

# YOU'LL NEVER GO HUNGRY

## Food Traditions of One Dry Creek Pomo/ Bodega Miwok Family

BY KATHLEEN SMITH

**T**he food of my people is important to me. It has sustained us both physically and spiritually since the beginning of time. I didn't quite realize it when I was growing up in the 1940s and 50s, but my family was a part of that "other America," the poor.

As far as food was concerned, however, we always seemed to have enough: fresh fruits and vegetables during the summer; my mamma's home canned food in the winter for fruit pies, jams, and salsa, or as mamma calls it, sarsa. Late fall and early winter were the only times the cupboard seemed spare to me; but the lack of fresh food provided

some of my most vivid memories of unusual dishes. We had home canned peaches and hotcakes for one memorable Thanksgiving dinner; the syrup was boiled sugar water. Other meals consisted of *pucklon*, which is similar to a dumpling, or fried tripe with mustard greens.

Mamma taught me that we would never starve because our food, the food that God gave us, is all around; all we need to know is how and when to gather it, how to prepare it. The teaching included going to the hills and valleys where these foods grow.

I shall always be grateful to my mother, Lucy (Lozinto) Smith, for showing me how to make the foods she learned in her childhood, and from her mother-in-law, Mary (Antone) Santos.

For every year of my childhood, mamma planted a vegetable garden, no matter where the crops took us to harvest, from the olive groves near Visalia in the south, to the fruit orchards of Washington's Wenatchee Valley in the north, and to what must have been a hundred places in between, mainly in central California, southern and north-eastern Oregon, and central and southern Washington.

My family also raised the hogs, chickens, and cows needed for grandma's blood sausage, stuffed chicken necks with the heads attached, and curds and whey, as well as for the meat, eggs, and milk these animals also provided.

I will always be thankful to my father, Steven Smith, Jr., who died in 1980, for taking me and anyone else who would wake up at 4 a.m. to the ocean in order to get abalone, which he and my brothers gathered at low tide. I helped by holding the sack the abalone was put into and helping to take it back up the steep cliffs to the car. It was

always an adventure, and we'd be home by breakfast.

Mamma, my sisters, and I gathered seaweed off the rocks at other times. Dad would rock fish for bull head (cabezona) during the day or surf fish at night. Those times, we would camp on the beach and roast potatoes, tuptups (similar to pocket bread), flank skirts, and abalone, all cooked on hot coals. The meat was sometimes cooked on a grill we brought along. The coffee was boiled. Cowboy coffee my dad called it. It was terrible.

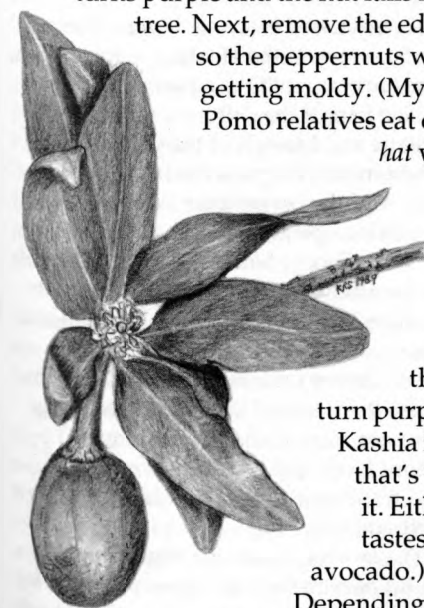
We'd drive the long way through Coleman Valley, near Bodega where daddy grew up, to catch a breath-taking view of the ocean from iris-clad coastal hills. For this too is a part of the experience of knowing one's place in the order of things.

Daddy loved to hunt, too. But I was never a part of that experience. Only the boys hunted. I fondly remember my younger brother Doug shooting robins with his new .22, and mamma proudly cleaning the birds and roasting them on a spit. YAH WE. Thank you. Delicious, lovely birds.

I especially want to thank my cousin Olive (Jack) Fulwider for teaching me how to make *béhe*, and for the many other things she has taught and shared with me about her life and her remembrances of our old people.

### BÉHE

Collect ripe peppernuts in the fall when the husk turns purple and the nut falls from the bay tree. Next, remove the edible husk (*hat*) so the peppernuts will dry without getting moldy. (My Dry Creek Pomo relatives eat only the tips of



*hat* when that part has turned light yellow from green. Later on, all the husk will turn purple, and my Kashia friends tell me that's the time to eat it. Either way, *hat* tastes like a peppery avocado.)

Depending on the weather, peppernuts take several days to several weeks to dry. When peppernuts are dried and ready to be roasted preheat oven to 350 de-



grees. Then shell the dried peppernuts; the shells are thin and easy to remove by lightly striking with a rock or small mallet.

The peppernut has two halves. These usually separate when the shell is cracked. If they don't separate, pull them apart by hand. An almost invisible parchment between the kernels will separate naturally from the peppernut if it has been properly dried; if it doesn't separate, it can be removed by winnowing or by rubbing off by hand.

Place peppernuts on a cookie sheet and roast until they are a rich, dark chocolate brown. When completely roasted, they will look almost burnt. This takes about 20 to 30 minutes. After removing them from the oven, immediately place the hot peppernuts into a blender or grinder. Grind them to a fine, flour-like consistency, then pour them into a bowl.

Season the peppernut flour with sea salt (*tako*) to taste, then knead it while still hot. At first, the nut flour will be powdery and dry. But as the kneading continues, a natural oil in the peppernuts will be released. Once oily, the nuts can be molded into balls about the size of a tablespoon.

As the peppernut balls cool, they begin to harden. When completely hardened, the balls are ready to eat.

Traditionally, *béhe* (peppernut balls, Dry Creek Pomo) is eaten wrapped inside a thick bunch or ball of *ohso* (sweet clover). Fresh endive or green leaf lettuce serve as good substitutes for sweet clover.

Kathleen Smith (Bodega Miwok/Dry Creek Pomo) is an artist who loves to cook. She is writing and illustrating a cookbook about the Indian foods she grew up with.

Lucy Smith and Steven Smith, Jr., spreading seaweed to dry, ca 1960s. Photo by Nancy (Smith) Napolitan.



Collecting abalone, ca mid-1950s. Left to right: Manuel Cordove, Steven Smith, Jr., Steven Russell Smith, Russell Smith, and Stanley Smith. Photo by Kathleen Smith.