

Sweet Camas

**A sampling of recipes for a lost staple crop of
Western North America**



Madrona Murphy

Kwiaht • Center for the Historical Ecology of the Salish Sea

Recipe illustrations and photographs by Camilla Loyd

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About Camas

Camas, the edible bulb of North American native *Camassia leichtlinii* and *C. quamash*, was cultivated and harvested by Native American and First Nations communities up and down the Pacific Coast of North America. This hardy bulb thrives both in the wet coastal meadows of the Pacific Northwest and the rain shadow climates of the San Juan Islands. Careful cultivation that included hoeing, weeding, fertilizing, and periodic burning allowed the Coast Salish communities of the Salish Sea to produce camas in quantities great enough to sustain their communities and to create a surplus to supply regional trade.

Raw camas bulbs are indigestible, and relatively resistant to pests. This is because they store energy in the form of inulin, a oligosaccharide or short chains of simple sugars that cannot be digested by mammals. Eating camas requires that the inulin be broken down into fruit sugar (fructose) through long, slow, moist cooking. Cooked camas is sweet, mildly nutty and rich in fruit sugar.

Proper preparation for easily digestible camas requires 48 hours of moist, slow cooking. Traditionally camas was prepared by pit roasting large quantities from family harvests all at once. A slow cooker works well to bring this sweet, nutty, ancient crop plant into modern kitchens.

This cookbook gives an overview of preparing camas, and provides a sampling of the recipes that were enjoyed at Kwiaht's 2016 First Annual Camas Festival on Lopez Island, WA.

Our development of camas production and preparation techniques was funded by a Specialty Crop Block Grant through the Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA).

For more information about Kwiaht's work to bring food camas back as a sustainable food crop in the San Juan Islands visit our website <http://www.kwiaht.org>

Properly Prepared Camas in a Slow Cooker

Mature camas bulbs may be harvested for cooking at anytime during the growing season, but are easiest to harvest and prepare when they are mostly dormant (July-January). Wild harvesting of camas may not be safe or sustainable, and all of these recipes we've developed for garden grown bulbs. If bulbs are harvested in summer each bulb may need to be split in half to remove the flowering stalk. This can be avoided by removing the flowering stalks at the beginning of the season, which can also encourage the growth of larger bulbs.

Clean bulbs, remove the root end (which may be replanted to form new bulbs) and the top end, and any insect damage or mold, if necessary split bulbs in half and remove the hard central stalk.

To diffuse the heat and avoid overcooking the bulbs on the edge, line the slow cooker well with washed thimbleberry leaves, soaked corn husks, or crumpled parchment paper. Add around a cup of water (depending on the size of your slow cooker—the water should come up to the top of the leaves). Make a large well in the middle and line with two sheets of parchment paper crossed over one another. Fill this well with cleaned bulbs; a full pot will cook more evenly. Fold the edges of the parchment paper over the bulbs and put on the lid. Set the cooker on low, and allow to cook for 48 hours, adding water as needed (check approximately every 12 hours).

After 24 hours the bulbs will begin to take on an ivory color, and after 48 hours they will be dark brown and very soft. At this point they can be used in any of the following recipes, or frozen, or dried for storage. Fresh cooked bulbs are quite perishable will only keep for a few days in the fridge.

To make camas paste from fresh bulbs, puree in a food processor with enough water to make a very thick paste, use a food mill or sieve to remove any remaining pieces (these pieces may be added to camas ice cream with the paste, but will detract from the smooth texture of camas spread).

To dry camas bulbs for storage, chop fully cooked bulbs, dry in a dehydrator until completely dry, and store in an airtight container. Whole bulbs can be dried as well, but are more challenging to re-hydrate.

Dry camas can also be powdered in a coffee grinder and re-hydrated into camas paste. Grind very fine, and sift, or sieve, to remove remaining larger chunks (which can be added to chopped camas).

To rehydrate dried camas: cover with boiling water (approximately 2 parts water to 1 part dried camas). To make camas paste from powdered, dried camas: add 3 parts boiling water to 1 part camas and stir well.



Camas and Sweet Onion Salsa

Spiced only with sweet onion and yellow mustard seed, this mild salsa shows off the nuttiness of camas, and is good alongside salmon or served with fry bread or chips.

½ cup chopped sweet onion
½ cup chopped prepared camas (or re-hydrated dried camas)
1 teaspoon rice vinegar or cider vinegar
1 teaspoon whole yellow mustard seeds
½ teaspoon kosher salt (or ¼ teaspoon table or sea salt)
ground black pepper to taste

Mix all ingredients, adjust salt and vinegar to taste. Camas salsa will keep for a week in the fridge.





Sweet Camas Spread

A mildly sweet spread, reminiscent of chestnut jam. The chocolate version is lighter and less sweet than chocolate nut spreads like Nutella:

¼ cup camas paste (or camas paste made from dried, powdered camas)
1 tablespoon water
1 tablespoon sunflower oil

(Chocolate Camas Spread variation—add 1 tablespoon Dutched cocoa)

Re-hydrate dried, powdered camas if needed. Stir water and oil into camas paste until very smooth. Add more water if the texture is too stiff. For chocolate version stir in cocoa. Sweet Camas Spread is very perishable, and only keeps for a few days in the fridge, chilled camas spread may need to be thinned with a little more water. Serve on crackers or toast, or with cheese.





Camas Albondigas (meatballs)

The mild nutty, sweetness of camas pairs very well with beef, and this recipe can also be used to make camas hamburgers (which may be served with camas salsa). Recipe makes enough for 2 burgers or around 20 small meatballs.

1/2 lb ground beef (80/20 or lean, not extra lean)
1/2 cups chopped prepared camas (or re-hydrated dried camas)
salt to taste (optional)

Re-hydrate camas if necessary. Mix beef and chopped camas, roll into marble sized meatballs and cook covered in a hot pan over medium-high heat, shake the pan frequently to keep the *albondigas* from sticking. Serve warm.





Camas Ice Cream

Creamy and gently sweet, ice cream shows off the subtle flavor of cooked camas. Camas and honey provide all of the sweetness in this recipe. Camas ice cream can be prepared over 2 days, making and chilling the custard the first day, and churning and freezing it on the day you plan to serve. Ice cream can also be made ahead and kept frozen, but with no stabilizers, it should not be allowed to thaw and refreeze.

2 cups whole milk (divided)

2 cups cream

½ cup honey

1 cup camas paste (or re-hydrated paste from dried, powdered camas)

6 egg yolks

Re-hydrate dried, powdered camas if necessary. Mix camas paste and 1 cup milk in a pot until very smooth, bring to a simmer over medium low heat, stirring frequently, and cook for 10 minutes. It will thicken. Add the remaining cup milk, cream, and honey and heat, stirring frequently, until steaming. Meanwhile lightly beat egg yolks.

Slowly stir 1 cup of hot mix into the egg yolks to temper. Add the yolk mix to the pan and heat, stirring frequently, until very hot but not boiling, at this point the custard may thicken more. Remove from heat and let cool. Freeze 1 cup of custard, chill the remaining custard in the fridge overnight, or until quite cold. Add frozen custard to chilled custard and stir until the frozen dissolves.

Freeze in an ice cream maker according to the manufacturer's instructions.

