

## Note

<sup>1</sup>Mario Casella. "Critical Realism." *Cervantes Across the Centuries*. Angel Flores and M.J. Benardete, eds. (New York: The Dryden Press, 1947) 214.

**The People of the 'Ksan. *Gathering What the Great Nature Provided: Food Traditions of the Gitskan*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1980) 127 pp., \$19.95.**

*Gathering What the Great Nature Provided* is a book about the Gitskan Indian tribe in North Central British Columbia living on the banks of the Skenna River. The book resulted from a project by ninety members of the tribe whose purpose was to document their past for themselves and future generations. This collective authorship shows the commitment and dedication of the people to the goal. Elders were questioned and memories strained to remember the distant past. Their culture is conveyed in a rich oral tradition. The writing was difficult and tedious, accomplished by long hours of interviewing and transcription of taped conversations. Material was first written into the native language and then translated into English, with the final writing done by consensus.

The book is divided into sections on cooking methods and tools, preserving and food preparation, cooking hints, and specific foods consumed. Included among the text are photographs of women performing various skills and beautiful sketches showing cooking techniques and food items. The senior cooks cook by visual memory of what they have seen their elders do and by their own cooking sense gained through long experience. Difficulty thus arose in attempting to write down recipes but, despite this difficulty, a few recipes are provided in the closing chapter.

Throughout the description of food gathering and preserving, the cultural importance of food is emphasized. Food etiquette and the role of food in religion, celebration and play are all briefly discussed. Food has a curative role in the healing of certain illnesses and is symbolic in many ways. Berries are associated with blood in the preparation for war. The arrival of the first salmon each spring triggers a special ceremony, a ceremony of gratitude. There is a feast for almost every occasion and there is humor in the retelling of stories about the mythical food thief Weget. Refusing a neighbor's kind offer of food is not acceptable. Uneaten food is simply packed in a container and taken home without noisy thank yous.

Tradition dictates the restriction of certain foods to specific groups in the tribe. Young pubescent girls are forbidden fresh meat during their menstrual cycle; the hunting season will be spoiled if this is not observed. Similarly, young boys are forbidden to eat certain parts of an animal, such as the head and legs of the bear. Men are served before women and children, although most of the food preparation is done by women, with one exception. Female chiefs or those with special importance, although few, are served first.

European influence on the lives of the Gitskan is mentioned. The Europeans brought sugar, spices, pilot breads, and potatoes and these were incorporated into the people's lifestyle in different ways. The biscuits were fried in grease, sugar was added to berries, and the cans, bottles and boxes of the suspicious new foods were put to good use. Today sugared soft drinks are well-liked. Most traditions have been conserved or only mildly adapted to new situations.

The Gitskan have used most of nature's resources and they take great care that nothing edible is wasted. An example is the usage of every part of the fish, including the head, eyes and offal. They are careful to burn fish bones, or to reassemble fish and return them to the water so that the fish can reincarnate. However, certain animals were sacred to the Gitskan and not eaten. Puzzling is the omission of the entire mushroom family. This is puzzling because mushrooms are abundant in the area and no poisonous varieties exist in the vicinity.

*Gathering What the Great Nature Provided* has value for the people about whom it is written and the younger generation who will benefit by knowing of their heritage. The Gitskan have done a great service by sharing a lifestyle in harmony with nature. In a society with increasing health problems in part associated with changes in food patterns and consumption of refined foods, many people long to understand an alternative lifestyle. The Gitskan people have a deep respect for the land and the environment. All that nature has provided is respected. A book such as this helps us to see a different way of life and to evaluate the direction of our social development. *Gathering What the Great Nature Provided* has its place in multiethnic education showing the food traditions of an American Indian tribe or in a cultural food and nutrition classroom. This book is applicable as a survival manual for similar wilderness areas or simply as enjoyable leisure reading. The authors end with the comment, "We have it in our hearts to create from this treasure a series of books so that our young people can know the stature of their heritage—and share it with the world." I look forward to learning more about the Gitskan's richly abundant culture.

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