

Knowledge of Native Elders
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Aleut Foods and Food Preparation

The same food types that will be discussed from the 1930's are assumed to have been eaten by Aleut forefathers as well. In Aleut society the Elders are always fed first. The hunter is awarded with the greatest share of the food and delicacies, such as the head or flippers of a seal. The Aleut unselfishly share food with others villagers.

The traditional Aleut needed to worry about spoilage of their valued foods therefore many meals consisted of seasonal foods from available animals and plants. At times, food sources overlapped producing a variety of food choices. There was not a "feeling of want for foods", nor were famines experienced.

Generally three meals a day were eaten with the other family members; breakfast, lunch, and supper. Supper was the main meal of the day. Breakfast and lunch were usually prepared from the previous day's leftovers. If a person was lazy he may not have always had food, but, only because of his own laziness. Single people were fed and housed with a family if they are good workers. There is an Aleut saying... "if a man is sleeping at home feed him because he will be hungry but if a man is out, he will feed himself".

The primary sources of food fall into three groups; meat and fowl, seafood, and plants.

Meat and Fowl

The meat and fowl group consisted of sea lion, whale, local ducks and birds, porpoise, and a variety of seals. The sea lion was available year round, was most plentiful, and used as food in addition to a clothing resource. Most parts; meat, internal organs, skins and sinew were fully used in all the animals that were hunted.

The intestines were considered one of the most important parts. The intestines were cleaned, dried and braided and used to make seal gut leggings, and coats. Vital organs such as the heart, kidney and bladder were usually eaten raw even after the introduction of cooking pots. Choice fleshy parts were stripped, dried and made into jerky for the winter.

The flippers of the sea lion are large and a favorite delicacy. Flippers were cut and stored in seal stomachs, or were hung up

until the oil stopped dripping then the flippers were ready to eat. Flippers are so favorite that a person will give up two days worth of food, or pay twenty dollars for them. The more pungent the flipper, the better it is to eat. Enjoyment continues to this day. The oil was also a necessity not only for food, but also as fuel for lamps. The stomach of the seals were cleaned, blown up, and dried to be used as storage bags for dried meat, fish, and to melt and store blubber and oil.

Whales were hunted but because there are now no hunters, are received only when a whale happens to beach on the shore. Whale is eaten raw and cooked. After salt was introduced whale and other meats were salted and stored in barrels. When salting the texture is similar to salt pork. Whale blubber is also considered a delicacy.

Fur seal was prepared in the same manner. Later fur seals were not allowed to be killed because of the over predation from the fur trading years influenced by the Russians.

Fowl was another important food supply. They were harder to catch and consumed rather than preserved when caught. The birds were not plucked, but skinned. The skins were used to make parkas. The internal organs; gizzard, brain, bill and feet were cooked and eaten.

Bird eggs, from the muir are the most plentiful. Duck and seagull eggs were also gathered and stored in salt brine for future use. It is not known by Albert if crows or eagles were a food source of the Aleut people. The hunting practices used for birds consisted of a bolo, (thong type implement with long strings with a stone thrown out of it), snares made from sinew, and bows with hand carved arrows.

Sea Foods

Fish the Aleut people had available to them includes halibut, flounder, bass, cod, salmon (humpies, silver, and red), and shellfish, such as clams, abalony, cockels, mussels, butterclams, and erchins. Crab were not eaten because they were believed to have eaten drowned Aleuts. The Aleut also ate octopus, and kelp.

Salmon, and cod were cleaned, split and dried, or eaten raw. Halibut would spoil during the drying process therefore were eaten soon after they were caught. The head of the halibut was also eaten. Often fish were boiled with the liver and internal organs. Cod in particular could be boiled with other parts of the fish and when allowed to set would form into a gel consistency. This was similar to head cheese, was sliced and

eaten. Cod becomes so sticky that it was once used as glue. Salmon eggs were preserved in seal bags where they would become pungent and then eaten.

As with other animals, fish often run in cycles. Cod, in Aleut is named Atxiidax, meaning "it stops". Most fishing in the early days was done with a gaff hook made from bone or ivory and later, bought in the store. Gaffing hooks were attached to a long pole and the fish hooked. Woven grass nets were also used and made new each season to catch fish. These nets needed to remain in water to prevent crumbling.

Sometimes fish would be stored in community houses once they were smoked. Fish were smoked in the open air with a fire built under them. Now there are smoke houses which are much faster.

Plants

Several varieties of plants and roots were gathered, cleaned, cooked, and eaten in a paste form. Puchies, are large leafy plants which grow in the water, are stripped much like celery, and eaten alone, or to flavor fish. Petroschies, have smaller clusters of leaves which are dried and also used as flavoring. There is another plant with purple leaves that is commonly used, and a plant similar to rhubarb. All plant varieties are picked in the late fall, eaten ripe, or air dried in the sun and wind, or near the fire inside the house. Certain species of plants were used for medicinal purposes.

Many varieties of berries grow in Unalaska and, there are many ways in which berries were prepared as food. The four most common types of berries are cranberries, blueberries, salmon berries, and moss berries. Blueberries and moss berries were stored in water for later use. Salmon berries spoil easily so are generally eaten immediately. The berries were a sweetening agent and sometimes prepared as a treat for the children. Berry picking was the woman's responsibility. Berries were not used to purposefully make alcohol, however, sometimes the berries would accidentally ferment and was not wasted.

Drinks

The people of Unalaska generally drank water. Later, leaves of the ladyslipper were picked and dried for tea. There was not a milk product that is recalled. Every village was located near a water source. The women carried water in a stomach seal bag and possibly in tightly woven baskets. Baskets of the same type were used to carry fish.

Breads

Kakxitax is a type of bread that was made after the introduction of flour and sugar. It was originally made by the Russians. The unleaven bread is a mixture of flour, water, and sugar. Fry bread is another bread which was eaten, and a particular favorite memory and breakfast of Alberts. Kolatchies, (bread with a fruity inside) are another type eaten by the Aleuts. However, this bread has special Russian Orthodox religious meaning, and is to be prepared and eaten only during the six weeks of Lent. Warm-blooded animals are abstained from during Lent and also during the six weeks of Christmas Advent.

Russian Influenced Foods

There are probably many foods that were originally introduced and borrowed from the Russians, however, they are also considered Aleut foods. Some Russian influenced foods are headcheese and gelled fish dishes, fish pies, kolatchies, as mentioned, and stewdin, a Russian word meaning salad. The women are the food preparers and the men are hunters. Most foods were cooked over an open fire both in and out of the house. Foods were seldom baked and after the introduction of pots, were generally boiled.

*****Recipe*****

Catch, cook, and debone fish
Mash mossberries or blueberries and add to fish
Add seal oil till well textured

* can substitute mayonnaise for seal oil

Aleut Traditional Beliefs

The sea otter was protected by the Aleut people. Following is a story of why this was the tradition.

This story is about a brother and sister in a family who fell in love with each other. They knew they could never marry, even though they were so much in love. They went to the sea shore and jumped in ... it is said they became sea otters.

The sea otter nurse and pat their babies on the back, over their shoulders like humans. If a sea otter comes onto land it is a sign that something bad will happen in the future. People will say, "Becareful, I saw a sea otter inland".

The fire ball is a phenomena in many cultures. In Aleut a fireball reaching the village is a sign of future epidemic. Albert has seen two fireballs which dissipated before they reached the village. A fireball will start on top of a mountain and roll downward growing bigger and rolling faster. If the fire ball dissipates there is no fear of a epidemic.

Death Commemoration

When an Aleut dies he is never buried for three nights. A person could have gone into a coma but still be alive. A story Alfred heard was that people were bringing a man to be buried and the man knocked from the inside of the box to be let out, he was not dead. A memorial is held on the 40th day after the person dies. It is believed that the soul remains in the house for that period. On the 40th night prayers are said and the door is opened at midnight to let the soul go. This is in significance to Christ staying on earth for 40 nights. After the soul is let go, the people celebrate the persons memory and food is served. This Aleut tradition is one of the few which also mixes with church beliefs.