



# Choctaw foods | History and development

By a special request from the Bishinik staff, February's extended edition of Iti Fabvssa focuses on traditional Choctaw foods.

For millennia, Choctaw and ancestral Choctaw chefs have been perfecting cuisine to satisfy their families' appetites and tastes. Today, as in the past, many Choctaws draw a part of our identity from cooking and eating old Choctaw family favorites such as **Tanchi Labona** ("Pashofa" in the Chickasaw language), **Pvlvska Bvnana** (Banaha bread), and **Walakshi** (fruit dumplings). This article will take a brief glimpse at the history and development of traditional Choctaw foods, featuring a number of early Choctaw recipes along the way, and outlining the important influences that these foods have had on today's American cuisine.

Like many things traditional, Choctaw foods have changed and developed over time. This is partially because our food sources, the plants and animals available to us, have themselves changed through time. What may be some of the earliest Choctaw oral traditions describe giant animals inhabiting the homeland, which were capable of tearing down trees. Within the last century, the western sciences of paleontology and archaeology have not only corroborated that such giant and powerful animals as the mastadon did live on Choctaw homeland (until perhaps 12,000 years ago), but also show that people used to hunt them.

Although relatively few details are known about the food dishes that our ancestors ate at this very early date, their culinary repertoire included meat from giant and smaller animals, as well as plant foods collected in season. Some of the species they relied on for food have now been extinct for thousands of years.

**Nipi Shila**, (a Choctaw term that used to refer to "jerky") must be one of the oldest ancestral Choctaw foods. The earliest recipe for Nipi Shila was simply to cut lean meat into thin, narrow strips and suspend them over a smoky fire. This preserved the meat by drying it and exposing it to creosote in the smoke.

Today, this technique can be seen first-hand in deer jerky-making demonstrations at the Choctaw Labor Day Festival. The same basic technique was surely used by our ancestors 14,000 years ago on the meat from now-extinct animals. Similar drying methods have also been used by Choctaws for thousands of years to preserve fish and fruit.

The plant and animal communities that today live in the Choctaw homeland, have existed here for about the past 10,000



Cakes frying in a griddle made from a broken clay pot.

years. Through much of this period, the diet developed by our ancestors represented a balance of wild plant foods and animal products that were eaten according to the seasons. In the spring, women collected leaves from young, succulent plants such as poke, dock and stinging nettles, providing the Vitamin A, calcium, and iron needed to supplement dried food rations that had been stored over winter. In the summer, they collected

edible fruits like grapes and blackberries, grains like sumpweed seeds, and oily hickory nuts, while the men provided protein by fishing and hunting small game. In the fall, women gathered acorns, while the men hunted the larger animals that the acorns attracted, their meat and hides prime for the coming cold. In the winter, the community dug starchy tubers like greenbrier roots, and welcomed the Vitamin C provided by fresh persimmons.

Early on, ancestral Choctaw people had no pottery to cook in (it hadn't been invented yet), but they cooked in the coals of fires, steamed foods in leaves, roasted or smoked foods on racks over the fire, boiled foods in containers made of animal hides, and buried foods in the earth and baked them. They probably also boiled foods in tight-weave baskets or wooden containers. Some of the foods prepared during this early time are still eaten by Choctaw people today. The following are summaries of early written recipes for traditional Choctaw foods, which, based on their ingredients and cooking techniques, have probably been made for thousands of years:

**Koshiba** "Poke Salad": Pick small poke leaves in the spring when they are tender before they become bitter. Put young leaves in water and boil for a short time. Pour off water and boil again, with fat meat if desired. The same process may also be followed to prepare dock, stinging nettles. Leaves from the lambsquarter plant do not require par boiling and can be eaten all summer.

**Uksak Ulhkomo**, "Hickory Nut Oil" is a broth traditionally added to many Choctaw dishes. Hickory nuts have very hard shells. To make Uksak Ulhkomo, hickory nuts can be crushed and placed in a cloth sack that is boiled in stew and then removed, leaving behind the "hickory milk". This technique avoids the work of picking the meat from the shells.

**Uksak Alhanta**, "literally mixed hickory nuts": Crack open

hickory nuts. Pick out meat. Discard shells. Pound meat into a paste. Put paste in boiling water and stir briskly. Serve as a porridge.

**Nusi Pvlvska**, “Acorn Bread”: Hull live oak acorns and pound them into a flour. Place acorn flour in a cane sieve near a creek. Dip water over the acorns until the bitterness leaves. Mix the acorn flour with water to make a thick paste. Wrap paste around a stick and hold over a fire until done. Similar bread can also be made from beechnuts, hazel nuts, and chinquapins. In times of scarcity, bread was sometimes made from flour created from boiled pine roots.

**Okshush**, “Acorn Pudding” is made by mixing acorn flour with water and boiling to make a mush.

**Ukof Honni**, “Persimmon Stew”: Gather persimmons in winter after a frost. If they are gathered too soon, they will be full of tannic acid and inedible. Some trees produce very sweet fruit, while others can have a bitter taste. To prepare, remove the skins and seeds from the fruit. Leave as chunks or mash into a pulp. Cut meat into bite-sized pieces and throw into boiling water. Add persimmon pulp or chunks. The stew may be thickened with hickory nut oil or acorn flour.

**Ahelusa**, “Black Potato,” is made from the roots of the trailing wildbean (*Strophostyles helvola*). These are dug up, cleaned, boiled in water, and then mashed.

**Lukckuk Ahe**, “Mud Potato,” is made from the root of the groundnut (*Apios americana*). The white-fleshed roots from the groundnut are dug up, collected, and washed. They are then boiled in water and served as Irish Potatoes are today. Alternatively, mud potatoes were sometimes cooked in the coals of a fire.

Indigenous technological innovations brought changes to the Choctaw diet. Beginning around 4200 BC, Southeastern communities began to domesticate some of the native plants that they had been gathering for thousands of years. Some of these early agricultural crops included lambs quarter, gourds, sumpweed, and sunflower. Clay pottery first began to be produced in the Southeast around 2500 BC, although it took a few centuries to reach the Choctaw homeland. Pottery made boiled and fried dishes easier to cook.

**Kantak Pvlvska**, “Greenbrier Root Bread,” is made from the roots of a thorny vine, common in the Southeastern woods. The roots are dug up, collected, and washed. The outside of the root is then peeled off. While still in a moist state, the inner portions of the roots are pounded in a mortar to form a paste. The paste is made into cakes, which are fried in bear’s oil. Alternatively, the roots can be dried before pounding, and made into flour.

Ancestral Choctaw communities changed their diet significantly around AD 1050 by beginning to produce two new



Harvesting young poke leaves.

agricultural crops, corn and beans, in massive amounts. According to one Choctaw oral tradition, corn was given to the Choctaw people by **Ohoyo-Osh Chisba** “Unknown Woman.” According to another Choctaw tradition, it physically originated in Mesoamerica. This location of origin has subsequently been confirmed by archaeology.

The importance of corn and beans (traditionally planted together) was so great to ancestral Choctaw people that many communities appear to have changed their ancient residence pattern and seasonal schedule to focus on growing these crops as efficiently as possible. Not coincidentally, the most important Choctaw social function and spiritual event, during this period, the “Green Corn Ceremony” was timed according to the ripening of the corn crop.

Many traditional Choctaw dishes incorporate corn and beans as ingredients. Some of these, such as **Oksak Bahpo** (a mush made from pounded hickory nuts, walnuts, and corn), combined older Choctaw foods with

the new crops. Other dishes were made solely from the new foods. Based on their ingredients, the following Choctaw corn recipes likely date back before European contact, but are probably no older than 1,000 years (recipe specifics vary by family):

**Pvlvska Bvnaha**, “Banaha Bread”: Cornmeal is mixed with pea hull ash and water to form a dough. To this, may be added cooked beans if desired. The dough is formed into masses, wrapped into green corn husks, and tied. These are then boiled. A related dish, “**Oksak Atahap**,” can be made in the same manner, except with the addition of hickory nutmeat instead of peas or beans.

**Tafula**, “Hominy” (literally boiled corn): Boil corn kernels in a large pot. Lye (wood ash) is added and the boiling continued until the cornhusks begin to loosen. Afterward, the corn is washed in clean water and beaten in a mortar to remove its husks and break up the kernels. These cleaned kernels can be dried or put back in water and cooked until soft. Sour hominy, “**Tafula Hawushko**,” is made by keeping cooked hominy in a warm place until it has soured. Alternatively to the souring process, beans and/or hickory nut oil may be added to the hominy. If beans are added, the dish may be called “**Tafula Toni Ibulhtoh**.”

**Tanchi Labona**, (literally stirred corn): The Tafula-making process is followed as described above, except instead of removing the corn husks in a mortar, they are taken off by rubbing in the hands. This leaves the kernels whole. To make Tanchi Labona, meat is added to this hominy, which is then boiled in a deep pot. Today, this meat is normally pork roast, but in the past, it could have been meat from a variety of native animals. This dish is often called “Pashofa,” its Chickasaw name.

**Tanchi Okchi**, “Sagamite”: happens to be the first Choctaw recipe known to be put down in writing (ca 1755). To make it, dried corn kernels are removed from the ears and

ground in a mortar. The finest part of the resultant meal is collected and saved. The coarser meal is stirred into boiling water. Pumpkin and / or beans and bean leaves are added to the stew. When nearly done, the broth is thickened with the fine corn meal that was saved after grinding. The stew can be flavored with lye made from corn silk or bean pods.

**Bota Kapvssa** “Cold Cornmeal” was the food of Choctaw warriors in the field. It was made in the following way: Boil corn kernels in a pot over a fire until they begin to swell. Remove and partially dry. Place back into a dry, heated pot and stir continually until they become a parched brown color. Beat in a mortar and then sift in a fanner basket to remove the hulls. Return to mortar and beat until a fine meal is obtained. For consumption, the meal is mixed with water and allowed to sit, forming a thick, soup-like beverage.

**Walakshi** “Fruit Dumplings” are served as a sweat dish, and are a traditional Choctaw food for weddings. The oldest recipes included dumplings made from cornmeal. These were boiled in water with native fruits like grapes or blackberries.

Many other very old traditional Choctaw corn and bean dishes were made in the past and continue to be favorite foods today:

**Tanchi Lakchi** “corn grits”, **Ampi Hobi** “corn on the cob”, **Tanchi Vlwasha** “fried corn”, **Tanchi Apusha** “roasted corn”, **Pvlvska** “cornbread”, **Pvlvska Mihlofa** “grated bread”, **Pvlvska Hawuksho** “sour bread”, **Pvskalvwsha** “hot water bread”, **Pvlvska Holbi** “bread in the shucks”, **Bvla Okchi** “bean porridge”, and **Bvla Hobbi** “boiled beans”.

Europeans came to Choctaw country in waves: beginning with the Spanish, then French, then English then Americans. Each of these groups borrowed and shared foods with the Choctaws and other Southeastern Tribes, creating new blends and cooking styles.

When the Spanish arrived in Choctaw country in the mid 1500s, they brought **Shukha** “pigs”, **Wak** “cattle”, **Takkon** “peaches”, and **Shukshi**, watermelons”, which the Choctaw quickly incorporated into the diet. Traditional Choctaw foods such as **Shukha Nipi** “pork roast” and **Nipi Shila** (meaning “salted pork”) or any of the many traditional dishes that include pork roast, bacon, ham, beef, peaches, or watermelon, exist because of early interactions with the Spanish.

In return, the Choctaws and other Southeastern and Mesoamerican Tribes gave the Spanish the corn and bean varieties that native farmers had been selectively crossing and developing for generations. These were eventually given to the rest of the world. Today, corn is the third most important food crop world-wide.

In the early 1700s, when the French, with their African slaves, began establishing permanent settlements in the Choctaw homeland, the sharing and blending of ethnic foods lead to the creation of a whole new style of cuisine, known today as Cajun food. In the creation of Cajun cuisine, the French contributed their traditional stews and wheat flour. The Spanish contributed onions, garlic, tomatoes, and peppers. African chefs contributed okra and field peas. Choctaws contributed several essential elements, including an intimate knowledge of local fish, shell fish, and native

plant and animal foods. Choctaw people gathered sassafras leaves and sold or traded them in towns to produce file’, a traditional Choctaw stew thickener, and a vital ingredient in Cajun gumbo.

Written records from this time period indicate that the Choctaw were the most productive agricultural producers in the Southeast. The Chickasaw, who often sent slaving raids against Choctaw villages, had to trade with Choctaw communities to get the corn they needed to survive. By the mid-1700s, Choctaw farmers had developed a knowledge of European vegetables and were growing crops of leeks, garlic, cabbage and other non-native plants for the purpose of exporting them to the French colonies for their food. Choctaws raised poultry and transported it 120 miles to market in Mobile.

With contact with the United States in the late 1700s, and the passage of more than two centuries, have come many changes in the diets of most Choctaw people. This has been brought about as a result of relocation through the Trail of Tears, boarding schools, commodity rations, changes in cooking technology (e.g. the microwave), and a shift to highly processed foods (e.g. microwave dinners). Native crops have also been altered. Hybrid and genetically modified seed varieties, easy to grow through mechanized agriculture but often relatively low in nutrition, have

been selected in place of the old, more nutritious native seed varieties. Ironically, today some “traditional” Choctaw meals such as Indian Tacos, include not a single ingredient that was in our ancestors’ diets 400 years ago, not even the type of corn used to make the vegetable oil.

Unfortunately, the changes that have been made in the diet of most Choctaws have decreased the amount of nutrients, protein and fiber that we eat, and replaced them with increased amounts of saturated fat, processed sugar, and calories. Consider “Nipi Shila”. To our early ancestors “Nipi Shila” referred to jerky, a lean high-protein traditional food, whose recipe was given ear-

lier in this column. Today, it means “salt pork”, a European food with tremendous levels of sodium and saturated fat.

Combined with a sedentary lifestyle, this diet shift has lead to an epidemic of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and stroke that significantly shortens lives and lowers the quality of life for many Choctaw people. This epidemic is being experienced by nearly all communities across the United States, but Native Americans are among the hardest hit.

In response, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma has started nutrition awareness programs, testing clinics, and wellness centers, to increase the health of our communities. Along with awareness, exercise, appropriate medical care, and technology, strong allies are also to be found in the wild edibles, traditional seed varieties, and minimally processed Choctaw dishes that have sustained the lives of our communities since time immemorial. The next time we’re craving an Extra Value Meal, or an ice cream cone, perhaps we could realistically consider the possibility of instead feasting upon more healthful traditional equivalents like Tanchi Okchi or Walakshi. Our taste buds, hearts, and loved ones will thank us.



**A traditional stew made from corn, beans, and corn dumplings being served in Choctaw clay eating bowls.**