

Edible Interpretation

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Abstract

The use of original objects is imperative for natural and cultural interpretation. As interpreters, we should have something edible to show visitors when we talk about edible plants or the diets of the people we interpret. What better way to connect to our visitors than through something they do three times a day? Everybody eats!

Keywords

edible, interpretive techniques, connections, eating.

Introduction

Several years ago I attended a guide training through an ecotourism group that was conducting contracting work for my agency. It was very interesting to see interpretation through the eyes of the commercial sector; it was very practical and hands on. During one of the sessions, the trainer mentioned a program he went to in Australia which consisted of a dinner that only used native ingredients. During each course, the native plants that were used were interpreted. Since then, I have been hooked on the idea of edible interpretation. Through my own experimentation with edible interpretation I have seen the value of using edibles as original objects for interpretation, something that everyone can relate to and something that at first seems almost impossible for interpreters but is actually quite easy. What I have found is that the way to a visitor's heart is through their stomach.

Body

The proof of the pudding is in the eating. While growing up, I would often visit my Grandmother's in East Texas. Around the holidays she would make pecan pie made from pecans that came from her backyard. So for me, it was not a big surprise to find out that the state tree of Texas was the Pecan Tree because it was such an important food source for early pioneers who were waiting for their first crops to grow; or that Tonkawa Indians used it as a trade good with early settlers. I already had an intellectual and emotion connection to pecans (especially pecan pies), so it was easy for me to make an intellectual connection to the value of a food source that you could literally be picked off the ground, or an emotional connection to the struggles of pioneer life. Fast forward a couple of years when I was interpreting McKinney Falls State Park, which contained the ranch and mansion of Mr. McKinney, one of Texas's founding fathers. I had a connection to the pecan trees in the park, but did my mid-western retired Winter Texans? Or my urban visitors who bought their pecan pies from Cosco? If I was interpreting the edibility of pecans is it really first hand if I didn't have pecans to show my visitors? No! I soon realized I needed to have pecans present and it would be even better if I had a bag of store bought pecans

so they could make the connection between their own experience and that of Native Americans and Texas pioneers. Of course, the best experience from my perspective would be to also have a pecan pie waiting for them at the visitor center!

The heart of a home is the kitchen. Everybody, at least three times a day, eats. What better universal medium do we have of connecting our resources to visitors? For example, how do we connect early Texas Pioneers with a modern urban visitor? Pioneers were leaving the security and community support of urban centers when our visitors are flocking to it. Pioneers carried everything they needed in a wagon and were prepared to build their own homes. Our visitors rent buildings to hold their extra possessions that will not fit in their prebuilt houses. The answer, of course, is food. I had the chance to host a Dutch Oven gathering at my park where visitors were able to see their holiday favorite recipes being cooked in a traditional way. Even though it was not an interpretive group, there was a lot of interpretation going on. Texas pioneers, native foods and Dutch Oven cooking became real for my visitors. Interpretation at the visitor center and nature trail was no longer sterile because they now had connections to what was being interpreted. I didn't have to have a Dutch Oven to talk about pioneers because my visitors had just seen one, and better yet, tasted something that came out of one. Everyone has emotional and intellectual connections to the food they eat, adding edible interpretation allows them to relate those experiences to our resources.

If you can't take the heat stay out of the kitchen. Unfortunately, too many of us have stayed out of the "kitchen" and this effective form of interpretation has been left at the wayside. My suggestion for the beginning edible interpreter is to either buy it, have somebody else provide the food or contract it out. I was partly able to fulfill my dream of a fully edible interpretive program when we hosted a Valentine's Day Dinner on the deck of Estero Llano Grande State Park. We interpreted birds that mated for life that lived at the park and a local restaurant provided a five course romantic dinner. In my example with the Dutch Oven gathering, the local chapter cooked and handed out all the food. In my example with the pecans, go ahead and buy the Costco pecan pie. Now, every Thanksgiving, when your visitors go out to buy their pie they will think of pecan trees, pioneers, Native Americans and your site!

Conclusion

The difficulties of edible interpretation can be overcome the same way we overcome the other limitations we face in the interpretive field (limited budgets and staffing), through imagination and dedication. The main factor is willingness. Edible interpretation has always been important to me because it is an easy way to connect to the visitors. Eating involves at least four and often all five senses. This eating experience creates memories, and through edible interpretation, connects these memories with our resources. It is also the only way to provide first hand interpretation of edible things. This is why I have found the best way to our visitors heart, is through their stomach.