

## Local Eats

California is America's garden. Plants from across the world are cultivated in the heat of the central valley, and wine grapes braid the hillsides in the north. Yet one native plant is swept into gutters, considered better suited for vermin or kindergarten art projects than human consumption: the acorn. The acorn is not flashy. Unlike wild cherries or plums, the acorn doesn't boast vibrant colors or a juicy interior. Getting past the hard exterior reveals only an acrid, slightly poisonous meat that is difficult to enjoy in its raw form. But when extended patience, the acorn reveals its true potential.

Once, before California was California, there lived a great many peoples of varying tongues and habits on the land. One such group was the Miwok. The Miwok, through centuries of experience, perfected the art of the acorn.

The first phase was collecting. A family of six might collect three hundred pounds of acorns in a day, venturing over nearby hills and valleys until they had enough for a year's supply (Mayer 6). Then began processing, a labor intensive occupation practiced exclusively by women. Women smashed acorns against stones with small rocks, removing the shells and enabling the meat inside to be ground into a fine powder. Their final step was to leach the tannic acid from the flour, using layers of pine needles to strain away the bitter flavors. Collect, shell, grind, strain. As sure as the falling leaves, or migration of trout, this process was intrinsically tied to the season.

From this acorn meal came "nu'pah" (mush), "oo-la" (biscuits), and "ma-soo-lah" (pancakes). These staples accompanied all other varied delicacies to be found within the California foothills, of which the land provided generously. These might include mushrooms, venison, quail, and honey.

Yet today, the acorn has largely vanished from the culinary vocabulary. The colonization and genocide of California's Indigenous Peoples extended to their culinary practices. When considered in the context of America's greater history, this is unsurprising. Food is never "just". The way a group gathers, prepares, and considers food reveals their soul- the knotted center where threads of environment, morality, and culture tangle. At the crucial dawn of interaction between two civilizations, colonizers discovered an ideological affront to their system of domesticated cattle and crops stemming from European land ownership practices, and deemed it savage.

The acorn has been cast out of the kitchen. Even so, they persist, perhaps biding their time until they are welcomed back into humanity's good graces. During times of hardship, an acorn is like an ancient fortune cookie. To crack one opens reveals the message: "You are home. You will weather the storm."