S craggly. Sprawling. Spiny. Dark. Branches like gnarled hands. So have I heard described the mesquite, most common of the low desert trees. I imagine to many locals, mesquite is just a giant weed, or at least a tenacious dryland survivor, doing well in poor soil, where so many other plants wouldn’t have a chance in hell. Yet despite how seemingly uninviting this tree might seem, mesquite, to me, is one of the Southwest’s most ignored treasures.

What most people don’t know is just how beneficial – essential, even — mesquite is to our native landscape. To the original people of these drylands — from the Aztec in central Mexico, to the Yaqui and Tohono O’odham of the Sonora, and the Yavapai of the Verde Valley — mesquite flour was a staple food. It is an ancient food, and the name itself comes from the word mizquitl, in the Nahuatl tongue of the Aztec. Mesquite’s flavor is sweet, subtly caramel, and the nourishing flour is high in protein, dietary fiber, calcium, magnesium, potassium, iron, and zinc.

Most commonly known is mesquite honey, endemic to the Southwest because bees, drawn from far and wide, seek out late spring’s mesquite flowers for their sweetness and nutrition. As for the barbecue, mesquite wood burns hot and slow, and gives smoked meat a distinctive taste. The pods themselves are ground whole, with the pith providing the sweetness and the beans providing the protein. Mesquite’s sweetness comes from fructose, which is low on the glycemic scale, making it ideal for diabetics, or anyone else who’d like to avoid a sugar crash.

As for the plant’s medicinal properties, Phyllis Hogan, proprietor of Flagstaff’s Winter Sun Trading Company, shared some of the knowledge imparted to her by the Yaqui people she studied with over the years. “Mesquite bark, taken from where the sap bleeds off the bark, is used as a strong medicine for skin ulcerations,” Ms. Hogan recalled, “and the sap itself can be processed and used for open cuts and sores, cankers, and wounds that just won’t heal.” She also expressed her favor for the tasty flour, and loves making cookies with it. Me too.

And that’s how I came to mesquite: through food. I love to eat, and I especially love to eat local. Although I didn’t grow up in the Southwest, somewhere along the way I’d heard of mesquite — not just through honey and barbecues — but that the ripe seed-pods could be ground into a fine powder and used as a sweet and protein-rich flour. Perhaps it’s because I didn’t grow up here that I don’t have an innate prejudice against mesquite, but rather a fascination. I see this tree woven richly into the natural cultural landscape, one of the species that flourishes and gives so much in this harsh environment that gives so little.

So, shortly after moving to Sedona, my mesquite odyssey began. Although I’d never seen these trees before, I immediately recognized them for what they were. They are humble trees, unassuming, not growing very tall or with spectacular form, but I was captivated nonetheless. Without having any experience in harvesting or grinding mesquite pods, I did little more than watch them ripen and fall to the ground, saddened by the waste, but unsure of how to make use of them myself. In the meantime, I found mesquite powder for sale at Rinzai’s Market, and made copious use of its candy deliciousness in smoothies and homemade chocolates. But mesquite powder is sold as a specialty food, and at $8-12 a pound, I was paying specialty prices for something that was literally growing all around me.

The next year, on a blazing summer morning, I had a revelation at the Sedona Farmer’s Market. I noticed a table laden with dry mesquite pods, slender and sandy tan in color, and bags of finely ground flour. As I read the sign, my heart skipped a beat: Arizona Mesquite Company. Mark Moody, proprietor, was over 200 miles from home – the tiny, middle-of-nowhere town of Bouse, Arizona — to sell at this market and make his products known around the Verde Valley.

I noticed that Mr. Moody’s endeavor. It was a little less sweet than toasted South American powder, but more satisfying for having been locally grown.

Mr. Moody had originally purchased his desolate, desert property with the intention of growing a native crop, but not sure which one to try. Then, one typically torrid Arizona summer day, serendipity hit. While clearing out an ancient grove of mesquite trees to make room for his as-yet-undecided crop, Mr. Moody discovered some manos and metates, old Indian grinding stones. “We put two and two together and decided that if the Indians used these pods, why couldn’t we?”

Now, the Arizona Mesquite Company has a 500-tree orchard yielding 1800 pounds of flour per year. Mr. Moody hopes the 2011 harvest will be double that. He tries to plant an acre a year, and expects to have 9 acres in by 2012. “It looks like we could see yields of 5,000 lbs per acre,” remarks Mr. Moody, “and this could feed a lot of people. The native people knew what they were doing when they built their camps and cities around native mesquite bosques.” Abundant food from a region with little water and terrible soil? Absolutely.

**Pearl Mast’s Mesquite Pancakes**

from Eat Mesquite! DesertHarvesters.org

Mix together dry ingredients in a large bowl. In a mixing bowl, whisk together egg, oil, and milk. Mix dry and wet ingredients. Add 1 cup milk, and more as needed to thin the batter. Cook on hot griddle and enjoy with your favorite syrup or toppings.

**Eat Mesquite!**

by Sarah Irani

**Mesquite So Sweet**

**1 cup mesquite meal**
**1 cup whole wheat flour**
**1 cup unbleached white flour**
**1 ½ teaspoons baking soda**
**1 teaspoon salt**
**1 tablespoon oil**
**1 ½ cup buttermilk, sour milk, or fresh milk enhanced with a tablespoon of vinegar or lemon juice**

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Mesquite grows well in just about every arid region in the world. Native to the dry-lands of the American continents, it has been introduced to Africa, Asia, Australia, and the drier parts of the Hawaiian islands, where it is known as kiawe. Not only does this per-severing tree grow well where other species couldn’t possibly get a foothold, it improves the soil in the process. As a leguminous plant, mesquite is a nitrogen fixer. This means that certain bacteria interact with mesquite’s roots in a symbiotic way, stabiliz-ing atmospheric nitrogen in the soil, enrich-ing the soil for other plants that might come along. These nitrogen-fixing qualities make it a favorite of Southwestern permacultural-ists, always looking to improve soils natu-rally and incorporate native species into food forests.

The following spring, when the mesquite was blooming again, I knew it would finally be the year to stop paying such high prices for the flour, and to gather and grind my own. I asked around and, short of an actual metate grinding stone, the tool of choice was a large piece of industrial machinery called a Hammermill. No coffee grinder or grain mill would be able to make much of a dent on mesquite’s rock-hard seeds.

Because mesquite is such an important re-gional food, especially in Southern Arizona, the Desert Harvesters group in Tucson hosts an annual milling party, featuring a Hammermill for hire, and mesquite pancakes with prickly pear syrup to feed the waiting masses and inspire their regionally-appropri-te cookery. But that event is in Tucson, and I wasn’t willing to drive hundreds of miles to get a taste of local food.

But then I found out, via the permacul-ture grapevine, that Prescott College had a Hammermill. I contacted Tim Crews, the man in charge of this coveted machine, and pestered him via phone and email to host a Verde Valley mesquite milling. It took months to nail down a solid date, but it was confirmed: the Hammermill would be com-ing to Cornville in the fall.

But that was months away and I had a har-vest to attend to. Summer was in full swing and the pods were quickly turning from green to gold, dry and ready to be picked. I called together a few girlfriends and, with my 14-month old daughter strapped in a car seat, my 14-month old daughter strapped in a car seat, with my separated flour and chaff, which is just the parts of the pod that weren’t able to be finely ground. Mesquite chaff can be used to make syrup or mesquite beer (I hope some homebrewers are reading this). Some people

Finally, I had my very own fresh-ground mesquite flour, and quite a bit of it too. What to do with all those pounds? What else? Baking! Desert Harvesters puts out a beau-tiful cookbook called Eat Mesquite! — full of not only recipes, but cultural, botanical, and medicinal information about the plant as well. I developed my own recipes, substituting mesquite flour for 1/3 of the regular flour called for. Although the flour is sweet, some savory dishes are enhanced by its addition, and everything becomes heartier and more filling because of it.

Mesquite, to me, has become more than just food; it’s become my connection to this place. The Arizona desert is not easy to love, what with temperature extremes, poisonous creatures, and thorny plants around every bend, but watching, appreciating, and using the mesquite trees has given me a personal relationship with them that keeps me con-nected to my environs. Now I have an anchor to anticipate the spiraling time of seasons. And as I continue to acclimate to the desert, mesquite has changed my relationship with the land. No longer am I someone just pass-ing through, but someone nourished by the fruits of the land itself. Mesquite keeps me grounded here and makes my desert life whole.

For more information:
WinterSun.com
ArizonaMesquiteCompany.com
DesertHarvesters.org

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