



# Harvester of the Earth's Treasurers

Sandra Lewis

## Cooking with Geraldine R. Aguilla

Geraldine “Geri” Aguilla, a Tohono O’odham, lives in Santa Rosa, the village where she was raised. Her family consisted of her father, mother, grandmother and three siblings. Geri has had many teachers in her life. Many lessons were learned before she became the head cook at San Simo:n School (**Note:** The marking “:” denotes a long vowel sound.) on the Tohono O’odham Reservation in the Sonoran Desert of southern Arizona.

Geri’s education began at birth. Her grandmother was her teacher. She told Geri stories of Tohono O’odham legends, guided her in all the intricacies of basket making and patiently nudged her along while showing her how to form the round, thin tortilla (**cemaik**), a main food in their diet. Geri also learned how to plant and harvest a garden that included, among other things, corn, squash, sugar cane, wheat, chili peppers, watermelon, honey dew melon and different kinds of beans.

The family used the fruit of the giant cactus, the saguaro, just as the Tohono O’odham do today. Tohono O’odham women pick the fruit, high on top of the cactus, with a long pole made from the cactus giant ribs. They call this pole **kui’ipad**. The fruit is called **bahidaj**. When the fruit falls to the ground, it breaks open and the Tohono O’odham scoop out the red pulp. They throw the skin to the ground, because they believe such an act brings rain. The women boil the sweet juice drained from the fruit into a thick syrup. The people use the syrup for making the wine that is drunk only during the rain ceremony. The rest of the pulp and seeds are dried and separated. The women make jams from the pulp. They grind the seeds of the fruit into flour. Sometimes the Tohono O’odham eat the seeds with syrup.

The women also gather the cholla buds (**cheolim**), the first spring plants, before the blossoms open into a flower. The thorns which cover the buds are brushed off. In season, the buds are eaten fresh. The rest are boiled until tender, spread thinly out in the sun to dry, and then stored in containers that keep the food fresh for months.

The prickly pear fruit is made into jams and jellies. The spines and seeds are removed before they are prepared. The Tohono O’odham still use the tender young leaves of wild spinach, pigweed and careless weed as salad greens. Wild onion and wild potato are also eaten.

Geri began her formal education at Santa Rosa Boarding School. While attending Phoenix Indian High School in Arizona, she was required to board at the school and did not get to go home often. During this period, she began to receive training in nursing and nutrition. She went back to Santa Rosa but continued to take nursing and nutrition classes and had extensive training at many locations throughout Arizona.

Geri’s first job was as a nurse’s aide at Luke Air Force Base in Phoenix, Arizona. She was there for a year and then was hired at the hospital in Sells as a nurse’s aide. Next, Geri went to work for the Tohono O’odham tribe as a nutrition Aide. While she had that job, she worked with diabetic adults and teenagers. She worked to change their eating habits so they would become healthy and live healthy. Lack of funding lead to Geri being laid off from her job. Her next venture was as a cook in the Santa Rosa Head Start Program. While working with Head Start, Geri received more training. In addition to studying in Arizona, Geri took classes in Oklahoma and New Mexico.

After two years, Geri started as a part-time cook at San Simo:n School. One year later she became head cook and has been at the school for seven years. Geri is responsible for ordering,

cycle menu. That menu can be used, but other food can be substituted as long as that food has the same nutrients. When Geri is asked about “junk foods,” she is quick to tell us that hamburgers, pizza and corn dogs are nutritious!

One of the changes that Geri has seen in recent years is less sodium as salt in the foods. Other spices can be substituted for salt. Sugar usage has also decreased. Prunes and dates are sometimes substituted for sugar. Also, the children are given the choice of whole or 2% milk. One of Geri's goals is to decrease the amount of food that children throw away and increase the amount of food being eaten. With the children’s ideas and her nutritional knowledge, Geri can create menus balancing the children’s wishes with the need to eat healthy and nutritious food.

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### **Discussion Questions**

1. Describe Geri’s childhood.
2. How was her grandmother important to her education?
3. Describe the job of a head cook.
4. How was nutrition training important to Geri?
5. Why is the saguaro cactus important?
6. If you were the head cook, what would you serve students in your school?
7. Why does Geri have to think about salt and sugar when planning meals?

# Science

## Bearded Breads

### Objective:

Students will learn about molds and their effects on white bread and tortillas.

### Materials:

- white bread from a commercial bakery and, if possible, homemade (without preservatives)
- cemaik (tortilla)
- Ziploc™ bags
- chart paper
- markers

### Exploration:

Have students examine slices of homemade and commercial white bread and tortillas to note physical characteristics. Sprinkle a few drops of water on both the bread and tortillas and bag separately, sealing tightly. Place in a warm place. Record changes in physical appearance daily for a week.

### Seminar:

Suggested Questions:

- What does the bread look like? the tortilla?
- How have the bread and tortilla changed during the week?
- Are they now edible?
- Are they soft or hard?
- What about changes in their color?
- What differences do you observe in the homemade and commercial products?
- What caused them to look the way they do?

### Invention:

Students observe mold which is a fuzzy substance that grows when bread is dampened. **Mold** is a living thing that breaks down organic substances. **Organic** means something that is living or was made from living things. The flour or corn in the bread and tortilla came from a living wheat or corn plant. Molds growing on food cause the food to decay or rot and become inedible.

### Application:

1. Put white bread and a tortilla in separate Ziploc™ bags and dampen both. Put white bread and a piece of tortilla in a Ziploc™ with no water added. Hypothesize about both pairs of bread and tortilla groups, both breads. Chart daily results with pictures. Put class into four groups and each group can

piece of bread in a bag untouched by human hands. Have a student with especially dirty hands (check right after recess) wipe his or her hands on the bread like a towel and place the bread in a bag. Have that same student wash and dry his or her hands thoroughly with soap and water and then wipe hands on another piece of bread. Mark each bag: untouched by human hands, dirty hands, or clean hands. Hypothesize the results. Check bags daily. (Note: This lesson helps the students to remember to wash their hands before going to lunch.) Since homemade breads do not include preservatives, the results of this experiment will be observed sooner if homemade bread is used.

