Day Five: Oyster mushrooms, the wapato shimmy and a vision

Contributed by "Wild Girl" Rebecca Lerner
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Off to dance in the cold waters of a marsh, myself and eight friends piled into a big van and set out on our quest for wapato. Also known as Indian swamp potato or arrowhead, for its arrow-shaped leaves, wapato is a bulb-shaped root vegetable that grows underwater in wet mud.

Conditions seemed almost preternaturally accommodating. Though it is duck-hunting season, Culture Change publisher Jan Lundberg easily secured a permit for our harvest at the last minute. We just happened to pick a day closed to hunters.

I was feeling energetic and well-rested, despite a dearth of sleep the night before. And though Portland is generally overcast from mid-October through April, the sky was a bright summer blue, the air temperature a mild 56 degrees Fahrenheit.

From north Portland we crossed a bridge over the Multnomah Channel to Sauvie Island, once known as Wapato Island. The picturesque land there is 26,000 acres of farms, hiking trails and wetlands bordered by the Willamette and Columbia Rivers. Along the way to a marshland called Catfish Slough, we gathered rose hips, delicious wild mustard greens and even oyster mushrooms.

In the fall and spring, you can find oyster mushrooms growing on dead trees, stumps and logs, especially on cottonwood, willow, alder and oak trees. Look for the distinctive gills, which run from the edges of the cap down through the stalk. Oyster mushrooms are sold commercially, but if you look for them, you can get them for free.

Wapato was once a staple starch food of indigenous people in the Pacific Northwest, though it is rarely harvested anymore. When steamed, it has a sweet, nutty flavor. If it is growing in a shallow enough area, or if you have a canoe and a steady sense of balance, it can be possible to uproot wapato by pulling its stalk. But the fun way to get it is to dance in the water, loosening the muck it grows in to send the bulbs floating to the surface. This is the technique my friends from TrackersNW and I used, and we had a blast. Emily Porter dubbed it the "wapato shimmy." Everyone was smiling even though our hands and feet were freezing. Wapato foraging was a joyous dance.

We waded into water as deep as our necks. Little air bubbles came streaming to the surface as we jumped around. According to wild food botanist John Kallas, the best technique is to stay in the same spot as you work, disturbing the mud for a good 15 minutes so the deeper bulbs have a chance to come up.

To stay warm, we wore wetsuits generously leant to us for free by Portland's Next Adventure outdoor store.

Tony Deis paddled out in a kayak and filmed our adventure. You can watch the 45-second video of our wapato harvest he made on YouTube here.

Thanks to Bryce Ruddock of Milwaukie, Wisconsin, who wrote in to answer my dock seed question. Grind the seeds and the hulls together and add them to flour, he suggested. I tried this today in chestnut-and-acorn flour pancakes, and it worked out great. Also, regarding the deer fat -- I will not be eating it. As I wrote, I have not eaten meat in 11 years, other than seafood, and the stomach-churning gamey odor in this jar has not served to sway me from that path. Before I began this week, I was open to considering it because I was thinking of the unpleasant sensations I experienced in May when I didn't have enough to eat. This time the nuts are getting me by just fine, fortunately.

Though Jan called this project a "vision quest for the universe," I hadn't seriously considered the implications until this evening. When I got back to my apartment around 6 p.m., I felt tired, weak and lightheaded. I was dizzy. My digestive system purged. My hands got cold and pale. At first I was a bit alarmed since it reminded me of the day I had to quit in May, but then I recognized that something non-physical was simultaneously going on. Energy surged in through my third eye and heart chakra. My vibrational state was changing. I realized that I had thought about the outward implications of foraging, but hadn't looked inward.

Stay tuned! For Day Six I will write about my encounters with plant consciousness and messages from spirit.

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Do you have a suggestion, feedback or advice? Rebecca loves to get e-mails from Culture Change readers at RebeccaELerner@gmail.com

TV coverage in Portland of Rebecca's wild diet:

koinlocal6.com

The Portland Oregonian, largest daily newspaper in Oregon: