

Eating Gitxaala, Being Gitxaala: Food and Cultural Security

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I was sitting at the kitchen table when the news came. This was the day that Gitxaala people had been waiting for, the Government of Canada's announcement of the final decision for the Enbridge Northern Gateway oil pipeline project.¹ As the television journalist spoke the focus of everyone in the room shifted from the projected image on the screen towards the large picture window overlooking the very place that would be affected. Silence. A somber voice came on the VHF radio: "It was approved" and clicked off.

That evening as family members gathered around the kitchen table, conversation turned to the implications of the approval of the Enbridge project for Gitxaala Nation and its territory. First, the conversation focused on what it would mean for the territory, the water, the animals, and the plants. Destruction. Devastation. It then shifted to what it would mean for the food harvested from the territory. Inaccessible. Inedible. This was a conversation about what it would mean for the people living in the territory, the Git lax m'oon,² the future of their lives and their grandchildren's lives, the transmission of culture, and ultimately the future of Gitxaala Nation.

1 The Enbridge Northern Gateway oil pipeline project is to build oil and gas pipelines that would span over 1000 km, from the Alberta oil sands to Kitimat, B.C. Natural gas condensate would be imported via eastbound pipelines; diluted bitumen would be exported via westbound pipelines. While there are an abundance of environmental and cultural concerns related to the different components of the project overall, it is the tanker traffic that would navigate through Gitxaala territory that is of particular concern to the Gitxaala Nation and therefore of relevance to this thesis.

2 'People of the saltwater' in Sm'algyax along with Gitxaala being a name that refers to the people of the Gitxaala Nation.

“What other reason do we have to live here? Without the food I wouldn’t live here,” one man lamented referring to the food harvested from the territory. This response to the Enbridge project decision, perhaps more than anything else I witnessed, illuminated the centrality of the territory-based food system to the culture and identity of Gitxaala Nation.

Projects like Enbridge have created a sense of anxiety among Gitxaala people. Such projects are understood as real tangible threats to Gitxaala territory, governance, and culture. The community and its research agents have tirelessly engaged proponents through education, meetings, and tours of Gitxaala territory to try to show them the beauty and wealth of Gitxaala culture and land. Community members often discuss how proponents “just don’t understand” the value and deep connection of Gitxaala resources, and foods, to Gitxaala people. Gitxaala foods are interwoven throughout multiple facets of Gitxaala culture and are fundamental to everyday life. Gitxaala food is a topic that permeates daily conversations throughout the village. Much like the weather is a conversation opener for city folk, the foods currently being harvested are a typical way to engage in short casual conversations in the village. Each time I trudged down one of the roads in the village I would come upon someone; pleasantries were often followed by comments on how the weather related to harvesting or processing of food. “Oh it’s a stormy day out there, not a good day for picking”; “Sun is shining perfect for drying.”

Gitxaala foods and resource management are central in discussions surrounding the body of academic research conducted with Gitxaala Nation. When Git lax m’oon speak of their foods they are not only talking about sustenance, they are speaking about themselves, their traditions, laws, and culture. Any threat to their territory and resources is also a threat to Gitxaala people themselves, their culture and traditions. Food is an intricate component to understanding and being Git lax m’oon.

The concept of food security is a popular buzzword when discussing the needs and well being of Indigenous peoples, particularly among those in locations inaccessible by road and/or without local access to grocery stores. Food insecurity is identified to be a problematic issue among many First Nations throughout Canada (Power 2008). Territory-based foods are understood as a steady and reliable source of food, although there are a host of issues surrounding the inability to consume such foods, including costs associated with harvesting, time required (away from work) to harvest food, environmental contaminants, climate change, and other threats related to territory and ability to access territory. Typically, academic, governmental and public policy discussions of food security recognize the cultural importance of eating territory-based foods but often fail to consider the unique cultural significance and importance in each stage of Indigenous food systems: harvesting, processing and storing, cooking and eating, as well as sharing. Embedded within each of these stages are cultural values and teachings unique to the place and the people who are

engaging with the food system. Furthermore, it is through these practices where relationships are established and maintained.

Involvement in the entirety of the food system and its activities, from harvest to consumption, are all acts which Alfred and Corntassel (2005) would consider as vital to living and ‘being Indigenous.’ These are the very practices that forge connection and relationships to the land and allow individuals and communities to understand what it means to be of the *laxyuup*,³ while providing the means to interact with, build, and understand the community makeup. The Gitxaala food system is a principal channel through which the Git lax m’oon are able to connect with and practice what it means to be of the Gitxaala Nation.

The importance and centrality of Gitxaala foods to the lives of the Git lax m’oon is quite evident upon visiting Lach Klan. As I would wait at the seaplane base or the ferry terminal to travel to Lach Klan I was always provided with insight into what was going on in the village, especially in relation to Gitxaala foods. Talk of Gitxaala food seeps into most discussions of those waiting to go to Lach Klan; details of who has gone where and what (and how much) they harvested are exchanged, how the weather has affected ability to smoking fish or drying *la’ask*,⁴ and who has had the latest brush with the DFO⁵ over harvesting Gitxaala foods were all topics of conversation I overheard. Conversations that included mention of the Enbridge pipeline or other resource extraction projects almost inevitably lead to discussion of Gitxaala foods. The vignette on the reaction to the pipeline approval in the opening of this chapter exemplifies the typical feelings community members have towards Enbridge.

Following Power’s (2008) call for qualitative research to determine Indigenous perspectives and definitions of food security, my research originally set out to find a Gitxaala specific definition. Power (2008) highlights the importance of the intricacies of the cultural elements embedded in food that are vital for Indigenous people’s connecting to cultural traditions and ways of life. My research was conceived with interest in how food figures in understanding and being Gitxaala.

I took on the role of an apprentice⁶ in order to learn about the centrality of Gitxaala foods. As an apprentice there was a lot of time spent observing and little time spent doing. I used this time to video-record harvesting and food processing practices to create film vignettes for the community. My goal was to follow Gitxaala foods from ocean to fork, and to understand each stage of their food system: harvesting, processing and storing, as well as cooking and eating. Sharing is a vital component of the Gitxaala food system that is pervasive through each of the other stages.

3 *Laxyuup* is the translation for “territory” in Sm’algyax, the language of the Gitxaala people.

4 *La’ask* is the Sm’algyax word for the red laver seaweed (*Porphyra abbottiae*) typically picked May. Both *la’ask* and seaweed are used in the local vernacular to refer to the particular species eaten.

5 Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada

6 See Jarvenpa (1998) for ethnography of apprenticeship on Dené hunting.

I was able to approach Gitxaala's food system from two entry points. While in the village of Kitkatla I stayed at a bed and breakfast operated by a community elder. Annabelle continually provided me with some of my most flavourful (pun intended) fieldwork experiences. In her home I was introduced to many foods and dishes that I had never tasted or had even heard of before arriving in Lach Klan. From her I learned about eating Gitxaala foods. Annabelle is a fabulous cook, who prides herself in the preparation of each meal in her kitchen for her family and for guests. As a guest in her B&B I would often help prepare meals. I learned a lot about the many new foods that I encountered in Lach Klan and the many different ways that they can be prepared and eaten.

My second entry point into the food system was through spending time with a harvester. Cyril graciously taught me and allowed me to video record teachings about food. I took on the role of an apprentice who watches intently, does very little, and even got in the way once or twice. I was first introduced to Cyril while being shown around the village by Caroline Butler. Upon mentioning that he was drying *la'ask* later that day, Caroline jumped at the opportunity to arrange for me to tag along to film and to learn. A few hours later I apprehensively opened the door to the home that matched the description I was given. As soon as I opened the door I could smell a strong unfamiliar scent that I would later recognize as the smell of *la'ask*. A familiar voice greeted me as I moved down through the doorway, "Hello! I'm in the basement, just about to get started."

Food Security And Cultural Importance

Food security is defined by the World Health Organization as "when all people at all times have access to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life" (World Health Organization 2016) and is considered to exist on three separate levels: individual, household, and community. Food security is maintained when its four pillars are upheld: (1) *access* to food source (2) *availability* of food (3) *utilization* of food and (4) *stability* of food supply (World Health Organization 2016).

Such a conceptualization of food security is the typical definition used throughout Canada when considering nutritional needs; it is widely used throughout the public health system, and research examining food practices and food availability in Indigenous populations. This definition excludes the practices associated with food outside of consumption, and also fails to incorporate the perspective of Indigenous peoples. Sociologist Elaine Power (2008) argues that Indigenous peoples of Canada have unique food security considerations related to harvesting, sharing, and consuming (I would also add processing) of their own foods and proposes that cultural food security be another level of food security to be included in working definitions of the concept.

When the Git lax m'oon talk about their food, they are talking about themselves. The harvesting, processing, and consumption of Gitxaała foods are not just about the physical act of fishing or smoking or eating, each act is an experience that encompasses language, story, history and relationships. These are all acts of cultural practice and transmission that assert Git lax m'oon identity and differentiate them not only from *K'amksiwab'* but also from other Nations. Ensuring the security of Gitxaała foods is vital to ensuring the continuation of Gitxaała cultural practices and values; therefore Gitxaała's food system can be understood as a source of cultural security.

Gitxaała Food System

My analysis begins with the Gitxaała food system as a whole. This approach provides a wide view into the significance of the territory-based food system. Each stage of the food system is embedded with different bits of cultural knowledge. Just as processing, storing, cooking, and eating expose knowledge not revealed by focusing solely on harvesting, each of these stages provides insight into each of the other stages that would not be realized without studying the system as a whole. Each and every stage of the food system embodies cultural values, relationships, and knowledge in unique ways.

The Gitxaała food system has several stages: harvesting, processing, storing, sharing, selling, cooking, and eating. Each stage, however, is not distinct and the stages often overlap. *Syt güülm goot*, which can be understood as sharing, is not a distinct stage but a vital component of the food system as a whole; *syt güülm goot* is foundational to the continued practice of the Gitxaała food system. I attempted to follow food from ocean to fork and involved myself in food practices wherever and whenever opportunity arose. I did not learn in sequential order; my first point of entry was sitting around a table eating a meal. I first realized that there was much to be learned on the importance of food sharing simply by sitting on a couch listening to the VHF radio and people's offers, requests, and sales of food. I watched a lot of meal preparations and cooking before I was able to join a harvesting trip.

This chapter is organized to focus on harvesting, processing and storing, and cooking and eating and discuss the sharing that is pervasive throughout each of these stages. Sharing and selling of Gitxaała foods are critical components of the food system, which permit access to food for those who cannot or do not harvest. The sale of foods within the community is not considered legal according to Canadian law;⁸ however it reflects the long traditions of barter and sale between households within Gitxaała Nation and between First Nations.

7 The Sm'algayx word for Euro-Canadian settlers.

8 See <http://cfmrnm.ca/dfo-cracks-down-on-illegal-seafood-sales-on-facebook/> for recent clash with DFO over sale of Gitxaała food amounting to a total of \$150.

The fragmented way in which I present the Gitxaala food system speaks to the experience of many individuals living in Lach Klan. Very few individuals are involved in each of the stages from harvest to consumption. Further, due to an abundance of sharing and selling individuals are able to process food they did not harvest, they may eat food they did not take part in harvesting or processing, and individuals harvest food that they will never eat. In this chapter I rely on the example of *la'ask* to demonstrate the importance and interconnectivity of all the stages of the food system at Gitxaala. *Ea'ask* is the food that I interacted with most; I was involved in all stages from ocean to fork. Each of the following stages embodies Gitxaala culture and social relations in a multitude of ways.

Harvesting

Cyril placed two empty white pails into his skiff before he hopped in it. He turned back toward me and took my video camera and backpack, then placed them on the bench before I stepped off the float⁹ and into the skiff. We readied ourselves, arranged our gear and buckled up our lifejackets. Then, Cyril let the motor rumble. As we zipped away from the float, Cyril looked into the lens of the camera that I held in my lap and smiled “We’re headed out to what we call our deep freeze.” Sometime later we arrived at an exposed rock. He jumped out of the skiff onto the rock and pointed out the *dzik’wi’its*,¹⁰ *bilbaa*,¹¹ and *’yaans*¹² and explained how these are foods that can only be picked at low tide. He cracked open *dzik’wi’its* on the side of the rock, split it apart, carefully slid the delicate golden brown roe out onto his fingers and placed it straight in his mouth. “Breakfast” he said. He picked up a *bilbaa* off the rock, turned to me and said, “We’re not allowed to eat these,” and told me about the current day DFO moratorium on their harvest (See Menzies 2010, 2015 for more detail). That particular morning we had set out to pick *la'ask* so he leapt back into the skiff and continued to search for an exposed rock that would allow us to pick.

Ea'ask grows on tidally submerged rocks. It is somewhat iridescent and has a deep dark green hue. Its appearance and texture reminded me of VHS tape that was wavy along its edges. It hung from the sides of the exposed rock at low tide in different lengths. Cyril showed me how to pick the seaweed off of the rock.

A young nephew of mine asked his grandma “how do you pick seaweed?” She said “I’ll show you...” She then rolled the roots of his hair close to his scalp around her fingers and pulled down quickly. “...that way you won’t forget.”

Ea'ask is graded as it is picked. Some grows too fuzzy, some too thick; among the seaweed that is being picked to eat grow other kinds of seaweed. Learn-

9 The floating dock, the major entry point to the village of Lach Klan.

10 The Sm’algyax word for sea urchin. Typically *dzik’wi’its* is used in the local vernacular.

11 The Sm’algyax word for abalone. Both *bilbaa* and abalone are used in the local vernacular.

12 The Sm’algyax word for chiton. Typically *’yaans* is used in the local vernacular.

ing how to dry *la'ask* taught me what a desirable harvest looked and felt like, enabling me to grade as I picked. I wedged myself in crevices before picking, out of fear that I would slip off the rock. Cyril walked easily about the rock picking seaweed. As he worked he told me about safety on rocks only exposed at low tides:

Three women paddled a boat out to an exposed rock not far from here at low tide to pick seaweed. Each woman jumped out onto the rock and busied herself picking seaweed. When the baskets were filled and they were ready to paddle back, the boat was gone. Each woman had assumed that the other had secured the boat's anchor to the rock. The tide soon rose and the women vanished.

These are cautionary tales about the knowledge and attention to detail required for interacting with places that are temporarily accessible. The act of harvesting and being present in these particular places brings up particular stories. The act of harvesting keeps the oral traditions alive, relevant, and ensures that they are shared.

La'ask can only be picked in early spring. Harvesters are able to identify that *la'ask* is nearly ready to be picked by the budding of particular plant species in the village. This speaks to the close relationship that the Git lax m'oon have with their *Laxyuup*. Being in tune with the life cycles of different species acts as a way of 'telling time' to identify when certain activities can be practiced. Through harvesting, the Git lax m'oon are enabled not only to live within the territory but to also interact with it, to know the territory and its ecosystems intimately. Ultimately it enables *syt giüülm goot* to be practiced and lived.

Harvesting requires the use of a boat; maintenance and fuel expenses associated with operating a boat make the cost of harvesting prohibitive to many members of the Gitxaala Nation. There is no shortage of people wanting to harvest; however there is a shortage of opportunity for those who do not own boats. Harvesters typically harvest with others to share the workload. Harvesting trips are a practice of relationship building. I spent several hours salmon fishing with five men on a wet, cold day. Cyril's own skiff is too small to carry all the gear required for salmon fishing, let alone the catch. He borrowed his nephew's boat for this harvesting trip. We left Lach Klan before sunrise in order to arrive at the site while the tide was low. Cyril, his son-in-law, his cousin, his friend, and I sat under the hood of the borrowed boat. Cyril's son rode alone in the smaller skiff.

We arrived at End Hill, a popular fishing spot, just after dawn. After setting up the net there was not much to do but wait. We all tried to stay warm and dry under the hood of the boat. Periodically two men would hop into the skiff and pull fish out of the net and place them into Rubbermaid tote bins. Eventually we got out onto the rock to which we had tied to stretch our legs. A small fire was made atop of the rock, we stood around it to dry and warm ourselves. We spent the majority of the several

hours with not much to do but wait; we sipped hot coffee from a thermos, shared food and snacks, all the while sharing stories and jokes. After the fish were taken out of the net one last time and the net hauled back into the boat, we gutted the fish on a rock. Knives slit through fish bellies, guts were pulled out and left to wash out to sea, roe was set aside to take back with us. About 170 cleaned fish were put back in the totes before we headed back to Lach Klan. “A small haul” I was told. Several more harvesting trips would be required to get the fish they needed for themselves and their families. Upon arrival back at the village the fish were divided up. Each of the six of us got a share of the fish. The next day a few of these same men went out and distributed that day’s catch between themselves and a few aunts.

Harvesting offers a vantage point to understand the life cycles of the territory and how all within this territory connects and shares life. Harvesting provides an opportunity to connect with people and is a time of relationship building. Harvesting brings people together where they share stories, knowledge, equipment, gear (such as boats and nets), and ultimately the catch itself.

Processing And Storing

Food harvested from the sea is understood as food as soon as it is harvested; long before it is processed. After being harvested there are multiple different methods of processing to provide different uses and flavours of the food. *Ła’ask* is dried, pressed, chopped or frozen. Fish can be smoked, dried, jarred, or frozen. I group these different activities all under one heading ‘processing and storing’ for ease of organizational purposes. No person I encountered in the village uttered the word ‘processing’ but instead referred to a specific activity such as, smoking, jarring, chopping *Ła’ask*, et cetera.

This stage of the food system is a tremendous amount of work. Beyond the effort involved, significant amounts of time and knowledge are required in order to ensure the quality (taste as well as health and safety) of the food. After *Ła’ask* is picked there are multiple stages for its processing before it is ready for storage and consumption. Some *Ła’ask* is placed immediately into Ziploc bags and into a freezer for storage. Drying *Ła’ask* begins shortly after its harvest.¹³

My very first interaction with Gitxaala food, other than eating it, was laying *Ła’ask* out to dry. Handfuls of *Ła’ask* were taken from a mesh-lined bucket and spread out on the *ha’li’lax si’la’ask*, a square slatted cedar board. Since it was overcast and rain was expected at any moment each of the *Ła’ask* covered *ha’li’lax si’la’ask* were left balanced on top of a box, freezer, wooden beam or washing machine in the shelter of the basement, until they could later be put out in the sun. These *ha’li’lax si’la’ask* once belonged to Cyril’s father who had made them. He told me how just a few weeks prior he had repaired the *ha’li’lax si’la’ask* as some of the cedar slats had come loose

13 *Ła’ask* used to be dried on the side of rocks, however this is done less frequently in recent times.

or worn. After laying out a few squares, Cyril turned to me and asked if I wanted to try. *La'ask* is a little bit slimy. It has a green-black colour and, when pulled, resembles the texture and feel of thin film plastic. As it is spread out on *ha'li'lax si'ta'ask* the *ta'ask* is graded, I was shown which pieces of *ta'ask* to discard; thicker and/or fuzzier pieces are not included to be dried. Learning to lay *ta'ask* out to dry prepared me for harvesting it. Other than eating, this is usually the first interaction that Git lax m'oon children have with *ta'ask*.

There are many ingenious methods used to dry *ta'ask*: drying it in the oven at the lowest temperature, in a dehydrator, using a mesh screen instead of *ha'li'lax si'ta'ask*, and some people even take the nearly dried squares off of *ha'li'lax si'ta'ask* and clip them to laundry hangers to finish drying. The number of squares is the local vernacular for describing and understanding how much *ta'ask* a family picked. Once squares are completely dry, some are folded up and placed into Ziploc bags for dry storage, some are then prepared for chopping.

Squares of dried *ta'ask* are layered into a box with fresh seawater sprinkled on top of each layer in order to help the layers stick together to make a cake. Once the box is filled to the top the layers of *ta'ask* are compacted to make a cake. I saw this done by placing a piece of clean cardboard atop the *ta'ask* and then the cardboard being repeatedly marched upon. A weight was then left on top of the compressed layers of *ta'ask* before it was left to dry. Once the “cake” dries it is ready to be chopped. A large dried out log had been made into a chopping block. It arrived via wheelbarrow from a family members' home. The top of the block had been encircled with rubber to prevent the bits of chopped *ta'ask* from falling off the side of its flat surface. The homemade chopping knife was fashioned from a repurposed logging saw; the teeth of the saw were placed into a long piece of wood that served as the handle and the smooth side of the saw was sharpened and used as a chopping knife. Before *ta'ask* is chopped it is again sprinkled with fresh saltwater. I filmed as an Elder sat down on a short stepstool and chopped *ta'ask*; “There are other ways of doing this,” she told me, “I do it this way because that's the way my parents always did.” Her arm was in a constant steady motion bringing the large knife down onto the *ta'ask*. I soon offered to take over the chopping. It is physically exhausting work. As the *ta'ask* was chopped, the *ta'ask* flakes were laid to dry in the sun on a tablecloth. Annabelle told me that I had chopped the *ta'ask* too much; that the pieces were smaller than she prefers. This was not a complaint or a judgment that I had ruined the *ta'ask* but was a matter of fact statement so that I would learn and change what I was doing. Once dried, the chopped *ta'ask* was funnelled into large glass jars that once stored pickles and was placed into the pantry.

I followed Cyril through a gate and into a backyard. As we turned around the back of the house there was an extended family all working towards a common goal. There were five women, the homeowner, her three daughters, and one granddaughter.

100 OF ONE HEART

They sat around tables set up under a blue tarp cutting up the fish they had caught the previous day. One man, the husband of one of the daughters, was preparing wood for a fire. After being introduced to everyone I held up my video camera and I asked whether it was okay to film what they were doing. All attention was then focused toward the matriarch of the family. "It's up to her," I was told by a woman sitting on a stool beside me as she continued to cut fish on top of a Rubbermaid tote bin. I was given a nod from the matriarch to acknowledge that it was indeed fine for me to start filming.

Jarring fish is a yearly tradition for this extended family. They harvest salmon together, and then smoke and jar fish together. Work and family obligations have caused two of the sisters to live outside of Lach Klan, but each year they take time away from their regular schedules to get their fish. "We've all worked in the cannery at some point or another and none of us would ever eat that fish. We've seen the way it looks when it comes in," I'm told as the women continue to cut the fish up, preparing it to be put into jars. Children run around the back yard playing, yelling, and periodically peeking their eyes up above the table.

Hours later, after all the fish is cut up and rinsed clean; it is ready to be packed into jars. A few pinches of salt are put into the bottom of each jar before they are packed with salmon. The rim of each jar is wiped clean, and then a brand new lid is placed on top of each jar before having a ring twisted on to ensure the lid stays in place. Younger kids become more involved more at this point, periodically helping to fill jars, wipe clean the rims, and place lids on top of jars. Once the jars are packed with salmon and the lids are on they are ready to be sealed.

After about seven hours of cutting and packing jars full of salmon, the incredible number of jars were ready to be sealed. This was each of these five families' supplies of jarred fish for the year. Two large metal barrels that had been set up above a fire pit were filled with jars. There was not enough room to fit all of the jars so the rest were set aside for second batch that would fill another barrel and a half. The barrels were then filled with water from the garden hose, sheets of metal were placed on top of each barrel, and a fire was lit beneath. To seal the jars safely the jars need to be boiled for four hours. It was about six o'clock in the evening by the time the fire was started. From this point it would take several hours to get the frigid water to boil. The fire needed to be tended to all through the night.

This family wasn't just jarring fish. Their backyard smokehouse was also filled with fish. As the jars were being loaded into the drums by the grandkids, other family members were taking the smoked fish out of the smokehouse. A grandmother packed ziploc bags with smoked fish and then divided the bags into separate piles for each of the families involved in the workload to take home. A young woman entered the room; she had not been around all day. A noticeably smaller share of fish was slid towards her and she was told, "If you want more for your family next year, you need to be here and help."

Months later at a Canada Day celebration in a Prince Rupert park I saw one of the women that had been jarring fish that day in the backyard. She and I had a brief conversation, but she made a point to tell me that my presence and interest in something that was seemingly so ordinary to her (jarring and smoking fish) caused her to reflect on what it meant to her. She explained that it was something deeply important for her to do each year, to go home for smoking and jarring salmon. It was not only for the fish that she would get to eat throughout the year but also an opportunity to interact with the land and water, and to connect with her family.

Processing food is an exemplary practice of *syt güülm goot*. All are expected to share in the efforts to get all of the work done and to receive a share in the food. The idea that everyone is involved together is not only to share the workload but also to ensure the practice is continued. Furthermore, it is a practice that enables individuals to connect with and affirm relationships with ancestors, through practicing techniques that had been taught and passed through the generations or by using *ha'li'lax si'la'ask*, knives, or jars that had been previously used by loved ones.

Cooking and Eating

As I spread out *la'ask* on the *ha'li'lax si'la'ask*, I turned to Rose and said, “there’s no way I need all of this. You should take some of it.” She looked at me and shot me a smile of disbelief. For dinner that night Annabelle took a Ziploc bag filled with dried *la'ask* out of the pantry and taught me how to deep-fry it. *Ea'ask* is prepared by cutting the large square up into smaller pieces. Deep frying *la'ask* is a delicate process; place it in oil for too long and it’s burnt, not long enough and it’s not crispy just greasy. Each morsel is placed into a pot of hot oil, flipped over, taken out of the oil, and then dropped into a bowl lined with paper towels in a matter of seconds.

“Do you see the colour of this?” Annabelle said to me as she held up a piece of fried *la'ask*. It was a brighter green after being fried “this is the colour it gets when we know it’s ready”.

“See this one,” pointing to a morsel that had brownish yellow bits around the edges “was cooked too long.”

She dipped another piece of *la'ask* into the hot oil with tongs and took it out without flipping it over, “see this colour? Wasn’t cooked long enough.” It was still nearly black. “Now, taste it,” she said handing me a bite-sized piece cooked to the bright green colour. It was crispy, salty, it melted in my mouth; it was reminiscent of a potato chip but far more satisfying. After I crunched into my first piece I said: “I don’t think that I got enough to last me very long.” Everyone in the kitchen laughed, “We knew you would change your mind once you tasted it.” “We’ve got a little Indian giver here.” Rose could not contain her delight, “Just a few hours ago she was giving it away, now she wants more.” I was affectionately teased about this time and time again.

Gitxaala foods are luxury foods coveted by outsiders: sockeye salmon, Dungeness crab, abalone, sea urchin, halibut, and herring roe, just to name a few. The love and gratitude that outsiders or the Git lax m'oon who no longer live in the village have for the quality, taste, and ease of access to Gitxaala foods is a channel through which people living in Lach Klan reflect on their appreciation for the steady supply of Gitxaala food. The very first time I visited Lach Klan the woman with whom I stayed lamented about how eating Gitxaala foods, which are often considered high quality delicacies by outsiders, is part of the everyday and ordinary in Lach Klan. She reflected that it is outsiders' taste and desire to only eat Gitxaala food while staying in the village (and also leaving the village with a supply of Gitxaala food) that helps to bolster the Git lax m'oon's appreciation of their own food while also hindering Gitxaala foods from being considered ordinary.

Gitxaala foods are incorporated into many different types of meals. From my observations I could note that the vast majority of meals eaten in Lach Klan include Gitxaala foods. Countless hours are put into transforming Gitxaala food from something that is living in the *laxyuup* to something that is stored in the pantry or freezer. *Ea'ask* is a food eaten frequently in numerous types of ways. *Ea'ask* that is placed straight from the sea into Ziploc bags and stored in the freezer is added to stir-fries. Chopped *la'ask* can be used to make broths, added to soups, or sprinkled on top of rice. Dried *la'ask* squares can be crisped in the oven by baking at a low temperature, or deep-fried in oil. Jarred sockeye salmon is used to make salmon sandwiches or eaten straight out of the jar with rice. Smoked salmon can be made into sushi rolls. Frozen salmon is fried, baked, broiled, poached, and made into soups and chowders.

There is more to cooking than purely acquiring necessary ingredients and having the knowledge and ability to follow (or recall) a recipe; cooking is a social act embedded with cultural meaning. Relationships are reaffirmed through the act of cooking Gitxaala foods. The knowledge and skills required to cook Gitxaala foods are typically passed down from mother to daughter. Each time a meal is cooked there is more than just a meal being prepared but it is also a practice of strengthening and honouring relationships. There is much thought put into what will be cooked and for whom. Ensuring that family members are fed their favoured foods is an act of love and appreciation. It is inevitable that family members visiting from outside of Lach Klan will eat most if not all of their favourite Gitxaala foods and dishes while in the village, and will be provided with enough to take some home.

The amount of food prepared for a meal is not simply for those expected to eat, but a surplus tends to be made for leftovers, in case of an unexpected dinner guest, or to be shared with others. Many nights around dinner hour you can hear offerings over the VHF radio, "I've got enough boiled seal meat here for about four people. Bring a pot or container over if you want some." Cooking is not just an act of food preparation but is an exercise in remembering and connecting with both, ancestors and family.

When a large bowl of fried *ta'ask* was placed in the middle of the dinner table along with a pot full of rice, a few jars of sockeye, and soya sauce everyone in Annabelle's kitchen quickly found a seat at the table. This was a meal I had on several occasions while staying with Annabelle; I was told it is a preferred meal for many of her family members. Annabelle's adult son popped off the lid from a jar of sockeye and proclaimed his love for the contents,

"The best there ever was, the best there is, the best there ever will be."

The jars of sockeye were scraped clean, the mountain of fried *ta'ask* quickly dwindled. Annabelle and her four family members thrilled at my love for this meal. Sitting around the table is also a time for conversation and political conversation: family members talk about memories of previous harvesting trips and future plans to harvest, but also about the future of Gitxaala's food system. Often casual conversation about the food would lead to discussion of how projects in the territory would affect the health of the *laxyuup* (tanker traffic introducing invasive species affecting the ecosystem, tanker spills), the continued ability to engage in harvesting practices (environmental degradation and increased vessel traffic in waters limiting Git lax m'oon's access to sites and resources), and thus capacity to eat Gitxaala foods (the health, safety, and quality of foods). These dialogues contained more than concern for food but also an anxiety for the impacts such a future would have on the Gitxaala Nation and its cultural practices.

I was offered the last piece of fried *ta'ask* left on the oil soaked paper towel and I cheerfully accepted. Everyone around the table smirked as I proceeded to finish off the last of the crumbs in the bowl. Rose turned to me laughing and said, "I guess we should have mentioned to you earlier that eating seaweed gives you real stinky farts." The room roared. A few fart jokes were made. I thought they were all teasing me, which had become a regular occurrence. They were not.

I was thankful later that night to have a bedroom all to myself; these were by far the most pungent smells I had ever created. This, however, was not the first time that I was warned of the after effects of eating Gitxaala foods. The first time I ever ate cockles I was told of the delicious flavour of the saltwater that they were cooked in. As a few others slurped up the salty broth I was cautioned against tasting any, as that they didn't want me to be embarrassed by the resulting unpleasant odours on the ferry I was about to take from Lach Klan to Prince Rupert.

The aromas (or stench) that food creates after digestion is not something regularly considered part of a food system; in fact this is a facet of human life that has rarely been studied in the discipline of Anthropology.¹⁴ However, due to the distinct smell that the saltwater foods create after digestion individuals are mindful of what they eat, when they eat it, and around whom they eat. Thus the resulting flatulence is understood to be part and parcel of eating particular Gitxaala foods.

14 See <http://popanth.com/article/silent-but-deadly-farts-across-cultures> for a discussion on the under-theorization of flatulence in Anthropology

There is much more happening in the kitchen other than cooking and eating; it is where the assemblage of time, effort, knowledge, and relationships culminate. Eating is the final and necessary act in the Gitxaala food system that demands the continued practice of all the efforts completed in order to provide the meal. It is the desire to eat Gitxaala foods that warrants that Gitxaala food continues to be harvested and processed, and in turn ensures that the knowledge and relationships embodied within these practices continues to live.

Conclusion

On more than one occasion I was informed that Gitxaala *la'ask* is the best tasting. For instance Annabelle told me when she and Rose were teaching me to fry seaweed: "When we were in Bella Bella last year for the canoe journey, everyone wanted to eat our fried seaweed. Gitxaala is known to have the best tasting seaweed. We're the best at cooking it too." Declaring that Gitxaala *la'ask* as the best tasting emphasizes the wealth of the Laxyuup while also confirming the value of the Git lax m'oon's knowledge and relationship of/with the Laxyuup that enables them to ingest laxyuup. Ingesting food that came from the laxyuup allows for Git lax m'oon to become literally made of laxyuup and thus forges deeper connections and strength in the Git lax m'oon's relationship with one another as well as with laxyuup.

The principle of *syt güülm goot* is present in each of the stages of the food system. Each time food is harvested it is shared between all whom are present at the time of harvest and also with friends and family members. Before returning with their harvest to their homes, harvesters drop portions off at several other homes first. Those who process food do not then pack their own pantries and freezers full but share the food with friends and family members who reside in and outside of Lach Klan. Food is cooked and then shared at mealtime; leftovers are often offered to the wider community. It is not only the distribution of the food itself that is guided by *syt güülm goot* but the transference of knowledge and skill surrounding food and the stages of the food system is also guided by this philosophy: how and where species sought for harvesting grow and live; when and how food is to be harvested; how fish is supposed to be cut for smoking as opposed to jarring; how fish is to be hung for smoking. Additionally, the sharing of vessels, equipment, and gear required for harvesting and processing food are propelled by the value of *syt güülm goot*.

This concept lies at the core of understanding the significance of the Gitxaala food system to Gitxaala culture. *Syt güülm goot* connects and integrates the Git lax m'oon with one another and with Laxyuup Gitxaala. It guides actions and thereby fosters respectful relationships that are caring and mutually supportive. The food system breathes life into the concept of *syt güülm goot*; it is through actions that this value becomes more than an abstract idea, but a way of life. Thus, the food system is a necessary channel for culture to be practiced, understood, and transmitted. The

Gitxaala food system assures cultural security for the Git lax m'oon and Gitxaala Nation.

Given this connection between food and cultural security, it is no surprise that food becomes a focus in any discussion of the risks associated with development projects planned in Laxyuup Gitxaala. Food is a vehicle used to discuss the impacts and threats that are posed by projects in Laxyuup Gitxaala. The Git lax m'oon lament over how tanker traffic would affect their ability to navigate through waters and access harvesting sites, what invasive species would be brought into the territory by tankers and how would they affect the foods they harvest, and what kind of devastation a potential spill would bring and which harvesting sites are most vulnerable. When the Git lax m'oon speak of the risks to their foods and their continued consumption of them it is not just about their diet, it is a reflection of a fear about the ways in which such projects could alter their way of life, strike at the heart of what it means to be Gitxaala.

Eating their own food and being able to feed people their own food is a source of pride among Git lax m'oon. Most Gitxaala foods are not unique to the *laxyuup* but their flavours and methods of processing are Gitxaala specific. Many of these same types of foods can and are harvested elsewhere. For instance the same species of seaweed as *la'ask* is widely available in supermarkets; Japanese nori is not harvested in Laxyuup Gitxaala and is processed in a way that not only alters the taste but also its use. It is not enough for Git lax m'oon to have *la'ask*, salmon, or any other type of Gitxaala food. It is food harvested from particular places within Laxyuup Gitxaala and processed in particular Gitxaala ways that are desired not only for taste preferences but also are necessary for the continuation of culture. That is, the Gitxaala food system is an embodiment of Gitxaala culture; its sustained practice provides cultural security for Gitxaala Nation.

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