



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.

A special “Thanks” to Patricia Lopez, a Tohono O’odham, who helped with many Tohono O’odham vocabulary words and recipes.

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?

Language Arts

Food for Thought

Objective:

Students will learn to recognize English and Tohono O'odham words for beans, chili pepper, corn, onions, spinach, squash/pumpkin, and watermelon. alternatively, this lesson can be adapted to teach students words from their own community's language.

Materials:

- felt board(s)
- pictures of foods with Velcro™ on back
- flash cards with Velcro™ on back

Procedure:

Ask students if they know any words in another language. Ask them if they know anyone who knows how to speak another language. Suggest that it might be fun to learn some words that Geri Aguilla uses.

Teach the following Tohono O'odham words to the students using a felt board and pictures and words of the foods with Velcro™ on the back.

1. Show the picture.
2. Say the English word.
3. Say the word in Tohono O'odham.
4. Say the English word and show the written English word.
5. Say the word in Tohono O'odham and show the written word.



Word Reference

English

beans
chili pepper
corn
onions
spinach
squash/pumpkin
watermelon
wild potato
sugar cane

O'odham

mu:ñ
ko'okol
hu:ñ
siwol
i:wak
ha:l
gepi
s-had
ka:ña

Note: The marking " : " denotes a long vowel sound.

In cooperative learning pairs, draw each food picture and label in both the English and Tohono O'odham languages. Make pictures into books.

