

Desert delicacies make tempting edible dishes

by Jo Walker

Members of the conservation committee were happy to be invited to the recent desert dinner held by Curt and Corky Cockburn. The instructions for the potluck dinner were "bring something edible, either flora or fauna, from the desert."

These potluck dinners have been held on an irregular schedule for 18 years; yet those participating for the first time went with dubious expectations of something like the "stone soup."

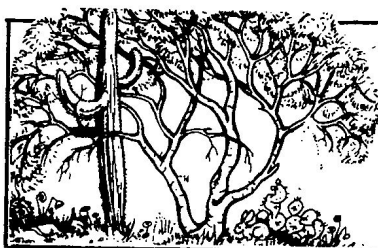
Therefore it was a pleasant surprise to see dish after delicious-looking and smelling dish being paraded into an already loaded table. Obviously, some participants had been coming for years — some bringing favorite dishes, and others always trying something new.

During the cocktail hour we were all invited to try orchata (a delicious drink made from melon seeds), tunita sangria punch (containing prickly pear tunas, oranges and burgandy), home-made elderberry, blackberry and elderflower wines and meads, and the notorious tequila (made from the agave first found near the harbor of Tequila).

These drinks were accompanied by desert peanuts (roasted and salted jojoba nuts), blue corn gorditas and snake rolls (blue cheese and rattlesnake rolled in dough and baked).

By then all the dinner selections had been arranged, and we bravely — or not too bravely — sampled all — or some — of the main dishes.

The large variety of breads included: prickly pear and jojoba bread; date nut, orange and acorn meal bread; acorn meal muffins with dried elderberries;



Sentinel Dec 18, 1985

a desert place

Natural beauty
through preservation

Presented by:
CONSERVATION COMMITTEE of the
Cave Creek Improvement Association

mesquite bread with pigweed seed; prickly pear corn muffins; corn bread in a long loaf; and mesquite, corn meal muffins made in a mesquite broth. These could be topped with desert honey, prickly pear jelly or grey thorn preserve.

Salads included lamb's quarters (not like it sounds; it is a green) with shaggy mane mushrooms; nopalitas ensalada (a delicious Mexican-style tossed salad with diced, cooked leaves of prickly pear).

Next, selections were to be made between jojoba beans, rabbit stew, antelope stew, desert chicken, a taste of quail (accidentally killed when they flew into a house window; it was saved for the dinner) and boiled cray fish.

For those who still had room

for dessert, there were more choices to be made: there were lemon tarts, desert-raised Kieffer pears, prickly pear jello, prickly pear jello with fruit, and saguaro loaf cake — made with the fruits of the saguaro, it reminded one of poppy seed cake, but with a slight tang.

In case someone hadn't been brave enough to try enough selections to fill themselves up, there were tortillas rolled with peanut butter and prickly pear jelly.

At least three dozen dishes, all delicious, had made a buffet unmatched at any gourmet restaurant.

For further reading: **Cactus Cook Book**, by Joyce L. Tate, from the Cactus and Succulent Society; **American Indian Food and Lore**, by Carolyn Niethammer; **Wild Edible Plants of the Western United States**, by Donald R. Kirk; and **Common Edible and Useful Plants of the West**, by Muriel Sweet.

And from the latest: **Gathering the Desert**, by Gary Paul Nabhan, in which he chose a dozen plants of the more than 400 edible plants of the Sonoran Desert and presented them by season.

"We hope that these sketches will encourage arid-land dwellers to feel more at home with the desert's bounty, a richness that cannot be understood simply in utilitarian terms," Nabhan said.

"Even if you don't gather the desert, let it gather a feeling in you. Even if you don't swallow it as medicine, meditate upon it: the desert can cure."

And that is what we wish all our readers in the year to come — the joy of learning and appreciating the desert, and the preservation of enough desert to protect the habitats of all the critters and creatures who inhabit it.
