



Photo: Dan Barta, Mono Lake, Lee Vining

AS TOLD BY JULIA AND LUCY PARKER
PHOTOS BY DAN BARTA

native california culture

This “tiny” oak acorn has fed and nourished native Americans for centuries and probably for millennia. Here in California, the original inhabitants’ diet was shared by families who gathered, stored and cooked the ingredients in their baskets.

“We have to follow the old way, the traditional way,” states Julia Parker, as she motions to her daughter Lucy, who has continued the consistent practice of weaving baskets while growing up in Yosemite Valley. As part of the Yosemite Miwok/Paiute tradition, California Native Americans continue to create beautiful works which tell the story of their culture.

Baskets and grinding rocks have always been a part of their native culture, having a variety of uses. “I could change this whole thing to make it modern, but to me it’s more important knowing how they did it *the old way* and to keep that story going, remarks Julia. “Today, we can make food faster than those with modern conveniences; our way may look hard, but it is quicker.”

As circling youngsters surround the setting, Julia sits down beside one of her woven pieces and explains their way of life. “In the village, the ladies would have different jobs to help, and it takes a lot of effort. There would be different chores. Some were making baskets and the others were entertaining the kids by telling stories and singing songs, like we do now. They would often cook only one meal in the morning, where everyone would get together. There, they ate a big meal. Berries could also be gathered and it was so nice... and peaceful.”

As Julia continues her story, she sits and works the raw acorns into flour. “When the leaves yellow and the rain falls, that is when acorns are harvested. In the seed of the acorn, when the little hat sticks to the acorn, this means that there is an insect in it.” Julia then cracks one open. “See, that didn’t make a very good sound. When it is a good acorn, you hear a snap. That’s a good sound and you are going to get a good acorn. Do you see how *all* the skin comes off? When the skin comes off, we can turn it into flour.”

Checking with a small knife point, Julia continues to inspect the kernels in order to eliminate those with imperfections or damage. “We have to split the seed now. It has to be split and we open it up like this. Then it is ready to pound.”

Julia has a small pounding stone and a tall stone mortar to which she adds the fresh kernel to already worked flour. This is where the real work of pounding out the acorn flour is done, inside what is typically called a grinding rock.





Julia explains, “in order to weave a basket.”

Soon, the acorn begins to make its transformation. “We need to pound, and you watch a few minutes, you’ll see it will turn, to flour. What’s happening is that all the heavy kernels fall inside the center with the vibration,” as she points to the center of the large mortar. “Then it is time to sift. I can put my hand in there and there is lots of fine flour on my hand. Now it is time to take out the powder.”

Julia and Lucy serve acorn hors d’oeuvres, “just enough to hold in your hand.” Then, deermeat, berries, fish and insects are also served. “We eat the *cacagee* insect, from Mono Lake, and the *peeogee* insect from trees around Mammoth. It’s all sweet,” says Julia, “and all protein; probably a 95% high protein diet!”

“The women were incredibly strong, they were always cutting their willow and fixing their baskets; their hands were exceptionally strong,” as Julia speaks from much experience.

“It’s a life that can disappear with time, in a millennium.” But who would think the Indians were carrying these traditions in the millennium year? “This is as close as we can get to our old ways,” states Julia. And these ways will always be the same because the rocks will always be here, and so will the people. What is inside of every Native American will never die because these people will not forget – “the traditional way.” ◆

“It all has to go in there clean, it can’t have any of the red on it. The ladies will know, because they’ll take a look at your flour, and if you have a lot of the red in it, then they can tell if you are lazy. They can also tell if you cracked this acorn wrong –the kernels will get all mashed up. You want to make it even,” says Julia as she displays her acorn flour. “You see, when you prepare food you want it to look pretty and want to have it nice and clean...they were immaculate with a special brush for the flour and a special brush for scrubbing the baskets out. You have to crack it the way I crack it to make it look nice. That’s how I was taught,” she implores.

“We always have a starter, just like sourdough, to keep it from getting oily, so it will be nice and fluffy, like flour. You see, if you keep pounding, this will turn to oil. These were last year’s acorns and these acorns are six years old,” as Julia reveals another basketful. “They keep indefinitely when in the shell. They’ll last for ten, twelve, fifteen years; and the reason for the acorn lasting a long time, you see, is because in Yosemite Valley the acorn doesn’t come every year.”

Julia stresses that the grinding rocks are also a very important part of this process. “My rock is a special one-hand rock; this is for a woman, a young girl who is beginning to pound acorns. We give her a light rock. Then, you want to get your hands, your whole body set for this. You see, you are going to be working at it.”

Julia continues to demonstrate the proper sitting position: “you’re stretched out and you pound. I didn’t bring my big fifteen to twenty pound rock that I lift up and bring down. It crushes it in no time. I always tell the young girls, if they want to learn how to pound acorn we do a one-hand rock and we do a five pound rock. Then, if you want to be a Jayne Mansfield, they work the twenty pound rock. Not many people sit on the ground and lift weights! The heavier the rock, the quicker you are going to get your flour. You are developing your hands, your arms are getting strong and you are getting yourself ready for when you do your basket. You need to have good strong hands,”

It Will Live Forever, by Bev Ortiz and Julia Parker, is a recently revised book on the history and reflections of native California culture and their methods used historically. For demonstrations and workshops on Native American crafts, contact Lucy Parker at: 760/647-6669

