

Borderland foods, Tohono O'odham Style

By Deborah Neff

I cannot think of the food traditions of the borderlands without thinking of Frances Manual. Frances was a “Desert Indian” of Tohono O’odham (“Papago”) and Seri descent, from both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border. She was born in 1912 in a brush house in the midst of the Sonoran Desert where she was raised by aging grandparents. When I met her, Frances was already an elder: a renowned basket weaver, storyteller and really great cook. Frances defied labels and boundaries by the way she lived and what she ate, collecting foods like she did stories and jokes, resulting in the kind of mixing and blending that defines Southwest border history. She had learned the ways of her people, the Mexicans, and the *Milga'an* (Americans).

Although Francis lived north of the Arizona-Sonora border, her parents came from both sides, and from multiple cultures that shared elements of the same border cuisine. But their diet was more than a “cuisine” in the modern sense of the term—it was a way of life. Frances and her people gathered traditional foods from the desert; they ate beans and large flour tortillas cooked in a Mexican-style, out door kitchen; they enjoyed *chile con carne* on special days, prepared with beef from their own cows. Many of Frances’ people still live on both sides of the international boundary line, and, until recently, passed easily through local trade routes and border crossings between the two countries.

The Spaniards called the area *Pimeria Alta* or *Papagueria*: It was a land that seamlessly stretched from Southern Arizona far into Sonora, Mexico. The Tohono O’odham, or Desert People, have lived on this land for untold hundreds (perhaps thousands) of years, and, having lived, until recently, self-sufficiently in the desert, have a deep and holy connection to it. The O’odham traveled through diverse terrain, with their summer and winter homes, where they hunted, farmed and gathered wild fruits, roots and greens. They have traded with Mexicans, with O’odham living across the border and later, with *Milga'an*, Chinese and others in historic Tucson. Through these many connections, Frances’ foods, like her life, mirror the cultural mixing, fluidity, and dynamic creativity of the Southwest border region.

Frances’ mother was from Mexico, but Frances never knew her, she said, as she died when Frances was only a year old. Frances was raised by her grandparents in the ancient ways of gathering and flash-flood and riverine farming, and, later, cattle ranching. Before they had wells, water was scarce; the Tohono O’odham developed styles of farming, irrigation and food preparation that required little water.

Plants were sung to. The people prayed and danced for rain. Seasonal growing and gathering cycles took place according to the moon. Along with farming, Frances’ family gathered a wide variety of edibles from the desert, and hunted deer, rabbit, and other small game. Taught by her grandmother, Frances grew up grinding wheat—introduced by the Spaniards—on the *metate*; making large flour tortillas and preparing cholla cactus buds and saguaro cactus seeds in the traditional way.

Frances' grandparents grew many kinds of food, but their mainstay, like the mainstay of the region, was a combination of corn, beans and squash. Another major staple was a parched-and-ground seed and bean gruel, or *atole*. Frances told me that when it seemed as though there was nothing to eat, her grandmother would go out and gather the makings of something so good, it was "gourmet"—like the "spring spinach" Frances and I loved to gather and eat with wild onions and eggs in the morning. Or, she said, her grandmother would pull out something from buried storage—buried under the desert earth, then sun drying it or baking it in ashes before eating. Sweet fruits, jams and honey from the saguaro and prickly pear were special treats; and harvesting and preparing them was a lot of work.

As Frances grew up in her desert home her social circles widened. Frances would travel with her grandparents to Tucson—a day's trip, in horse-drawn wagon—for supplies and to sell wood. They'd go every month or so to buy flour, coffee and sugar; often they'd buy groceries at "the Chinaman's store." And once in a while they'd buy a steak, French bread or a can of pork and beans. But Frances' favorites were pinto beans, flour tortillas and chile, and the old desert foods, cholla buds and tepary beans.

Frances writes in our book, *Desert Indian Woman*, "In 1941 a bad year came. There was no rain, everything was dry, the cattle were dying and so we sold most of our cattle and we had to move to Tucson to find work." The Bad Year, and many more like it, initiated the gradual disappearance of traditional ways of life, as Frances, her husband, Jose, along with other O'odham, began a life as urban Indians, working in town for the Milga'an. Frances and Jose returned to the reservation only on weekends. Working as a "domestic" and selling tortillas, Frances began to eat fewer of the farmed, gathered and hunted foods from the desert, and instead turned toward commodity foods, beef and Mexican and American foods that were popular at the time.

For the many years I knew her, Frances was generally open to eating new foods, but she preferred beans and ate them every day. Her daily fare also often consisted of several of the old, desert foods—cholla buds, tepary beans, squash and gruels; these were savored, when you can get them. Frances also frequently consumed high cholesterol and low-value foods that were brought by the Spaniards—lard, beef, white flour, sugar, and coffee, and, sometimes, canned commodity foods introduced by the government.

Canned, commodity squash, prepared with cheese, made frequent appearances at meals; pinto beans replaced tepary. Because of these and other dietary changes, Frances and some her family have lived with debilitating diabetes—a rampant problem among her people. But even when she didn't feel well, Frances loved to cook. For Frances, food was about sharing with loved ones. Central to Oodham *himdag* (lifeway/traditions); food is a form of hospitality and commensality. Food mediated Frances' relationships, and it mediated ours: food and water.

Frances taught me about water, too. Each time I turn on the kitchen faucet, I recall her strong words: "Don't waste water! We live in the desert!" Frances told me that water was

so important in the Sonoran Desert that her husband instructed her, “When I die be sure to put out some water for me [my ghost]!” Frances laughed, “I wonder if he is drinking water now!”

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