

FOOD FROM THE EARTH El Cajon Valley's Abundance

The Kumeyaay called it *Amut-Tar-Tum* (level-ground-center). These native people and their ancestors used every resource from the sea to the mountains for nearly 12,000 years, and were intimately familiar with the lush valley. The water table was high, springs were abundant, and streams crossed the valley to nourish the soil. Oak trees provided shade, wood and acorns while other plants offered seeds, roots and greens.

Nature was the gardener of the valley, but the Indians labored in it as well. They transplanted trees to shade trails, moved food and medicinal plants closer to camping areas, and burned off the underbrush at regular intervals. There is also evidence that they diverted streams to irrigate planted crops and conserve water for the dry seasons. Food gathering, preparation and storage required a full-time effort from every man, woman and child.

Life in the valley centered around the oak trees (there were several species and there were individual words for each) and running water. Acorns were gathered, dried and cracked open. The kernels were removed and pounded with stone pestles (*haapachaa*) on stone mortars (*pi* or *ehmuu*), and the resulting meal was placed in baskets in running water to wash away the bitter tannic acid. Cooked, the acorns became a 'mush' (*shawii*), the staple carbohydrate of the Kumeyaay diet.

While many of the Kumeyaay made an annual trip to the mountains in the Fall to gather acorns, there is evidence everywhere in the valley of their harvesting and grinding them here. For example; when Johnson Avenue was built from Main to Bradley, dozens of grinding stones were revealed at a depth of three feet; there must have been a line of oak trees and perhaps a stream there long ago.

A pond near present-day Johnson Avenue and Madison persisted into the 1920's and contained small fish. Surely there were cattails (*epilly*) growing along the streams. Young cattail leaves are tender, and while the roots are tough, the 'tails' are usable as flour or made into a soup.

Around the edges of the valley, the women sought yuccas with their starchy roots and edible flowers. Samuel Brown (howkasam@hotmail.com) states that his mother gathered mushrooms (*matepan*) as well as yucca (*aakuull*).

Canyons in the surrounding hills produced wild grapes, and cactus offered its fruit (*ihpaa chewuw*) and leaves for the careful gatherer. It's likely that families making the trek from mountains to the sea brought mountain pine nuts (*ehwiiw*), gooseberries, currents, pine and manzanita berries with them.

Bow (*aatim*) and arrow (*epal* or *kupaal*) hunters harvested deer (*ekwak*); while others sailed the rabbit stick or boomerang (*hampuu*) close to the ground to kill rabbits, hares (*hallyaaw* and *kunyaaw*), squirrels (*ehmaall*), and other small game. Insects, such as grasshoppers (*tuumuw*), were frequently eaten. One very old Indian told my parents that while the white man brought many unhappy changes, he had to admit that he appreciated beef. "It tastes much better than grasshopper."

The Valley's agricultural revolution began when Spanish missionaries arrived in San Diego in 1769 and introduced livestock, grapes, olive trees, and European farming methods. By the mid-1890's, the lives and food resources of the Kumeyaay had changed for ever. The replacement of native plants was rapid and dramatic. The oaks were cut down and Brazilian pepper, Australian eucalyptus, and a variety of fruit trees were planted. Yellow-flowered mustard, alfileria with its distinctive 'pins,' wild radish and other exotic plants replaced the local grasses. When commercial crops of wheat, barley and oats were planted and 'went wild', the Kumeyaay adapted quickly and harvested the introduced grains.

In the 1960's, anthropologist Dr. Florence Shipek interviewed Delfina Cuero, a Kumeyaay woman born in 1900 at Jamul, who said she couldn't find plants she had gathered in her youth. Hers was one more comment on a hunting and gathering paradise transformed into a bewildering blend of agriculture and commerce.

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