

# **Anthropologist's Journal**

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## **Shawee: A Kumeyday Meal**

**SAN DIEGO MUSEUM OF MAN  
LANGUAGE ARTS AND ANTHROPOLOGY  
A LITERACY PROGRAM FUNDED BY THE DE FALCO FOUNDATION**

# Introduction

## Cooking and Culture

Everyone knows we need food to survive. But food also has to taste good, otherwise no one would eat it. A lot of food also has to be cooked in special ways for it to be safe to eat, not to mention to make it flavorful. We don't just want to eat, we want to enjoy our food and have fun eating it.

When you sit down to eat dinner, have you ever wondered where all the food on your plate came from and how it got there? Chances are it came from the grocery store, and was cooked in a special way. Or maybe you're at a restaurant, where cooks make food for you. Have you ever had Mexican food? Chinese food? Japanese food? Texas barbecue? Each of those types of food comes from a different culture, is cooked in a different way, and tastes different from any other type of food. In fact, by learning more about food and how food is prepared, we can learn a lot about different cultures.



## Initial Questions

What are some of the foods you eat that are from different cultures?  
Try to include the culture that the food is from.

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Where does the food you eat come from?

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# Reading Selection 1

## Collecting Acorns

What would happen if there weren't any grocery stores where you could buy food, or restaurants to make food for us? Where would we get our food then? The Kumeyaay, an American Indian culture living in the San Diego region, have an answer to that question. The Kumeyaay knew how to get food long before there were grocery stores or restaurants. They got food from the forests, the rivers, the oceans, and even the desert.

The Kumeyaay liked one food in particular, and continue to enjoy it today. It is shawee, a dish made from acorns. For the Kumeyaay, acorns traditionally were a staple food. This means that they ate acorns a lot of the time. Examples of staple foods eaten today include wheat, corn, and rice. Today the Kumeyaay still prepare shawee for special occasions.

Did you know acorns come from oak trees? In San Diego, there are two main types of oak trees. One is called the Coast Live Oak and can be found throughout San Diego. The other is called the Black Oak, and is found only in mountains. Acorns from both these trees are good, but the Black Oak acorns taste better.

Part of the reason acorns were a staple food for the Kumeyaay was because there are so many acorns to be found. Most years, the Kumeyaay would find more acorns than they could possibly eat in one year. But instead of throwing them away or leaving them on the ground, they would store them for the future. After all, you never know—next year the oak trees might not leave as many acorns behind. Besides, since acorns can last for five years or more and not go bad, you can store them for a long time. To store acorns for long periods of time, the Kumeyaay would build large baskets called granaries and fill them with acorns. These would help protect the acorns from animals. Do you know any animals that like to eat acorns?

# Activity 1

## Vocabulary

Write the word, used in Reading Selection 1, next to the sentence that describes its meaning.

\_\_\_\_\_ : A food that is eaten a lot, maybe even at every meal.

\_\_\_\_\_ : These come from oak trees and are made into shawee.

\_\_\_\_\_ : The acorns from this tree were the tastiest.

\_\_\_\_\_ : These oak trees are found all over San Diego.

\_\_\_\_\_ : Large baskets built to store acorns for a long time.



## Reading Selection 2

### Grinding Acorns

As you may know, acorns are very hard. The part you want to eat—called the nut—is in the middle and is covered with a hard shell. There is also a reddish skin in between the shell and the nut. Both the shell and the skin have to be removed before acorns can be turned into food.

To remove the shells, acorns were first cracked open with a hammerstone. After the shells were picked off, only the nut and the skin would be left. The acorns were rubbed with the fingers to loosen the skins and placed in a shallow basket called a winnowing tray. This tray was then swirled around gently. The wind would carry off the skins, leaving only the nuts behind.

The acorn nuts were then ground into a very fine powder. Have you ever felt what wheat flour feels like? It's kind of like that. The Kumeyaay used two tools called a mortar and a pestle to grind acorns into a flour-like substance called meal. The acorns would be placed in the mortar to be ground using the pestle.



## Activity 2

### Fill-in-the-blank

The following is a brief summary of the above passage. Using words from the above reading, fill-in the correct words in the passage below.

Grinding acorns takes many steps. The first step in grinding acorns is to remove the \_\_\_\_\_ by cracking the acorns with a \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_. Next, the \_\_\_\_\_ can be removed by swirling the acorns in  
a \_\_\_\_\_ tray. Then the acorns are ground into a fine powder,  
also called \_\_\_\_\_, using a \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

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Now, go back and review Reading Selection 1. Collecting Acorns.

Write a short summary of that section in the space below using the words you wrote in Activity 1. Vocabulary.

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## Reading Selection 3

### Eating Acorns

I bet you didn't know that you could eat acorns. But don't rush out to your nearest oak tree, grab some acorns, and pop 'em in your mouth. You'll probably just spit them out if you did. Acorns taste bitter if they're not cooked properly. In fact they have something called tannic acid in them that makes them inedible. So how can the Kumeyaay eat them? They invented a way to get that tannic acid out by pouring warm water over the ground acorn meal, which is placed in a loosely woven basket that lets the water drain out. The tannic acid dissolves in the water and is washed out of the acorn meal in this process, which is known as leaching.

One of the reasons the Kumeyaay had to grind acorns into a fine meal was to let the water leach out the tannic acid. Once the acid was removed, they could add more water and cook the acorn meal to make mush. A special pottery cooking pot called an olla was used to cook the mush over a fire. A wooden stirring paddle was used to stir the mush as it cooked. This edible acorn mush is called shawee.

Shawee was also prepared by letting the hot mush cool and solidify, when it was cut into pieces to be eaten cold. This is a popular way to prepare shawee today—the mush is spread in a cake pan and cut into squares when cool, like brownies!



## Activity 3

### Short answer

Using information provided in the previous reading, answer the following questions in complete sentences. Be sure to include the words listed in parentheses in your answer.

After grinding acorns into meal, what else did the Kumeyaay have to do before they could cook and eat the ground acorns? (tannic acid, leaching)

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How was acorn mush cooked? (olla, paddle)

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## Other Activities

Write a recipe for making shawee. Read examples of recipes from cookbooks to learn about how recipes are written. Be sure to include all the ingredients, equipment, and the steps followed from start to finish.





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