

Labrador Tea and Scones

Hi, I'm Michael your Alaskan Cultural Chef and welcome to this series of shows on cultural food and my experiences since 2008 living in bush Alaska.

Today I'll be talking about Pam's and my first village and my experience learning about Labrador tea, where its found, what it looks like, how to brew and what I used to serve with it.

Pam and I began our Alaskan bush adventures waiting at the village of Unalakleet airport for our ride to Stebbins on Norton Sound. We were lugging our luggage and boxes of food from Anchorage. We boarded a Cessna 207 for the short half hour flight.

Our arrival was an incredible one because the plane came in from the Norton Sound side of the village. We landed on a rustic gravel runway and we both looked at each other with a look of, "what did we just get into!"

The plane taxied into place and we began unloading our luggage and groceries. We were met by a man named Bob, owner of one of the two stores who was riding a 4 wheeler with a trailer in tow. The trip to the school was an experience I will never forget.

We were loaded with our luggage and food without any straps or hand holds on the trailer. About three kids jumped on with us as we began the short but very fast trip to the school. Off we went! As Bob came up on his first turn we held onto each other tightly as we made the turn. One of the kids disappeared from the trailer. About five minutes later we barely made it to the school gymnasium with one kid left on the trailer.

This is where we met a teacher named Eric at the gym door with keys. He let us in where the rest of our supplies and resources that we had previously mailed were waiting for us. Eric was an awesome, positive guy, and also a math teacher, as well as tech guru. He had a great sense of humor and led us to our apartment in teacher housing.

At the time Stebbins was a fairly large community of about 700 people, with a large elementary/high school, two native stores and a gravel runway. The village itself was laid out as one long street with homes and businesses stretching about a mile. Adjacent to this is a levee road that connected us from teacher housing to the beach and dump. Near the end of this levee the road headed inland toward a small residential area where a number of off grid homes existed. Because the infrastructure was so limited in Stebbins, many residents had to haul their own water and waste was carried out and stored in large bins

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outside their homes. The waste was picked up on a schedule every so often. Many villages in Norton Sound were the same in this regard. Even the large village of Unalakleet had to ration its water and toilet flushing was limited.

Our apartment was a small one bedroom with interesting amenities. It had a large sofa in a small living room and a small dining table near our entry door. The kitchen was quite small with an upright electric stove and full sized refrigerator that had seen better days. We had two water sources. One was from an old well that put out rusty water which we were told not to drink and was pumped into the bathroom where it was used for showers and flushing the toilet. The other source was a clean source that came from a huge tank that supplied the village and the school. Finally to cap things off there was windows in the living room as well as a small window in our bedroom that faced the ocean. The sunsets were amazing from this bedroom window.

Stebbins in particular has a rich and historical culture. It was and still is one of the few places where dancing, potlatches, basket making and subsistence is still a major part of the tribal community. It's one of the many reasons I fell in love with Alaska bush communities and it is why I would experience living there all again!

The first week we were there, Pam was called to a week of teacher development meetings at our district office in Unalakleet. While she was gone I went on walks to see the layout of the village and its people.

On one of my first walks a couple who lived a ways from the village came out of their home and invited me in for tea. They were a charming couple who had laid out snacks, cookies, a pot of hot water, and tea cups. They offered me a tea that was harvested from the tundra. I tasted the tea as a good guest would and found it to be very flavorful. I asked them what they called the tea. They just said it was from the tundra and they had a cup each day.

As I remember, the tea had a flavor similar to chamomile and spearmint combined. Before moving to Alaska I always loved herbal and imported teas. I used to purchase and consume types from specialty shops near my home. I later found out through attending an Alaskan cultural natural food course that the tea was called Labrador tea. Other names used were bog tea and swamp tea.

The tea grows in wet areas in Alaska and the tundra is the best location to find it. The leaves are similar to the herb rosemary except a little larger and the plant produces a flower easily identifiable with small white petals and long stamens. When visiting places like Denali look for it near the streams and pond

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locations. However, the tundra areas are the best places to look for the tea. I usually found it near wild blue berries and squaw berries. Squaw berries are similar looking to blueberries only smaller with a large pit in the center.

The tundra is a unique place to harvest food. The ground is wet and spongy. I always wore rubber boots and always kept an eye on the ground beneath me so I would step in the right places. I also kept an eye out for bears. The villagers told me about bear encounters and how they would raise their shirts or kespuks above their heads to look taller than the bears. I guess this worked although never encountered a bear.

To prepare the tea you only need water and sprigs of the tea plant. First bring a kettle of water to a boil. Take the water off the heat and add a few good sized sprigs to the pot and steep at least 3 to 5 minutes depending on how strong you like the flavor of the tea.

Now. What to serve with Labrador Tea. During the fall on the village tundra one can find wild blue berries, crow berries, salmon berries, cranberries, strawberries and raspberries. My favorite among these berries are blue berries. They are healthy with anti oxidants and wild berries have the best flavor. I loved baking blue berry scones and serving them to some of the village elders I had become acquainted with.

I began by modifying an English scone recipe replacing cold butter with lard (preferably lard without any smell or flavor and later I found coconut oil. Some people could also get vegetable shorting. I preferred unscented lard or coconut oil and spent hours in village grocery stores. Once I began working for NACTEC in Nome as a house parent, I found the Nome A/C store very useful.

Here is my recipe for my Alaskan version of the English scone made with blue berries.

2 cups all purpose flour

1 tsp baking powder

1/2 tsp baking soda

3 TBL sugar

1 pinch of salt

2 Tsp ground cardamom (if available)

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1/2 cup of cold lard or coconut oil (1/2 stick butter also works)

1/2 cup or more of blue berries

2/3 cup milk (will make a sticky mixture)

Instructions: Pre-heat oven 425 degrees

1. Sift flour and add all other dry ingredients except baking powder and baking soda into a large bowl. Chop cold lard or coconut oil small bits and then rub into the flour with your fingers until the flour looks pebbly. Do not rush this step or take shortcuts if you are after light, nicely risen scones. Place dough in refrigerator for 15 minutes.
2. Take out from the refrigerator, add milk, baking powder, baking soda and mix together. Incorporate this mixture until a sticky dough forms and then fold in the blue berries. I like it moist, but add more flour if you wish a dryer scone. Add more milk a little at a time if too dry.
3. Pat out a nice round 8 to 10 inch circle on a baking pan parchment covered, or a greased pie pan. Cut the round diagonally into 8 equal scones. If using pie pan you can wait to cut until finished baking and having cooled for 15 minutes.
4. Bake at 425 for 20 to 24 minutes checking for a nice rise and brown top. Insert a tooth pick into the scone and remove for doneness (it should come out clean). It may take longer to bake if you don't cut the round before baking.

Note: I've also used dried cranberries and other berries in this recipe. Don't be afraid to experiment with different ingredients like butter, coconut oil or even crisco shortening. The flavor and results are what we are after.

May your day be blessed

Michael, Alaska Cultural Chef

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