

Nakonabi
Chokecherries
Cha'pa

There is no fruit more plentiful on the northern prairie of Montana, North Dakota and southern Canada than the chokecherry, cha'pa. It grows along rivers, creeks, ponds, and other places where water settles annually. Bears, buffalo, birds, and Indians harvested the chokecherry. Consequently, the relatively large, hard, non-digestible seed has been widely scattered, making the food available in most places the Indians traveled.

The chokecherry is still used in great quantities by the Assiniboine, especially in the ceremonial feeds, but also in jelly and syrup.

Once, it was the job of the women and children to harvest the fruit in rawhide containers. Today it's common for the whole family to pick chokecherries using metal and plastic buckets. Chokecherries were sometimes dried whole but were often pounded between specially shaped stones. Placing the mortar stone on a hide and using another stone fastened to a wooden handle, the women would pound the cherries until the seeds were smashed. The chokecherries were then formed into patties, laid on a hide and dried in the sun. The process required a good deal of attention as the patties had to be turned over several times. The chokecherries then were packed away for winter in the rawhide containers and carefully kept away from any moisture. Today the cherries are frozen at home, and when mashed cherries are needed, they are finely ground in a grinder.

So important to the Assiniboine was the chokecherry that the ripening of the fruit was used in their reckoning of time. The eighth moon of the Assiniboine calendar is known as Black Cherry Moon.

RECIPES

Chokecherries are harvested when they are black (i.e., at the sweetest stage). Fresh, black cherries are eaten raw, made into soup, or pounded to make cherries in grease or pemmican.

1. The chokecherry soup- Fresh chokecherries or chokecherries dried whole are used to make chokecherry soup. If you're using dried chokecherries, soak them in water overnight. If you are using fresh chokecherries, just add water. Boil the cherries, add flour or starch to thicken and add sugar to sweeten. (If you want truly traditional soup, use wild turnip flour to thicken and honey to sweeten.) Chokecherry soups can also be made in the same way using ground or mashed chokecherries.
2. Chokecherries and grease- If you're using dried chokecherry patties, soak them in water some overnight. Fresh ground and mashed chokecherries can be used without soaking. Mix grease (rendered animal fat or marrowbone grease) with the mashed chokecherries and, if you desire, add sweetener.
3. Pemmican- Fresh chokecherries were used in pemmican. (If the chokecherry patties were used, they had to first be soaked overnight.) Finely mashed cherries are mixed with dried meat that has also been mashed. Next, render fat and pour it over the mixture. Some people form it into balls, as rendered fat and marrow bone grease will keep its shape.