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Food Detective: On the path of the Chilean pinon

BY DAVID HAMMOND

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The Mapuche are the largest grouping of indigenous people in Chile, comprised of several sub-groups including the Pehuenche (pay-when-chay), or “people of the tree.”

The tree, *Araucaria araucana* or Monkey Puzzle, can live for thousands of years, growing to over 100 feet and sprouting erratic branches that once inspired an Englishman to observe that even a monkey would find it puzzling to climb through such a maze.

The nut of this tree — the pinon — is a cultural icon of the Pehuenche. While traveling, I saw it proudly displayed at a Pehuenche powwow, on dining tables and in jewelry.

About the size of an adult male thumb, the pinon is sheathed in a brownish-red papery skin. It is mild-flavored and has a pleasingly fleshy texture.

A splendid preparation for this nut can be had at La Cocina de Elisa in the small Chilean town of Curarrehue. There, I enjoyed them dressed simply with garlic and olive oil.

Back home in Oak Park, I varied the recipe by adding some basil from my garden. In salads, pinons provide the lightly starchy contrast you might achieve with garbanzo beans or hearts of palm.

Adaptable to sweet and savory dishes, the nut — like the land — has made accommodation to foreign influences.

Since the mid-19th century, the southern municipality of Pucon has accepted a steady flow of German immigrants as a result of the Law of Selective Immigration that encouraged Germans to emigrate to Chile. In the small town of Conaripe, we found an example of how indigenous ingredients become enmeshed in immigrant foodways: The native pinon is cooked into a German “kuchen.”

Unfortunately, actual relations between foreigners and Mapuche have not always been so pleasant as this cake.

For some time, the Pehuenche homeland has been threatened by the interests of settlers, and in particular by large-scale forestry operations that value the fine-grained wood of the Monkey Puzzle tree as construction material.

Allegations continue to be made that the Chilean Department of Agriculture favors logging interests over those of the indigenous peoples, and there is little doubt that the population of trees that define the Pehuenche homeland has radically diminished over the past century.

Still, every autumn, Pehuenche harvest and eat pinon nuts, plucked from the ever-dwindling forest of Monkey Puzzle trees, some of which may have been growing since the days of the Roman Empire, and some of which may very well be growing into the third and, remarkably, possibly even the fourth millennium.

David Hammond is an Oak Park writer, Chicago Public Radio contributor and founder/moderator of culinary chat site LTHForum.com. E-mail detective@suntimes.com.

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