

# Iti Fabvssa

## Little Hunger Month

This article is part of a series titled “A Year in the Life.” Focusing on the time period of around 1700, the series follows the traditional Choctaw calendar through a year, with each article providing a glimpse of the activities that our ancestors were up to during each month.

The information in these articles is taken from a book titled, “Choctaw Food: Remembering the Land, Rekindling Ancient Knowledge,” which will be published by Choctaw Nation later this year. This edition of *Iti Fabvssa* presents Little Hunger Month.

**Chafo Iskitini Hvshi** (literally *Little Hunger Month*) came at the end of the main growing season, but before frost. This is roughly October in our current calendar.

The Choctaw language refers to the cool season as **Hvshtula**, meaning *Reclining Sun*. This is because after the fall equinox, the sun reclines farther in the southern sky, making the nighttime longer than the day in the northern hemisphere.

The lower angle of the sun also brings cooler temperatures. At this time of year, the woods in the Choctaw homeland soon begin to take on their fall color peak, with yellow hickory leaves contrasted by the brilliant red leaves on the oak and maple trees.

Coming immediately after the main harvest, Little Hunger Month was usually an abundant time in Choctaw communities.

Corn cribs and homes were full of bags of dried corn kernels, sunflower seeds, beans, rings of dried winter squash hanging on strings and stores of parched chestnuts.

Given this abundance of food, the name “Little Hunger Month” at first seems strange. The month may have received this name because it coincided with the time Choctaw people were preparing to leave their villages to go on the winter hunt the following month.

These preparations included not only activities like greasing bows and making new arrows, but also fasting for spiritual purification.

Although a time of the year when food was everywhere, for many it would have been a time of hunger.

As Choctaw communities prepared for the winter hunt, a number of resources were harvested near the villages.

Yaupon holly leaves were gathered to be used in making the Black Drink. This caffeinated beverage, known in the Choctaw language as **kvti okchi**, *thorn juice*, was used in the purification process before important discussions took place and for certain ceremonies.

Little Hunger Month also began the season for gathering red sassafras leaves to make filé. Later known as **kombo akshish** in the Choctaw language, this powder was used to thicken and add flavor to stews.

Little Hunger Month began the season for harvesting hickory nuts, acorns, chinquapins, walnuts and beechnuts.

The harvest seasons for each of these would reach their peak, later in the following month. Nuts and acorns were an important part of the Choctaw diet. They provided flavor and richness to a number of food dishes, along with a number of important nutrients.

The nut and acorn harvest was gathered by groups of women, children and elderly men. They went out into the woods or to orchards near their homes and collected the nuts and acorns where they fell on the ground.

After being gathered, the harvest was parched in a bed of hot coals. This process lightened the weight, helped to dry the harvest and killed the eggs of any insects that could be lying dormant within it.

The parched nuts and acorns could be taken back to the village and processed into the food dishes such as hickory nut porridge or acorn mush. Alternatively, they could be stored for the coming year, perhaps after further processing them into a concentrated form, like balls of hickory nut meat, to save on space.

Nut harvests could be highly efficient sources of food. Period accounts describe families harvesting enough nuts to last them for several years. This worked out well since good nut crops did not come every season.

The acorn harvest was a different story. Unlike most of the nut trees, oak trees are capable of producing a good acorn crop year after year. With oaks being the most abundant type of tree in the Choctaw homeland, the acorn harvest could truly be substantial.

Compared to the shells on most nuts, acorn shells are much easier to remove. However, the acorns from most oak species go through a leaching process to remove their bitter tannic acid before they can be used as a food ingredient.

When the first chill was felt in the air, Choctaw communities began building or refurbishing their winter homes.

These were fittingly called **anuka lashpa**, *hot inside*. Home building was an organized activity, in which the elder men of a community, whose aching backs prevented them from going on the winter hunt, worked together.

The winter houses had floors excavated about three feet below ground surface. Circular in shape, they had walls made of wooden posts, interwoven with strips of split oak and covered in adobe-like plaster.

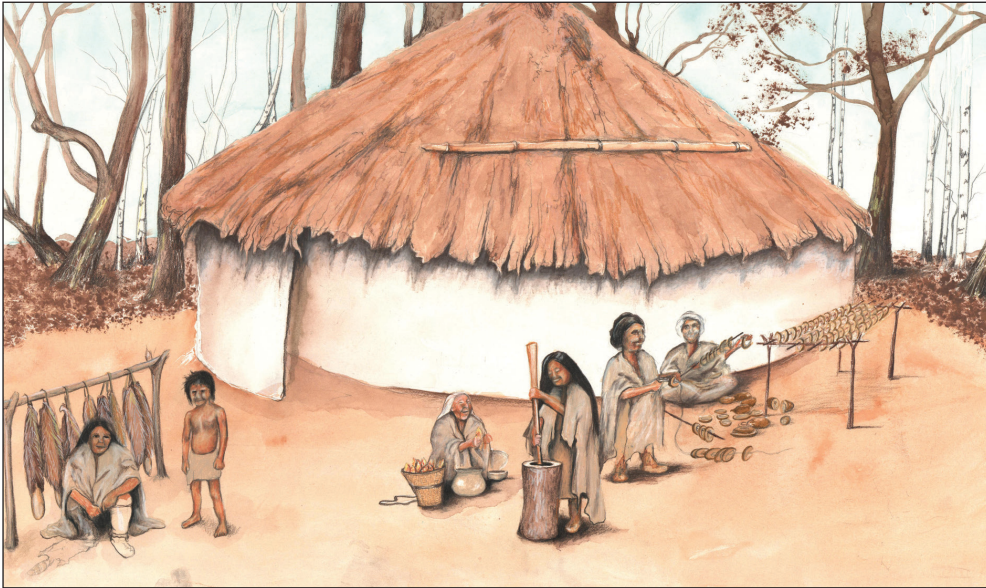
Their roofs were thatched in such a way that rain could not get in, but smoke could escape from the fire inside the home.

Entrances wound around the outside of the building a short distance to block the wind. Beds lined the inner walls of the house.

These were set up several feet off the ground on a platform of oak, making it harder for fleas to attack. The mattresses were made of split cane and covered in softly tanned hides of panthers, buffalo, or deer.

A fire made of low smoke, dry hickory bark was burned in a hearth on the ground at the center of the house in the evening and covered with ashes at night. Coals would be scraped out of the fire and taken to individual beds during the night as needed for warmth.

*Editor's Note: For Iti Fabvssa stories you might have missed please visit [ChoctawNation.com](http://ChoctawNation.com) and click on History & Culture.*



by Ruby Bolding

**Choctaw winter homes were called anuka lashpa, or hot inside. When the days started getting chilly men in the community would build or refurbish the homes.**