

Métis Food and Diet – Todd Paquin, Leah Dorion and Darren R. Préfontaine

Module Objective: The students will be provided with a general overview of traditional Métis food preparation and how a move away from this pattern has had dire consequences for the Métis community.

The Métis have contributed immensely to the dietary fare of Canada, adapting many of the simple, nourishing and flavourful foods traditionally eaten by their First Nations and European ancestors. The Métis have particularly adapted such French-Canadian foods as *Tortière* (a pork-based meat pie) and *les Boulettes* (meatballs) and such Aboriginal foods as pemmican or wild rice. These nourishing foods, easy to prepare and transport, were particularly well suited for such a semi-nomadic people as the historic Métis. The meals and recipes of the Métis are distinctly Canadian. Historically they were simple and consisted of the products people could obtain from hunting, gathering, or farming. In other instances, Métis recipes included ingredients from trading posts. Recipes were made with products people commonly had at their disposal. For traders and freighters, fresh home-cooked meals were a delicious and welcome change from pemmican.

Traditionally, the Métis ate a high fat and carbohydrate-rich diet. This was necessary because they lived active, often physically demanding, and lives. The energy produced by such a large caloric intake was then used to live a subsistence lifestyle. Furthermore, since Métis families were involved in so many subsistence activities they enjoyed a wide variety in their diet. Combining farming with hunting and fishing ensured people a wide variety in their diet and helped offset droughts, floods, early frosts and poor hunts. However, there was always the possibility that, on a particularly bad year, a family would run short of fresh food. Winter,

too, was a long season and no matter the skill of a hunter or trapper there was the threat that not enough food would be available to make it through. When people could not afford to buy goods brought into a settlement or from a post, they tried to ensure they could make it through difficult years and the harsh winters by preserving and storing food from their gardens, fields and kills.

Métis women commonly dried (and smoked) meats and berries for later use – usually for several months. Dried berries and fruits could later be boiled to make tarts and pies or to be eaten with cream. Drying and smoking meat and fish was done outdoors in the sun and wind on racks over low fires. Dried meat and fish could be eaten plain or boiled in stews. Pemmican, a staple of many Métis diets and a product that could last for years was an indispensable but blend food resource made from pounded and shredded buffalo meat fortified by berries and hot buffalo fat. Meat, berries and fruits were also canned. Autumn was the season for canning and some motivated families canned up to one thousand quarts of vegetables, fruits, wild berries, fish and wild meat! Indian corn, which was a fairly common garden product, and barley were dried and ground for easy storage and use in soups, stews, bannock and bread.

Storing fruits and vegetables in small cellars or in semi-subterranean root houses ensured that families had fresh sources of vitamins and minerals in the winter. Meat could be kept cool in a well or by burying it in sawdust, wheat, or under the ground. It would last for about ten days when kept in a bucket at the bottom of a well. People also froze fish, meat from kills, and meat from slaughtered livestock and kept it in heavy

containers or in a tree to deny animals access to it. If the family had access to one, icehouses were used to keep meat and vegetables frozen and out of the reach of hungry animals. Frozen meats lasted until the following spring without going bad.

If a family raised cows, they were able to make their own butter, cook with cream and drink milk. To preserve butter in winter, women would fill a small tub with butter, cover it with a cloth topped with coarse salt and pour a mixture of brine and egg over it. The tub would be tightly covered with a lid and kept in a dairy shed separate from the house.

Bannock is a traditional Métis food, which was used by people who had to eat a quick, nourishing, and tasty meal, particularly when doing an activity. Like pemmican, bannock was a high-energy food eaten by travelers or other people engaged in a great deal of physical activity, who did not have time to prepare food. It has a high fat and high carbohydrate content, which supplies long term energy for those on the trap line, hunting, or paddling long distances. However, it becomes an unhealthy food if eaten on a regular basis in a sedentary lifestyle because of these same characteristics. Métis women also baked pies, tarts, and other goodies for their families and when friends came to visit. Christmas was a time when many women baked treats such as ginger snaps, mincemeat and raisin pies, and fruitcake.

The most common method of cooking seems to be either boiling or frying. Meals tended to include a high percentage of wild meats and fish mixed with vegetables from their gardens, particularly potatoes. In place

of oil or butter, Métis cooks used marrow fat or *graisse de moëlle*. When families could afford it, they purchased items such as sugar, raisins, flour, rice, butter, syrup, bacon and tinned meats from the local stores to include in their recipes.

Today, most Métis make these traditional foods only on special or festive occasions – like everyone else in North America, they eat standard fatty and carbohydrate-rich "North American" food most of the time. While eating this calorie-laden diet, many Métis have refrained from the great amounts of physical activity needed to expend this extra energy. Furthermore, the inability to access wild meat, fish, and berries has contributed to the decline in health of many Métis. They had to turn to store bought foods, which are high in sugars, fats, and salt which lead to high rates of obesity, hypertension (high blood pressure), diabetes, and tooth decay. Finally, since the Métis, in general, have a low economic position in society their diet tends to be inadequate because less expensive or preserved foods tend to be less healthy. Diet related or diet influenced health problems, such as diabetes and high blood pressure, occur in greater frequencies and are of greater concern within the Métis community compared to the general population.

Questions and activities:

- 1) Why did the Métis traditionally need a diet high in fat? Is this a similar pattern to Indigenous people throughout the world? What changes in lifestyle made a high fat and protein diet a health concern? Has the lack of access to wild meat and other game affected the health of the Métis? What impact has store-bought and processed foods had for Métis health? Has the generally poor income of the Métis as a people affected the way they eat or prepare food?

- 2) Why was the preservation of food so important to the nomadic Métis? What kinds of meat and vegetables did the Métis preserve? How were these foods prepared?
- 3) With your parents' or teacher's assistance and using the recipes listed below or collected from family members or recipe books make a traditional Métis meal. Bannock, *boulettes* and wild rice make a wonderful hearty meal. Be warned this food is high in fat but it is delicious!

A) *Boulettes (For six):*

1 kilogram of ground beef, moose or deer
 3 large onions diced
 2 litres of water
 Salt and pepper to taste
 Flour
 6 medium potatoes peeled and cut in quarters (optional)
 6 medium carrots cut in pieces (optional)

Boil water in a large soup pot, adding salt and pepper, potatoes and carrots. Form the ground meat and onion into balls and roll in flour. Place the meatballs in the boiling water and simmer over medium heat until done, adding a water and flour paste to thicken the broth.

Or:

Take 2lbs (1 kilogram) lean ground beef
 Medium onion chopped fine
 1-1/2-teaspoon salt
 1/2-teaspoon black pepper
 1/2-cup flour to mix into meat to hold everything together

Mix well and roll into 2-3 inch (6 centimetres) balls and roll into the flour once more. Put the meatballs into a quart of boiling water with one teaspoon of salt, and let them simmer for 60 minutes¹.

B) *Beignes*

2 packages of fast rising yeast	1/2 cup sugar
1/2 cup lukewarm water	1-tablespoon salt
1-teaspoon sugar	2 beaten eggs
1/2 cup oil	5 cups of water
	9 cups of flour

Mix together the first three ingredients and let stand for 10 minutes. Mix the next four ingredients and add the yeast mixture. Add the lukewarm water to the combined ingredients and mix until smooth.

¹ "Les Boulettes" submitted by Florence Bruce for *Buffalo Trails and Tales* Newsletter, December 1996.

Slowly add the flour, and with oiled hands knead the mixture until the dough is soft but not sticky (add flour until proper consistency). Let rise for 1 hour. Then, cover with waxed paper and punch the dough down, letting it set for another half an hour.

Knead the dough into a 2 cm thick mass, slicing the dough into pieces. Make two cuts on the surface of each piece. Deep-fry the pieces of dough in melted shortening, about one minute per side.

C) Bannock (For six):

6 cups of flour	1/4 pound of lard or bacon grease
3 teaspoons of baking powder	2 cups water
1/2 teaspoon of salt	

In a large bowl mix the flour, baking powder and salt together. Rub in the lard or grease until everything is mixed together in a fine mixture. Add enough warm water to make a soft ball of dough. Flour a board or counter top and pat or roll with a rolling pin the dough on it until about 1 inch thick. Let sit for 10 minutes, then prick the entire mass with a fork. Bake at 350° until golden brown, about 20 minutes. Serve with butter, lard, jam or bacon.

D) Rabbit Stew with Salt Pork

1/2 pound (120 grams) salt pork cut in pieces
2 rabbits cut up in serving pieces

Put in pot of boiling water, add 1 sliced carrot and 1 small chopped onion. Stew for 2 hours until tender, adding flour to thicken the broth.

E) Wild Ducks

2 wild ducks (mallards)	1/2-teaspoon black pepper
1-teaspoon salt	1 small carrot sliced
	1 small onion chopped

After the ducks are plucked and cleaned, singe them on an open flame or wood fire. Cut them up in serving pieces and put in a pot with enough boiling water to cover. Add salt, black pepper, sliced carrot and chopped onion. Simmer for 2 to 3 hours until meat is tender, adding flour to thicken broth.

F) Muskrat

Boil muskrat in 4 cups of salted water for 1 1/2 hours or until tender. Or roast in oven for 2 hours with plenty of lard, seasoned to taste with salt and pepper.

G) Wild Rice (For 6):

1 cup wild rice
4 cups water
1-teaspoon salt

Wash wild rice by placing it in a strainer and running cold water through it. Combine the ingredients in a saucepan and heat to a boil. Cover and simmer over low heat for 40-50 minutes until the rice is tender. Remove the cover and fluff rice with a fork. Cook five minutes longer and serve.

H) Wild Rice Pancakes (For 16 to 18 pancakes):

1/4 cup wild rice	2 cups flour
1/2-teaspoon salt	2-tablespoons sugar
1 1/2 cups boiling water	2-teaspoons baking powder
2 eggs	1-teaspoon baking soda
2 cups buttermilk	1-teaspoon salt
2-tablespoons melted butter	

Cook wild rice in boiling salted water until soft and partially puffed. Beat eggs until light and fluffy and stir in buttermilk. Sift together flour, sugar, baking powder, baking soda and salt. Gradually add the flour mixture to the liquid, beating to make a smooth and thin batter. Stir in the melted butter and the cooked wild rice. Drop by the 1/4 cup onto a hot buttered griddle, turning once.

I) Pudding in a Bag (Poutchine au sac)

1/2 cup fine beef suet	2 cups flour
1/2 cup brown sugar	1/2-teaspoon salt
1 cup raisins	4 teaspoons baking powder
1/2 cup currants	3/4 cup milk
1-teaspoon pastry spice	

Mix all the dry ingredients together then add the milk. Pour mixture in two large (a litre-plus) sealer jars and steam 2 1/2 to 3 1/2 hours. When ready to be eaten, serve with sauce (below).

Sauce

1/2 cup white sugar	1/2 teaspoon lemon extract
1 tablespoon cornstarch	1/2 teaspoon vanilla
1 cup boiling water	1/4 teaspoon nutmeg
2 tablespoons butter	

Mix sugar and cornstarch then stir into boiling water. Boil five minutes and remove from heat, adding butter and flavouring.