



Drying Foods the Traditional Way

Lesson Description

In this lesson, students learn the traditional importance of drying foods and make a chile ristra.

- Time required: 60 minutes
- Location of lesson: Classroom and garden



Learning Objectives

- Be able to list common methods for drying foods.
- Have a basic understanding of what happens chemically during the process of drying foods.
- Gain an appreciation for drying foods the traditional way and the importance of dried foods in traditional Native life.


Materials and Preparation

- Invite an Elder to lead the class activities on “Making Chile Ristras” or to speak at the end of the lesson on the traditional importance of preserving food
 - Consider making an example ristra before leading this class
- Red chile peppers, freshly picked
- String, lightweight cotton
- Wire
- Scissors
- Raffia ribbon
- Prepared vegetable snack of the week – 1 for each student
- Water to drink during the Class Warm-up – water dispenser in the classroom and 1 cup or a water bottle for each student

Class Warm-up: Champion Cheer and Veggie Taste Test (5-10 minutes)

- Give each student a cup of water or ensure that they have a filled water bottle in front of them.
- Give each student the prepared veggie snack of the day.
- Lead the students in enthusiastically reciting the  **Champion Cheer**.
- At the end of the cheer, drink water and eat the veggie snack together.
- Have students complete their  **Taste Test Observations** about the vegetable snack of the week.

Review of Last Lesson (2-3 minutes)

- Review the evaluation questions from last week's lesson. Evaluation questions from all lessons are listed at the end of the workbook .

Class Discussion (10 minutes)

Today we will be learning how to dry foods the traditional way. Have you ever seen a chile ristra? Have you ever made a chile ristra before? Chile ristras are one example of how we can dry a food from the garden and eat it all year long. We will be making our own chile ristras in class today. Hold up the example ristra to give students an idea of what they are going to make.

Drying and preserving food is an ancient tradition. Most of you have probably already eaten dried and preserved food before. It is an important technique that has been passed down from many generations.

- *Have you ever harvested vegetables from a garden/farm before*
- *Have you ever dried any of the harvested food before?*
- *Do you know of any methods of drying foods?*

The oldest forms of drying foods included: smoking, sun drying, and air-drying. Today, we still use all of these methods to dry certain foods. We dry or dehydrate foods in order to remove the moisture and preserve them. In the more modern world, we have added a few more ways to dry food such as using a dehydrator, oven, or microwave.

- *Have you heard of beef jerky, smoked salmon, sun dried tomatoes, raisins, spices, or apple chips? All of those food items are dried or dehydrated.*

Drying removes enough moisture from the food so bacteria, yeast, and molds cannot grow. Drying also slows down the action of enzymes, a natural chemical in fruits and vegetables that causes food to ripen and eventually spoil.

Drying food is known to be an ancient form of food preservation. Since before recorded history, people have dried herbs, fruit, meat, and vegetables for use at a later date.

A chile ristra is a collection of dried peppers tied together for later use while cooking in the winter.

From mid-September until the first frost, green chiles mature and turn deep red. New Mexicans have traditionally harvested and strung red chiles into colorful strings or ristras. The chile is allowed to dry in the New Mexico sun and then is stored for use in various tantalizing food dishes during the winter.

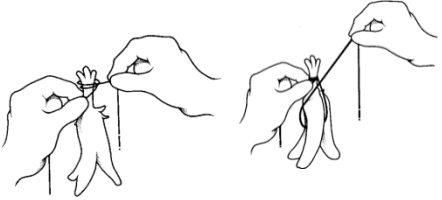
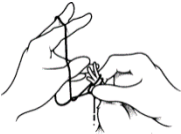
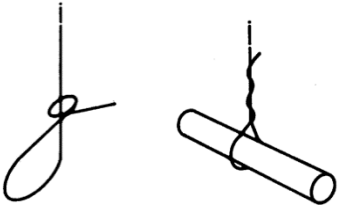
Besides being used for food, ristras have become popular outdoor and indoor decorations, and a market has developed for red chile wreaths for holiday display.



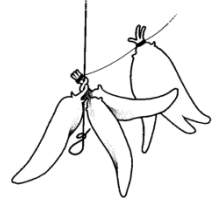
At this time, you have the option to pass the lesson to the Elder or complete the rest of the lesson and only have the Elder speak at the end of the lesson. If you choose to have the Elder teach the rest of the lesson, please refer them to the activity listed below. If they have other traditional ideas about drying foods, please have them do an activity around that topic. Have them decide what fits their tradition of drying foods from crops grown in the garden/farms.

Activity (20 minutes)

- **“Making Chile Ristras” (20 minutes):** Students make their own chile ristras.

1. Begin by tying clusters of 3 chiles together with a lightweight string (e.g., cotton string, or fishing string). To tie the clusters together, hold 3 chiles at a time by their stems and wrap the string around the stems twice. Bring the string upward between 2 of the chiles and pull tight, cutting into the stems slightly. 
2. Loop the string around your hand and turn it so that you place the loop over the ends of the chile stems and the free end is beneath the string attached to the cluster (i.e., half-hitch). Pull tightly. 
3. Continue making clusters about every 3 inches along the length of the string. Several 5-foot lengths of string will be easier to work with than one long piece. Continue until all the chile peppers have been used.
**Note: Do not use any peppers with bad spots.
4. Suspend the wire or coat hanger from a nail in a rafter or a doorknob (or some other convenient place). Make a loop in the free end of the wire to prevent the clusters from slipping off. Some people use a wooden dowel at the end to keep the chiles in place. 

5. Starting with the first 3 chiles on the end of one string, braid the chiles around the wire. Place the cluster so that the chiles are on one side of the wire and the string holding the stems together is on the other, and twist 2 of the chiles in a braid. The process is similar to braiding a child's hair - the wire serves as one strand and 2 of the chile stems in the cluster serve as the other 2.



6. As the chile clusters are braided onto the wire, push them down in the center to ensure a tight wrap. Position the chiles in different directions on the wire for a balanced look. If this is not done, empty spaces may develop along one side of the ristra. Continue braiding until all the chiles have been used. Any excess string between the clusters will be hidden inside the ristra. You may add a finishing touch with cornhusks or raffia ribbon.
7. Now that you have your ristra, hang it outside in full sun on a clothesline or on an outdoor rafter to dry. If you do not do this, the chiles will turn moldy and rot. They will lose most of their weight during the drying process.

****Your new ristra can now be hung indoors or outdoors as a decoration. The dried chile peppers can be broken off and used in cooking. Do not spray the chiles with lacquer or any similar spray that will give it a shiny, unnatural sheen. This will make it look artificial and make it unfit for use as a food.*

- **Elder Discussion (15 minutes):** If an Elder does not choose to do the chile ristras with the students have them talk about the following topics with the students:
 1. Traditional methods of drying foods that have grown in the garden.
 2. Why is drying food important?
 3. Why is it important to preserve food in your community?

Evaluation Questions (5 minutes)

1. *Why do people dry foods?* (Answer: food preservation)
2. *Does drying food remove moisture from the food or add moisture to the food you are drying?* (Answer: removes moisture (water))
3. *Are dried foods just for decoration or can you eat them?* (Answer: you can eat them too)
4. *Do bacteria grow on dried foods?* (Answer: no, bacteria need moisture to grow)
5. *How much water should you drink every day?* (Answer: at least 6 cups of water a day)
6. *How many fruits and vegetables should you eat every day?* (Answer: at least 5 fruits and vegetables a day)
7. *Does gardening connect you to your culture and help you learn new words in your language?* (Answer: yes)

Preparation for Future Lessons – Reminder for the Instructor

- Review the materials and preparation needed for the next lesson.
- Remember that an Elder guest instructor is needed for these Fall lessons: Lesson 2 (The Plant Life Cycle), Lesson 4 (Seed Saving), Lesson 6 (Drying Foods the Traditional Way) and Lesson 10 (Companion Planting and Traditional Cooking).

Notes
