

Renewing Salmon Nation's Food Traditions

Food experts gather to identify endangered regional foods

By Dan Sadowsky
October 5, 2005

Chinook salmon, loganberries, camas bulbs and wapato roots. These are among the icons of Salmon Nation. Their tastes anchor residents to the region and its longstanding cultural traditions. Yet according to those most knowledgeable about Northwest foods, these foods might not be around for future generations to enjoy.



Nancy Turner and Gary Nabhan

Food experts from northern California to British Columbia sounded that alarm at the end of a September workshop convened by Renewing America's Food Traditions (RAFT) and hosted by Ecotrust. Twenty farmers, food historians, chefs, wildlife biologists and ethnobiologists, along with representatives from Slow Food USA and the Chefs Collaborative, spent the better part of the day hammering out a preliminary list of 210 foods unique to the region. Of these, 22 percent are at risk of falling out of use due to factors that include environmental degradation, habitat destruction, and the loss of cultural traditions tied to those foods.

Leading the workshop was Gary Nabhan, the director of the Center for Sustainable Environments at Northern Arizona University and a pioneer in seed-conservation efforts and the study of indigenous foods. He founded this consortium of seven sustainable-food organizations to try to revive at-risk foods with strong ties to regional culture. Over the next three years, groups affiliated with RAFT plan to distribute heirloom seeds, host "American Traditions" picnics around the country and publish a book on the nation's 100 most-endangered foods, among other initiatives.

"We want to draw attention to the fact that many foods that have been mainstays for generations or even millennia are today at risk," says Nabhan.

In calling for the preservation of distinctive regional foods, RAFT joins a broader social and cultural movement that encourages consumption of food grown locally and sustainably by people with a connection to the land. Local farmers markets are thriving, organic products are gaining marketshare and the slow food movement, which began in Europe in 1986, now has a visible presence in the U.S.



Gerry Warren and Joe McGarry

"The irony of the slow food movement is that the Italians reminded us to look at our back doorstep," says Nabhan. But our own native food traditions, he says, still haven't been fully recognized. "Why are we trying to imitate Europeans when there's an incredible bounty here?"

A complementary effort by Slow Food USA, called the Slow Food Ark of Taste, is soliciting nominations for uniquely American foods that are at risk, either biologically or as culinary traditions, are sustainably grown and are culturally or historically linked to a specific region, locality, ethnicity, or traditional production practice. After these foods are identified, local chapters will work with chefs and food producers to heighten their profile among local consumers.

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RAFT plans to gather experts in 11 regions to develop endangered-food lists. The Northwest was its first stop. The invitation-only workshop brought together experts in Salmon Nation to refine a list of foods unique to this region and to determine whether these foods are extinct, threatened, endangered or recovering. The results will be compiled and distributed at Northwest food conferences such as the Seattle-hosted International Association of Culinary Professionals in March.

Seated around a long conference table strewn with papers and coffee cups, the experts proceeded methodically down a list of wild plants, berries and nuts, fish and heirloom vegetables, sharing their widely diverse knowledge of the history and availability of each.

For foods judged to have significantly diminished in quantity over the last half-century, the discussion turned to possible causes. Surprisingly, the group found that many suffered not from direct environmental or habitat destruction, but from the loss of cultural traditions in which the food was an integral part. “In many cases, it’s the infrastructure supporting (the food) that has fallen apart,” remarked Anthony Boutard, owner of Ayers Creek Farm.



Jennifer Hall, Lora Lea Mysterly, and Karen Jurgensen

Not surprisingly, there was a lot of wistful talk about loss: the relative scarcity of kokanee sockeye, the smallness of today’s eel grass, the disappearance of Marshall strawberries, and the poorly maintained genetic quality of Walla Walla onions and other regional staples.

But the process unearthed hopeful stories, too. The Songhees Nation on Vancouver Island, for example, recently revived traditional feasts featuring pit-cooked camas bulb, a root that once thrived in the region but is now relegated to the hinterlands, says Nancy Turner, who works closely with First Nations elders as an ethnobotanist at the University of Victoria.

Turner thinks the time is right for this sort of heritage-foods campaign. She says we’ve moved beyond the “Kraft Dinner Era” and are now more attuned to the importance of local foods and their link to our culture. “I think paying attention to our home places is the most important way we have to look after our unique resources.”



Debra Sohm Lawson

RAFT’s approach to conservation is unconventional, Nabhan concedes, because it urges consumption. In this case, Nabhan says, “conservation and sustainable use aren’t diametrically opposed to one another.” He and others realize, however, that RAFT needs to tread carefully on certain endangered foods, such as abalone, where greater consumption would only hamper their recovery.

Other issues also require further discussion, such as how America’s everchanging mix of immigrants affects what foods are deemed “traditional,” and whether all uniquely regional foods are worth saving. Sinclair Philip, owner of Vancouver Island’s Sooke Harbor House Hotel and Restaurant, which is known for its local cuisine, wonders about some of the more obscure foods that made the list. “Will somebody be interested in growing it, cooking it, and eating it?” he asks.

There was no question, however, about RAFT’s premise: Few will be interested in preserving any food that they know nothing about.

<http://www.ecotrust.org/foodfarms/renewing.html>
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