



FOODS OF THE AMERICAS

NATIVE RECIPES AND TRADITIONS



Fernando and Marlene Divina

and the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian

Corn Is Life

ONE OF MY FAVORITE HOPI FOODS is *tupevu*, freshly roasted sweet corn. In late summer, after the harvest, many Hopi households prepare to roast sweet corn. The roasting of sweet corn is usually done once a year, to cook and preserve a full harvest to be used throughout the year. Sweet corn is the only kind of Hopi corn that is cooked in this way: steamed in a sealed pit. The pit is roughly three to four feet wide and can be about six feet deep. It's big enough to hold a whole truckload of corn.

The day before cooking, while the pit is being heated with fire for several hours, two perfect ears of corn are sought. When found they are prepared in a special way to represent the mother corn and father corn. When the fire has died down, the mother corn is

placed in the pit first, at the bottom. Then the hundreds of ears of corn from the year's harvest are thrown into the pit. The father corn is added last to the top of the pile. The pit is then sealed with mud so the heat cannot escape. The heat within the pit will release the natural moisture found between the husks and kernels, steaming the corn neatly within its husk. We have to wait until the morning of the next day for the corn to be ready.

It is told that when we, the Hopi, arrived at the place we now live, corn kernels and a planting stick were the only things given to us for our survival. Therefore, corn to Hopi people literally represents life, and the use of it within Hopi culture is ubiquitous.

Dry farming is still practiced at Hopi. Planting and maintaining a cornfield usually begins in the early spring and is done by Hopi men, mostly by hand. In spring they work to keep the field free of weeds and rodents. As the plants sprout through the dry sand, these seedlings represent new life, such as children. Throughout the summer months, the men laboriously care for them as such, hoeing weeds sometimes daily, singing to the corn plants, praying for their continued life and growth, and praying for the moisture that is needed in the arid landscape of Hopi. Once harvested, the corn becomes the property of their wives or mothers. It is they who will preserve, prepare, and use it throughout the year for meals and ceremony.

Corn serves as the main staple, with many different dishes and breads made from it. Besides sweet corn, the other kinds of corn planted by the Hopi are blue, white, red, purple, yellow, and speckled, which is a combination of several colors. Corn is also symbolic of the various cardinal directions. A perfect ear will represent the spiritual mother of a new baby, or a new



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≡ Harvested Hopi corn of different colors set out to dry.

initiate in a ceremony. White corn is ground into a coarse meal and ritually prepared for use in prayer. Finely ground meal from roasted sweet corn is called *toosi* and is mixed with water to create *qōmi*, a baked dough that is especially important for an unmarried girl and her family because it will be used in the girl's engagement ceremony. Large amounts of blue and white cornmeal are used when a woman gets married in a traditional Hopi wedding.

Before the sun has risen the next day, along with others in my family, I awake and go outside our house, bleary-eyed and chilled. We hover around the pit to warm ourselves. The smell of the sweet corn, the smoke left over from the fire, and the early morning air rouse me. The seal of the pit is broken, and the father corn is retrieved. When its husks are peeled back, everyone gathers to take a bite of the father corn. This corn ritual creates what it is meant to: an increase of appetite and a renewal of strength. But coming together to share this one ear of corn also signifies family unity and is meant to eliminate any divisiveness.

Soon the men begin to empty the pit of corn, taking turns jumping into the pit as the hole deepens. They sometimes compete to see who can stay in the longest and retrieve the most corn. It is fun to see them get sweaty from the heat and black from the soot, each trying to outdo the other. Outside the pit, the mound of steaming corn grows larger, until finally the mother corn is retrieved. I join the others to repeat the shared eating of the mother corn, knowing that this signifies the strength of both parents to a family. Finally, we are allowed to pick a full ear for ourselves. My hands turn black from the charred husks as I peel back each layer. The heat rises off the cob and my hands are warmed

as I take a small piece to personally feed the spirits. As the early morning light slowly turns into full daylight, I eat to my heart's content, enjoying the smoky sweetness.

Askwali (thank you)!

—Susan Secakuku

Susan Secakuku (Hopi) was born and raised on the Hopi reservation in Arizona. She is a member of the Hopi Butterfly Clan. She received her B.S. from Arizona State University and her M.A. in Museum Studies from George Washington University. She worked for six years in the Community Services department of the National Museum of the American Indian. Now based in the Hopi community, she is an independent consultant who works with Native American tribes on museum operations and cultural projects.



☰ Susan Secakuku's father, Ferrell Secakuku, checks his corn plants at the beginning of harvest time.

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