

# Pit Oven

by Susan Labiste

This year at the Rattlesnake Rendezvous, a delicious chicken came straight from under the ground. The Rendezvous is a 3-day primitive technology gathering. For the duration of the event, participants live as closely to a Stone Age life as they are able. For most of us that meant no metal cookware. For me, it meant it was time to experiment with a cooking technology which predated both metal and clay pots. I made an underground pit oven.

Cooking underground is a time honored tradition in many parts of the world. The [imu of Hawaii](#) is perhaps the most popularized example in the United States. The pit oven is also a Native California tradition, with many Native American groups cooking food underground.



To create a pit oven, fire wood was the first consideration. Enough wood was needed for an eight hour fire. I set off with my conical burden basket, and found its design ideal for gathering wood. Usually I am juggling wood pieces, dropping some of what is in my arms as I try to gather more. With the burden basket and a tumpline, I was able to use my hands to toss gathered pieces into the basket behind my back. To my amazement, it seemed to stack itself in there without falling out, even when it was quite full.

At about 9:30 a.m., I started a cooking fire and added ten grapefruit-sized spherical cooking rocks, and 6 larger (7 to 12 inch) somewhat flattened stones. These volcanic rocks were of vesicular basalt, and fairly heavy despite the presence of holes. Vesicular basalt is ideal for cooking because it can withstand high temperatures without exploding. If my morning hours hadn't already been promised to another task, I would have started the fire in a pre-dug pit rather than on the top of the ground.

At about 11:30 a.m., I began digging a hole adjacent to the fire. The hole was about 2 feet wide, and 1 1/2 feet deep. The sides were nearly vertical. It was stony ground, so I was glad for my modern shovel. When the pit was complete, I moved the larger heated rocks into the hole to line both the base and lower sides. I then built a second fire in the pit. As the fires heated the rocks and the earth surrounding the oven, I gathered greenery. I chopped thistle and placed it in two piles near the fire. I chose the thistle because it was non-native (weedy), plentiful, and it was nontoxic.

A Cornish game hen was washed. An apple was placed in its body cavity to add flavor and moisture. I had already shucked some sweet corn for roasting, and placed the husks in water to keep them moist. The husks from four cobs (base intact) were used to completely wrap the Cornish game hen. Willow bark was bound over the husks to keep them tightly sealed.

At 1:30 p.m., the rocks had been heating a total of 4 hours and the fire had burned down to coals. Using the shovel, most of the coals were removed. Half of the thistle was placed in the pit. It created a layer of thistle measuring about 4 inches thick. The husk-wrapped chicken was placed on top of the thistle. The second half of the thistle was placed over the chicken, and the heated cooking stones were placed around the wrapped chicken. The entire oven was now crackling and steaming from the heat. With some hesitation, I shoveled earth over the top of the thistle. I was hoping the dirt wouldn't penetrate the thistle and the wrap. I didn't want gritty chicken.



The fire was raked over the top of the pit and rekindled. It was kept burning until 5:30 p.m. when it was allowed to die down to a few coals. The pit was then uncovered carefully, moving earth and thistle from the center to the sides. The corn husk wrapped chicken was intact inside, steaming hot and damp with moisture from the thistles and husks. When the wrapping was removed, there was no sign of dirt, and the chicken was very moist, tender, and quite flavorful.



Pit oven cooking is generally done when a large number of people are being fed. It requires lots of fuel, plentiful rock of a type capable of withstanding heat, and considerable labor to dig the hole. Regardless of the impracticality of such a small pit oven, it was an enjoyable experiment I would encourage readers to try.