Ohlone Acorn Grinding

The Ohlone people have lived in the Bay Area for thousands of years during which they learned to gather, process, and prepare food from the resources around them. They had to store food for future use and cook every day to feed themselves and their families. They did not have grocery stores or restaurants then to buy food like they have today.

A staple of the Ohlone diet was the acorn. An acorn is the nut of an oak tree. (See Oak Trees and acorns that have fallen from the tree below).

Acorns were such an important food source for the Ohlone because they are highly nutritious, containing high amounts of fat, protein, and complex carbs. Acorns can be harvested in large numbers and store well for future use. The Ohlone would store acorns in granaries, which were storage structures used to keep food dry and away from pests.

When the acorns were ready to be harvested the Ohlone would often use long poles to knock them loose from the trees and then gather them from the ground. Once the acorns were gathered, they would lay them out to dry and then store them in a granary until needed to make acorn soup, acorn mush, or acorn bread.

Before cooking, the acorns need to be cracked open, ground into a fine flour, and leached of tannins. Tannins are a naturally occurring bitter plant compound that may be harmful when consumed in high amounts. Leaching is the process of pouring water over the acorns until they are no longer bitter and the tannins are removed.

Acorns have a hard outer shell that protects the meaty nut inside. The first step is to crack open the shell to retrieve the nut for grinding. The grinding is done with a grinding stone. This is a stone bowl or bowl shape in a larger rock (as seen below left) and hand tool used to grind nuts and seeds.
The image on the left is a grinding rock that was used by the Ohlone hundreds of years ago. Each hole or (mortar) was used to hold the acorns while an Ohlone woman ground them into flour using a stone pestle. The image in the center are two grinding stones used for making acorn flour. The image on the far right is a modern day mortar and pestle you might find in a kitchen.

**Turning acorn flour into food:**

Once the acorns are processed into flour, and leached of tannins, they are cooked into soup or mush. Hundreds of years ago the Ohlone did not have a kitchen full of metal pots and pans and a stove top like they have today. Instead they had fire, baskets, cooking stones and other hand made utensils for the cooking process. Ohlone used water tight baskets in their cooking and were not able to put them directly over open flame because they would burn. Instead, the baskets would hold the acorn flour and water mixture while cooking stones were added from the fire. Cooking stones are special stones that can withstand high heat. The cooking stones were set into a fire to heat up. Once the stone was hot enough it was retrieved from the fire, rinsed off with water, and put in the basket holding the acorn mixture. From there the stone was stirred around (so as not to burn the basket) and then taken out when it began to lose heat and replaced with a new hot stone from the fire. Through this method the Ohlone were able to boil and cook the acorn soup!

**Activity:**

This activity is an opportunity for you to experience grinding your own food AND to think about a food staple in your life and what plant it is made from!
Look around your house to see if your family has a Mortar and Pestle. (See photo above). If not, look outside in your yard for a hard surface such as a cement driveway or a garden paver and a rock you can hold and use for grinding. Once you have the tools for grinding, now you need to find something to grind. If you are lucky you might have a tree outside your house that drops acorns and you can collect a small handful to practice grinding. If that is the case, you will need to first crack them out of their shells! If you are like me, and do not have acorns available you can use nuts from your kitchen, or cereal, or even corn chips. Be creative!

At my house I ground walnuts used a stepping stone from my yard and a rock. (See pictures below).

Step 1. Step 2.


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Now it’s YOUR turn to practice grinding “acorns”. Pay attention to the technique you use to grind.

*Is there a certain pressure or technique that seems to work best?*

*Can you grind your “acorns” into a very fine powder? How long does it take you?*

*How many acorns do you think it would take to feed your whole family for one meal? What if you had to feed your family all their meals this way?*

Acorns were an Ohlone food staple harvested from a tree. Do YOU have a food staple that is harvested from a plant?

*What is your favorite food or something you eat all the time? Do you think any part of it is made from plants?*

Example: If your favorite food is pizza you are eating multiple plants. Pizza crust is made from wheat or cornmeal. Just as the Ohlone harvest and grind up acorns to make a flour, both wheat and corn are harvested from a plant and ground up to make a flour. The flour is then used to make many different foods such as pizza dough, bread, or tortillas. Also, the sauce on your pizza is made from a plant. *Can you guess which plant it is made from?*

Plants are important to our survival as human beings and make up most food we eat today. Ohlone people still gather, process, and eat acorns today but not so much as a staple as they once did. Today there are many other foods available, but acorns are still used for meals during holidays and special occasions.