enabled them to ride out together a century and a half of extreme hardship. Providing mutual support, both are reclaiming land lost to them and are together more often again. It is not too much to imagine a future in which Pomo people and oaks, companions for so long, encounter each other daily in relationships of sustenance and care, with both exhibiting vigor and diversity.

Acorn mush—like the stories of Bloody Run or Bloody Island told to young Pomo by their parents and grandparents, stories of massacres, forced marches, and internment—is bitter. The old women whose words animate this recipe and its meaning argue over how bitter it must be, but they all call...
it medicine. They laugh at the children who want it sweeter, who do not understand the balance that Pomo people expect and value between sweet and bitter, comfort and pain, bounty and deprivation. The oldest teach the acorns of just enough tannin to avoid stomachaches, leaving enough "toxin" to heal them of the legacy of settler violence. This bitter remedy, although less stark, recalls Charles Eastman's account in *Soul of the Indian* (1911) of the Sundance ceremony among Lakota becoming more difficult. Piercings became more numerous and extreme, as a reaction to violent events. Bitter medicine heals in a bitter time.

Acorn mush is microbiopolitical: It is a partial remedy for industrial agriculture, the homogenization and marketing of everything edible. Acorns are generally traded and not sold. Pomo collectors sort through many wormy and spoiled acorns to get those we can eat. Collectors recognize differences among stands of oaks and even individual trees in the types of acorns they produce and their quality. They see in acorns and oaks a way back to older practices—or, at least, a way for older and newer approaches to articulate with one another. Those who eat acorn mush value the labor and skill of the collectors, whom they generally know, and together they engage in the creation of a biosocial community. Acorn mush better sold a trip to a chain grocery store. It can be, at its best, an affirmation of a Pomo way of getting food that declares, "We are still here," oak and human alike, and getting stronger.

Our recipe is the result of a compromise between Pomo women who gathered. Around a table at the Pineville Pomo Nation offices. They sat and talked together about oaks and acorns, about mush and recipes. They laughed at the differences between Pomo bands and families—thier varying tastes in mush. The women discussed their favorite acorn gathering sites and which species of oaks they prefer. Linda Noel's mother makes the mush for the annual Big Time celebration, the primary Pineville Pomo Nation social gathering. She had the largest say in articulating this recipe:

1. Gather acorns in the fall (as they fall) from black oak, white oak, and tan oak. Watch for changes in bird activity and the color of leaves to know when to collect. Share, or don't, your information about trees that are giving generously in a given year with your human neighbors. The flicker, woodpecker, and deer have already located their favorite trees. Remember to share with them—we need them for feathers and meat. We are less sympathetic to feral pigs that gobble up the bounty. Place the acorns in a secure location. In the old days, we had granaries. Now we keep them in a five-gallon bucket or wicker basket.

2. Dry the acorns by letting them sit in the sun for a week. Crack and remove the shells. Here is where the hard work begins.

3. Clean the acorns with a small knife to get the remaining inedible parts out—the bits of shell and skin surrounding the kernel. It is a time of work but can also be a time of visiting, sitting outside, and nothing clouds passing by, the color of the day, the curious woodpeckers looking to get in on the action.

4. Grind the acorns into flour. We used to sit on huge rocks with depressions made by generations of pounding. Now we use a meat grinder and flour sifter, quick and easy for our lifestyles today. We often do this alone, as did our generations past. These are moments of reflection (while we sweat).

5. Construct a mound. We once used sand along the creek's edge and held the acorn flour in a pit covered with wild grape leaves. Now an old tire will do or anything that can securely hold a piece of cloth, preferably cheesecloth. But we prefer a mound of sand that drains slowly.

6. Stretch cloth over the mound so it can hold the acorn flour and place the flour on the cloth.

7. Place small cedar (*calocedrus decurrens*) branches over the flour to give flavor to the mush.

8. Pour water over the cedar and the acorn flour to leach out the bitterness. If you leach more, you lose more bitterness. Some of the old women like the mush bitter, so be careful not to leach too much—we do not want "Cream of Wheat." The bitterness is medicine, after all.
9. Dip water out of a bucket and slowly pour it over
the cedar branches and flour many times. Do this
for several hours, as needed, occasionally tasting
the flour that is becoming more like dough. When
we did this by the creek, we would just take creek
water. Make sure you have a good water supply.

10. Taste and leach until you get the right amount
of bitterness. Some like acorn mush quite bitter;
others don’t. Older ones tend to like the bitterness
much more than do young ones, but this also
differs by family and community. Anna says that
bitter is stronger medicine and bitterness in life
makes you stronger.

11. Cook the dough, adding water to control
thickness. In the old days, we made baskets
specifically for cooking mush. Rocks were heated
in an outdoor fire, and with two branches the rocks
were dumped into the mush held by the baskets.
After the mush bubbled, the rocks were removed.
We now use a gas stove at the Big Time event,
stirring the mush regularly and keeping the heat
low enough not to burn the mush.

12. Add another branch of cedar (Calocedrus
decurrens) to the mixture for flavor.

13. Stir constantly. As the mush thickens, it will
stick to the pot.

14. Remove the cedar and serve the mush in small
portions.

Mush goes well with cooked meat and fish. Today, we sometimes eat it with
bread made from “commods.” The irony of juxtaposing US Department of
Agriculture commodities, mass-produced canned meat and beans from an
unknown Midwestern location, with our self-collected and prepared bowls
of localized mush is not lost on Pomo people. But we are full of contradic-
tions, aren’t we?

POMO AND OAK RECOVERY

I don’t mind being “close to nature.” But I know what
they mean when they say that, and it’s not what I mean.
—Linda Noel, Koyungkawi poet and acorn mush maker

The conversation at the Pomo Nation offices shifts from recipes to efforts to
nurture more oaks—or, in contemporary natural resource management parl-
ance, oak restoration. It is tribal staff members who now speak to the Pomo
women, explaining what they are doing in their daily work on reservation
land and why.

We begin with a first step, the retrieval of an oak seedling started from
an acorn that fell in the soil behind our office. The soil was compacted and
poisoned by heavy metals and dense petroleum hydrocarbons left by wreck-
 ing yards and double-wide trailers that made themselves at home during the
termination era for the Pomoville Pomo Nation. The seedling is now more at
risk from the shoes of playing children or tribal staff gaming the time clock,
standing in the shade. The seed germinated and sent up its first stem and
leaves in the spring of 2008. It competed with poison oak and blackberry,
which have also taken refuge in the narrow woodland on the hill behind us,
carved between wrecking yard and road.

Our former housing director, who used to work for Masonite—the once
great consumer of local timber, now defunct—suggested we put the oak
seedling in a pot and bring it along to our newly built greenhouse. He was
afraid that the maintenance guys would kill it with their weed eater. And
anyway, it could not grow to maturity where it germinated. There was not
enough space between the hill and the office for a fully mature oak.

Even though few people remember how to make mush free of stomach-
twisting compounds, everyone remembers that oaks fed Pomes back in the
day. The local organic brew pub has expressed interest in serving acorn mush
if tribal citizens will produce it. The oak is also about healing race. Seeing
more oaks makes tribal elders happy, although oaks compete for space with
fruit trees and alders (good for smoking fish). Pomo people feel hopeful
about their own prospects, it seems to us, when they know we are nurturing
oaks. There is gratitude to oaks and a shared history, a mutual dependence.

The oaks also participate in the Pomoville Pomo Nation’s scientific idiom of
recovery. They represent “native species.” The more local, the better. Some native plant experts—from forest company professionals trained in distant universities to self-taught lovers of local landscapes—advise that
only genetic stock from within five miles of the tribe’s lands really counts as “native.” We try to meet this standard, but such notions of local purity and hard categorizations have disquieting associations. Pomo and oak were both travelers and mixers, cosmopolitans in their own ways. We will, on occasion, go to the local nursery to buy an oak, a taller one, further along in its development, if it meets a need. But the locals, over time, have demonstrated to us their superior viability. So we now dig up seedlings that begin in our back yards, taking them only a short distance to an area recovered from the wrecking yard, cleared of old trailers and their appliances and furniture, household trash, and the oak-unfriendly items people call solvents and disinfectants. In the cleaned area, the oaks cast shade on a creek to which we hope fish will return one day, too. The short trip is better for the seedlings than a long trip from the nursery anyway. We imagine the growing trees will like having the water nearby, as our years become drier. But they will let us know if it is too wet. Their leaves will fall, and their branch tips will blacken. We will have to protect them from invasive bamboo brought by the US Army Corps of Engineers to stabilize the banks of our local waterways.

A Pomo-oak alliance represents a shared politics of resistance during the colonial era, when white settlers brought plants, animals, and diseases that damaged Pomo and local vegetation alike. It is far from a perfect alliance: The Pomo only now are beginning to make mush again from the acorns, and the oaks do not like the pavement around Pomo buildings or the trash that drips who knows what alien chemical onto the roots. But the alliance has value. The tribe will mark the recovery of land with oaks as a potent symbol of Pomo culture. The oaks will profit from tribal sovereignty, and the stories Pomo tell about history, culture, and the role of acorns in their lives. To threaten oaks and acorns is to threaten Pomo, and we will protect each other.

A more general concern about vanishing species (and cultures) brings environmentalists to the alliance, whether they are from federal agencies or conscious local landowners, such as our logging company neighbors and the irrigation shop across the creek. Acorns will bring other fauna, especially the deer that we want to see more of, too. We have to figure out how to advance the influence of this kind of multispecies alliance. We feel danger on the horizon, and elders speak of difficult times ahead.

As we plant the oaks, we think of new ways to regenerate tribe and tree. We have gained access to a patch of oak woodland now, thanks to the generosity of our logging company neighbors and, perhaps, institutional pressure from the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), which indigenous peoples have helped push toward a reckoning of the effects of forestry on those with deep, complex, and original ties to places. This is a site where Pomo once camped, and we feel the presence of good spirits there. We pray and listen and feel for their approval of what we call, for our funders, a “restoration” project. It is a bit different from that, though. Our restoration cannot focus on mitigating the ravages of the agro-industrial economy and the housing, roads, and infrastructure entangled with it. We cannot seal away “pristine” nature to ease the psychological burdens of our overstimulated neighbors, or even focus on the hydrology or climate-related services of a protected, “natural” landscape, as some funders would have it. We are in a different historical moment. We need to plant more densely, to water more regularly, to weed and burn and harvest in one small spot rather than over the vast expanses where Pomo used to travel. We need to get lots of basketry and arbor materials, lots of medicine, and lots of food out of this small patch. We need a freshly cultered landscape. Oaks will be at the center of these efforts.

For now, the acorns are scarce here on forest company land. We must go elsewhere to fill our burlap bags. And there is another complication: We look for the tan oak stands that are weeds to the forest company. These produce Pomo’s preferred acorns. However, we must plant other species, valley and

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Recipe Figure 4.2 A barren oak tree silhouetted against the sunset. Photograph courtesy of CopyrightFreePhotos. See multispecies-salon.org/acorn-mush.
black oaks, at the old village site, as these are not a threat to the forest company’s moneymaking trees. Yet we continue to search the tan oak stand for acorns outside our project site. These are the ones the older people like. We now serve them again at social events, such as the Big Time, and we can see parents and grandparents talk to children about the flavors. Some kids are drawn to the taste—the ones with older spirits in them, everyone remarks. But the tribe in general is taking up again the practice of eating this food with respect and gratitude.

We have ideas for producing and enjoying acorns on a grander scale. We are making bread and soup as well as mush. We think about preserving acorn products for shipping and introducing them to local schools and businesses. There is some danger here: Will we harvest with reverence if we produce at this scale? Will we know the individual trees and how much and when they produce, when they need trimming or protecting from parasites, when they need to rest and recover from our attentions? We hope that expansion will bring more tribal people and others into relationships with oaks and acorns but in a way that strengthens older tribal ways of being in the world, harvesting modestly and mindfully, rather than bringing oaks and acorns into a commercial exchange that ravages the oaks and creates more spiritual distance between us and our ancestors. We need to proceed carefully, in a Pomo way.

So much of the landscape is greedily secured behind fences, material and social, but we have identified a few generous trees and groves where we can collect the best acorns. We have gone and sung prayers to the oaks, thanking them and wishing them well, and have filled our bags. We know an elder who makes good mush and who is willing to show us how. The kids have learned to crack the acorn shells, and we have an old-style grinding rock and a blender to make flour. We have the pots, the sand, the cedar boughs for leaching, and the flame for cooking.

If we produce the acorns, if we share the recipes, will our readers join us in a different kind of food way? Will they make space for mush, for acorns, and for Pomo people in their lives?

NOTES

1. Dodd, “Promiscuity in Oak Woodlands.”

3. This history is only recently acknowledged by the state of California; see “Bloody Island,” accessed January 13, 2013, http://www.hmdb.org.
4. In When Species Meet, Donna Haraway teases out many of the (potential, emerging) qualities of human–non-human relations, insights that are not at all strange to most Native Americans.
6. Pomo–acorn relations resonate with Heather Paxson’s exploration of the politics of locally grounded, artisanal food production that cannot easily be homogenized and scaled up and sanitized. Her notion of microbiopolitics embraces life with other species—bacteria particularly—that involves pleasure and risk, nourishment and discomfort, labor and reward: see Paxson, “Post-Pasteurian Cultures.” See also the interlude in this volume.
8. The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) includes the protection of indigenous people’s rights among its principles and criteria. The forestry company with which the Pineville Pomo Nation works is certified by the FSC. Tribal staff have been interviewed about the company’s relations with indigenous peoples, and the ensuing report calls on the company to expand relations with other tribes and advance co-management projects. The FSC’s discussion of its commitments to indigenous peoples is at http://www.fsc.org, accessed January 13, 2013. It should be noted, however, that many people feel there is much room for improvement in the FSC’s work; see, e.g., FSC Watch, accessed January 13, 2013, http://www.fsc-watch.org. In the end, the Pineville Pomo Nation would like to manage oak woodlands for itself rather than through a company.
9. Contingencies govern the coming together of new groups: marketers and oaks, consumers and mush makers, Pomo and non-Pomo in the case of all of us who wrote this essay and who are involved in oak-related work. But if we proceed slowly, keeping relationships among Pomo and oaks at the center of our thinking, we dare hope that a “coalescence,” as Anna Tsing and Elizabeth Pollman call it, will emerge that can change local landscapes and histories for the better and perhaps even model something for the wider world: Tsing and Pollman, “Global Futures.”