



Connecting kids to wild foods from their local environment



Jessie Ferraro *AmeriCorps Farm to School Program*

Farm to School is an AmeriCorps program designed to promote connections between local farmers, schools and students to increase the awareness and consumption of locally produced food. AmeriCorps members in the Farm to School program also work as teaching assistants helping to expose more students to locally grown food and share why it's important to be connected to it, usually through school gardening projects.

The Farm to School program at the Kickapoo Valley Forest School is more like Forest to School – connecting students directly to producers like the Red and White Oak, Black Walnut, White Pine and Staghorn Sumac. Children are introduced to these plants and soon become intimately associated with their location, habits, friends and idiosyncrasies. Singing songs of thanks to them for the gifts they give that nourish our bodies, minds, spirits and hearts we celebrate together the precious moments of communion with Nature.

The first of these connections was made with the Oak Trees that kindly provided a shady lunchtime reprieve from the hot Autumn Sun, a distant memory now tickled by the frigid snowflakes kissing our cheeks. It seemed one day that the ground beneath our bottoms was a little bumpier than usual and sure enough, a thickening blanket of acorns boldly made our acquaintance. Here began the arduous adventure of the making of the acorn pancake.

We began to collect them, to admire them, to imagine the longings of the little roots sprouting out – the desire to become a giant tree instantly understood so that some children had no want to eat something with a will of its own. Compromising with the promise to leave some to grow into trees we commenced with the harvest which ended with a playful song to our tree friends and to ourselves.

I am an acorn, I fell from a tree, I'm lying on the ground, sleeping safe and sound. In the Spring I'll awaken, and my roots will come out, and then my leaves will open – from the ground I'll sprout up!

*This song is about the Red Oak Acorns who like to sleep through the winter while the White Oak Acorns typically sprout in the fall, perhaps to become less palatable to the squirrels and other aficionados. We washed the acorns and dried them overnight in a dehydrator to make the cracking and peeling process a little smoother. In a mortar and pestle we cracked the nuts and peeled off the shells while sorting through to see which ones looked tasty for eating and which ones had been already claimed by the acorn weevil or some hungry fungus. The acorns then had to be boiled several times and strained to remove the bitter tannins and then roasted to draw out the latent sweetness. A food processor made quick work of the grounding and a suspended window screen covered with paper towels acted as an air dryer. Finally, the acorn meal was ready to become a pancake:

- 2 C finely ground leached acorn meal
- 3 TB honey
- 1 C unbleached flour
- 3 eggs
- 1 TB baking powder
- 1 ½ C milk
- 1 tsp salt
- ½ C melted butter~

The twirling leaves were dancing with the wind who so kindly helped to start the fire. A giant cast iron pan sizzled with melted butter. Acorn pancakes cooked in smoke and flame and covered with maple syrup tasted sacred like plants who taste the sunlight. Enjoying the fruits of Nature and the fruits of our shared labor we ate together our fill until contentment brimmed from our bellies and smiles. Thank you Trees, thank you Friends, and thank You. :)

Recipe adapted from thepeoplespaths.net