

Hoponi Hvshi: Cooking month is the final month of the Choctaw calendar

This article is the final installment in the series entitled "A Year in the Life". Focusing on the time period around AD 1700, this 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. This information is excerpted from a book, soon to be published by the Choctaw Nation, which is entitled "Choctaw Food: Remembering the Land, Rekindling Ancient Knowledge."

The final month in the Choctaw calendar is Hoponi Hvshi, Cooking Month, roughly corresponding to September. By this time of year, temperatures slowly begin to cool, bringing the first breaths of relief from the heat and humidity of the previous months. Cooking month, like some of the other Choctaw months, has a name that is a bit of a paradox. This is the season when the main crops were harvested. The name reportedly refers not to those crops, but to the stored foods left over from the previous harvest that had to be cooked and eaten up in order to make room for the new.

By this season, the corn in the fields would have fully matured, along with the beans and squash. Prior to the main harvest, Tanchi Nuna, the Ripe Corn dances were held. These were conducted only by the men. The celebration lasted 4 days, and was accompanied by feasting. The harvest of the communal fields was referred to as tanchi hoyo, meaning literally looking for corn. Like planting the communal fields, it was done cooperatively by the community as a whole. This harvest was often prolific. Workers picked the corn ears, put them into pack baskets, and then dumped them out into piles called vlhpikvchi. People cooperated to quickly prepare these ears of corn by pulling the husks back and removing the silk, a process known as luffi. The loose husks were used to braid the ears together into long strips, known as shikowa. These strips of corn ears were hung up in the sun to finish drying. When the corn was dried, much of it would be shelled, a process called chilukka. The loose, dried corn kernels would be stored in large bags, bahta chito.

Sometimes, corn was also preserved for storage through the following process. First, it was thoroughly dried in the sun. Then, the dried corn was laid in a series of piles, each made up of one or two pack basket loads. A layer of dry grass was placed on top of the piles. A mortar made of clay mixed with dry grass was used to coat the piles. Corn stored in this way would remain fresh until the next harvest. Most of the stored corn would be eaten during the upcoming year. Seed corn, in the form of ears representing the ideal characteristics for a given corn variety, was stored on the cob, with the husks of the ears tied together. This seed was called pehna.

As the corn was picked and put away, so was the rest of the harvest. Immature green beans were eaten or threaded onto a string and hung up for storage. The dried beans were removed from their pods and put aside for storage. When the bean poles were taken down, the vines were left in the field, in recognition that they provided something (nitrogen) to the soil that the corn plants took out. Winter squashes were cut into thin rings, and suspended on racks where they were smoked and dried for storage.

Families kept a portion of the harvest from the communal fields for their own use, and they deposited as much as they saw fit into community store houses. This food was used to serve visitors who came to the community, to provision war parties, and to assist families who had run out of food.

Dried produce was stored in corncribs called kanchvk or picha. These structures measured about eight feet by ten feet, and were raised off the ground to make it harder for rodents to get into the harvest. People entered them by means of a ladder. The process of filling the corncrib with the harvest was known as kanchvk fohki. The floors were covered in big, heavy bags of dried corn kernels and beans, bags of raisins, and parched nuts stored from previous seasons. From the rafters, strings of pumpkins slices and green beans were hung. The main enemies to this scene were the rodents that the rattlesnakes had missed, along with corn mold hakbona and weevils hapvlak.



Image by Ruby Bolding

No greater food security exists than being able to look at the ceiling of your home and see a year's supply of food stores, put up by you and your family, and to look out and see storage buildings full of the same. Most years, that is what Choctaw people had to look forward to during Cooking Month.