

Endangered List Created for Native Foods

by [Ted Robbins](#)

[Weekend Edition Sunday](#), December 18, 2005 · Political boundaries often seem artificial, based on a long-ago treaty or current party registration. The boundaries of North America's cornbread, salmon and clambake nations are rooted in climate, geography and tradition. But the culinary heritage embodied by those names may be in peril.

Cornbread nation? That's a construct of the RAFT coalition (Renewing America's Food Traditions), which came up with a map of North America based on food traditions.

It's in chile pepper nation -- at Desert Botanical Garden in Phoenix, Ariz., -- that two dozen botanists, farmers, chefs and anthropologists have gathered to create the first list of Southwestern food, plants and animals. RAFT founder Gary Nabhan is leading the workshop, which will also determine which species are abundant, threatened, endangered or recovering.

A previous workshop was held in the Northwest's salmon nation.

"That group came up with 180 foods distinctive to that region that can only be found there," Nabhan says. "Two-thirds of them are at risk either due to contamination, over-harvesting, damming or other environmental and cultural factors."

Globalization of food can be positive. It brought coffee and olive oil to the United States. But protecting species where they originate preserves genetic diversity; every region has particular foods that grow best in that climate. It also preserves culinary diversity, adding aromas, flavors and textures to cuisine. Nabhan says the cultural diversity of regional food is just as important.

"If we didn't have the fishing traditions of the 19th and early 20th centuries, we wouldn't have Herman Melville, we wouldn't have John Steinbeck and *Cannery Row*," says Nabhan. "Our literature, our songs, every part of our popular culture has food themes running through it."

Future workshops will focus on cornbread nation in the mid-South; wild rice nation in the upper Midwest, and clambake nation along the Atlantic seaboard. Once RAFT members have compiled and classified a region's native foods, they work to create awareness among chefs and gardeners to incorporate endangered foods into their work.

For beans, the usual choice in Southwestern cuisine today is either pinto or black. But Kevin Dahl knows of dozens more bean varieties. He heads Native Seeds Search, an organization, which collects, sells and grows traditional crops.

Once upon a time, the O'odham tribe of southern Arizona grew tens of thousands of pounds of tepary. Now only a handful of farmers grow the small white beans consistently. Still, the bean, which has as much protein as a soybean, is making a comeback. But Dahl says the tepary should never try to rival the soybean.

"We don't want foods of mass domination," he says. "We want people to enjoy foods that speak to where they live and how they live."

And, says Dahl, the best way to preserve foods and their traditions is not through a museum, but by growing and eating them.

