Juliet Blankespoor finds mouth-watering ways to enjoy the acorn.

Most of us descend from acorn eating cultures. Historically a staple food in Europe, Asia, North Africa, the Middle East and North America, acorns once made up half of the diet for many of the native peoples of California. Acorns have been a “grain from the tree” for many because of their abundance, nutrition and sustainability. A mature, healthy oak forest can produce as much as 6,000 pounds of acorns per acre, requires little to no cultivation, and can grow on and stabilize the steep banks so prevalent in our mountainous terrain. Acorns are predominately a carbohydrate source with fat percentages reaching seventeen percent and protein percentages around four percent. Surprisingly, they are also a good source of vitamins A and C.

Before it’s ready to eat, this edible nut of oak trees (Quercus spp.) must often be processed to leach out tannins, a mouth-puckering substance also found in a strong cup of black tea. Tannins interfere with digestion by binding to proteins in the gastrointestinal tract and must be consumed moderately. Certain oak species contain more tannins than others, and there is even a wide range of tannin levels within individuals of the same species. Finding a “sweet” tree is helpful, as one tree can produce all the acorns you need for a year, and that tree can be revisited every fall.

There are two major tribes of oak species, the red oak group and the white oak group. The red oak tribe contains species like the scarlet oak, black oak and red oak, all with high tannin acorns. The white oak tribe contains the species with more palatable acorns. In our area, I have found the white oak (Quercus alba) to be the mildest, with the chestnut oak (Quercus prinus) a close second. That said, I still prefer chestnut oak acorns because of their larger size and greater ease in shelling. But don’t confuse the chestnut oak with its close relative the...
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2. Let your acorns cool until you can comfortably hold them in your hands. Take the broad flat end of a very small log and hit them on a cutting board to crack open the shell. Peel the remaining shell by hand and place the kernels aside. This is the most work-intensive step and can take a while if you have a good amount of nuts. Children love this activity and will go at it for a surprisingly long time. Once you have your acorns shelled, you can keep them whole or chop them up coarsely. Some folks run them through a hand-cranked grinder at this point. I prefer to keep them whole, as they seem to lose less of their good oils to the leach water and drain more easily if they’re not so mealy.

3. Bring two large pots to a boil. Place your shelled acorns into your first pot of just boiled water and turn down the back pot; you won’t need it for a couple of minutes. Boil your acorns until the water turns dark, probably five minutes or so. Strain in a large colander and use the second pot of reserved boiling water to pour over the acorns for a second round of boiling. Repeat until the acorns are less astringent; you may need to follow this leaching process two to four times depending on the species of acorn.

4. What to do with the leached acorns? Chop them to a coarse meal and add them to a dish immediately or save them in the fridge for a couple days. To store them longer, freeze or dry them in a dehydrator or in an oven set on low with the door ajar. Many people prefer roasted acorns as it brings out their rich sweetness. To roast them, place the dry acorn meal on a metal cookie sheet in the oven at 175 degrees.
and stir them often until they are brown and your kitchen smells like yummy forest goodness. Store the fully dehydrated meal in a closed jar until ready to use.

I add acorn meal to chili, soups, pancakes, cookies, oatmeal and breads. I generally add acorn meal in one-fourth proportion to the flour in breads, as it will not rise on its own. For a surefire way to please even the most finicky of eaters, replace nuts with acorns in any zucchini bread recipe, or give this cornbread recipe a try.

**SWEET POTATO ACORN CORNBREAD**

This is a dense, moist and nutritious cornbread that makes excellent trail food—it’s filling and compact.

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Ingredients:
1 ½ cup whole wheat pastry flour
1 ½ cup cornmeal
4 tsp baking powder
1 tsp salt
¼ cup sucanat sugar (optional)
2 cups mashed sweet potato
2 eggs
½ cup milk (rice, soy, cow or goat)
4 tbs olive oil
2 cups acorn meal (finely chopped)

Instructions:
Preheat the oven to 400 degrees and steam two to three large sweet potatoes, then peel and mash them. Mix together the dry ingredients: flour, cornmeal, salt, baking powder and sugar. Separately mix the wet ingredients: eggs, sweet potatoes, acorns, milk and oil. Mix the dry and wet ingredients and pour into a greased muffin tin or two bread pans (under two inches deep) and bake for twenty minutes or until done. The inside will still be moist after it is cooked.

Vary this basic recipe by adding cranberries or creating a savory cheese and jalapeno version.

Juliet Blankespoor is a mother, herbalist, botanist and organic gardener who has been sharing her love of plants by teaching about medicinal herbs and botany for over 15 years. She runs the Chestnut School of Herbal Medicine (http://chestnutherbs.com), which specializes in all-outdoor, hands-on herb courses; she may be reached at 828-683-5233.
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