

Harvesting of Cactus Fruit Keeps Indian Custom Alive

By George Garties

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SAGUARO NATIONAL MONUMENT, Ariz. — The Tohono O'odham Indian woman squints in the morning's bright sunlight, looking for red in the cluster of fruit that crowns a tall saguaro cactus.

Stretching up with a 25-foot stick, she knocks ripe fruit to the ground in a harvest that will fill her larder with jam and help preserve a culture that evolved around survival in an inhospitable desert.

Stella Tucker — a full-blooded O'odham despite her urban Tucson address and the ring of Chicago in her name — is one of the few members of her tribe who still camps in the desert for three weeks each summer to reap the fruit of Arizona's signature cactus.

As most Americans are preparing for Independence Day picnics, she's gathering material for a sort of tribal New Year's ceremony to ensure the summer rains will continue to nourish the Sonoran Desert.

"I love this," Tucker said. "When I come out here I get a blood rush."

The saguaro harvest generally starts in late June and lasts only a few weeks. It ends with the onset of the desert monsoon season, a time of sporadic downpours and spectacular lightning shows in the southern Arizona desert.

The harvest marked the start of the year for traditional O'odham, said Donald Bahr, an Arizona State University anthropologist. Some of the fruit was fermented by holy men in a four-day ceremony that climaxed with an entire village sharing copious amounts of sweet red wine and listening to speeches intended to call down the rains.

The tradition coexists with the Roman Catholicism embraced by most O'odham. Tucker's sister, Anna Gomez, takes a pinch of saguaro pulp and

makes the sign of the cross before her first taste. "For luck," she said.

The "wine feasts" are getting rarer on the Tohono O'odham reservation, as are the storm-irrigated patches of corn, tepary beans and squash that once fed the tribe, said Tucker's cousin, Helen Ramon.

Ramon, a teacher, sometimes brings children to the saguaro camp in her quest to keep tradition alive among the 12,000 O'odham who inhabit a 75-by-100 mile reservation along the Mexican border.

Tucker will spend two or three weeks in her camp in this park on the edge of Tucson, sleeping in a lean-to.

With the help of relatives, she picks fruit in the relative cool of the morning and evening. In the triple-digit heat of the day, she tends a battered pot over a wood fire, cooking saguaro pulp down into jam or syrup.

If she's lucky enough to be invited to a wine feast on the reservation, she'll contribute some syrup to be made into wine, Ramon said.

The syrup, drizzled on muffins, tortillas or Indian frybread, looks and tastes like a thin molasses with a hint of fruit or fig.

It's getting to be a rare treat. "The culture is kind of dying down because nobody does it any more," Tucker said.

Her nieces don't like to abandon TV and friends for the rigors of camp. Her oldest daughter just got a college degree in fashion design and is working in New York and another daughter in her 20s isn't much interested in cactus.

But she has hope for her 12-year-old.

"My youngest daughter, she's real interested. She's been doing this since she was 3," Tucker said.

The girl isn't around this morning, though. She's gone to the circus.



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Stella Tucker harvests the fruit of a saguaro with a long stick made of dead saguaro ribs at Saguaro National Monument.

Burning Desert Yields Sweet Saguaro Treat

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Stella Tucker welcomes the occasional outsider to her saguaro camp, a jumble of cots and cooking paraphernalia around a lean-to of tarpaper and plywood.

She leads the way through a stand of saguaros, stepping carefully among withered brittlebrush and shin-threatening cholla cacti. It's over 100 degrees at 6 a.m. and climbing toward the day's high of 110.

For protection, she wears sneakers, a baseball cap, long cotton pants and a faded flannel shirt flapping open over her T-shirt.

She and her sister, Anna Gomez, take turns knocking down fruit with a stick made of dried saguaro ribs.

It is Anna's first harvest since before her 26-year-old daughter was born and she's happy, chuckling when fruit falls on her head.

The sisters recall childhood harvests from horse-drawn carts, sometimes sharing a private joke in the softly clipped syllables of the Tohono O'odham language.

The fruits are about the size of eggs, though skinnier about the middle. The tough skin splits open to reveal a bright red, pulpy core dotted with pinhead-sized black seeds.

Three hours of picking brings the sun uncomfortably high and fills a one-gallon pail with pulp.

Back at the camp, they thin the pulp with water and treat themselves to dippers full of pulpy but refreshing "Indian Kool-Aid" before putting the mixture in a pot over a wood fire. It will be boiled, strained and boiled again in a long, hot day's work to yield a few jars of jam and syrup.