

Indigenous Food Hubs

2025 Harvest of the Month



DECEMBER: MUTTON

NUTRITION AND FUN FACTS

Mutton refers to sheep that is over one year old with a deeper flavor and is less tender than lamb, which refers to sheep under one year old. Mutton and lamb were introduced to the Dine and Zuni Tribes in the 1600s and are commonly used in traditional dishes today.

A classic Navajo (Diné) mutton stew is made with backbone or cubed mutton, slow-cooked with potatoes, carrots, onions, and sometimes hominy or juniper berries, and served with frybread or tortillas. Neshjizhii (Steamed Head) is another traditional delicacy. A sheep's head is seasoned and steamed or roasted until tender, and then served with boiled vegetables. The most common cooking method is roasting leg or shoulder cuts with simple spices, such as salt, pepper, and sumac.

Mutton and lamb are both excellent sources of protein, iron, zinc and B12, which help build and repair muscles, carry oxygen to the brain and organs, support the immune system, and facilitate brain and nerve function.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Navajo (Diné) people consider sheep a symbol of wealth, family, and survival. There is a common Diné phrase, "Sheep is life (Dibé bé iiná)." Hopi and Zuni communities also raise sheep for meat and weaving materials. Shoshone "Sheep Eaters" refers to a band of the tribe that lived in Yellowstone and relied heavily on mountain sheep for food, clothing, and tools.

AT-HOME ACTIVITY

Talk with a parent, grandparent, or elder about food traditions in your family or community. Ask them questions like, "What does mutton or sheep (or another traditional food) mean to your family and our tribe?" Write down their answers or draw pictures to show what you learned.



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DECEMBER RECIPE:

MUTTON STEW (ATOO' IN DINÉ)



COOK & PREP TIME

3 to 7 hours, depending on heat



SERVINGS

10 to 14

INGREDIENTS

- 8-10 cups of water or vegetable broth
- 3 lbs. of mutton backbone or 2 lbs. of Cubed Mutton Stew Meat
- 3 Large Carrots, diced and chopped
- 3 medium-sized russet potatoes
- 4 Celery Stalks diced
- 1 Large Onion diced
- 2 cups squash, cubed
- 1-2 cups Navajo steamed corn (or fresh/frozen corn kernels)
- 2-3 New Mexico hatch green chiles, roasted, peeled, and diced (¼ c diced)
- Seasonings: ½ tablespoon Garlic Salt and ½ teaspoon Pepper

INSTRUCTIONS

- Prep the meat: First, brown meat in a skillet for better flavor.
- Layer strategically: Add broth/water to crockpot. Season with garlic salt and pepper. Add meat first, then add the heartier vegetables that take longer to cook (carrots, potatoes, celery, onion).
- Add delicate ingredients: In the last 30-45 minutes of cooking, add the squash, corn, and green chiles. These cook quickly and will turn to mush if added too early.
- Check for doneness: Meat should be tender and vegetables should be fork-tender but not falling apart. Adjust seasoning if needed.
- Heat and Timing:
 - High: 3-4 hours total (add squash/corn/chiles at 2.5-3 hours)
 - Low: 6-7 hours total (add squash/corn/chiles at 5.5-6 hours)



DIFFICULTY:

☒ EASY ☐ MEDIUM ☐ HARD

A ZUNI TWIST

Zuni people sheep (chuleya:we) and some traditional dishes made also include mutton stew, made with cubed mutton and white corn, simmered for hours and flavored with cilantro and red chile powder. This dish is traditionally cooked inside on a stove or for special occasions in an outdoor horno (beehive-shaped oven), sealed with flagstone and mud to slow-cook overnight.



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