

Burned-Rock Midden: Cooking with Hot Rocks in an Earth Oven

The people who lived at the Graham-Applegate rancharia were great consumers of granite rock. They brought many tons of it into the settlement from isolated outcrops in the surrounding area. By far the greatest amount of rock was used in the cooking of food. Most rocks, when heated in a fire, absorb and store heat. Long after the fire has died down, the rocks continue to release the heat, making them ideal heating elements for different kinds of stone-age cooking "appliances." In prehistoric times, the people of central Texas made full use of this kind of cooking technology, constructing stone hearths in many different shapes and sizes. Most interestingly, they constructed earth ovens—layered arrangements of hot rocks and food placed in shallow pits and capped by a thick layer of earth. These were used to cook many kinds of foods but particularly certain plant foods that require long cooking before they are edible or their full nutritional value is realized. When the rocks cracked into small pieces from repeated heatings, they were tossed out and the oven pits re-lined with new rocks. The huge mounds of fire-cracked rocks, or burned rock "middens," that built up over time around these often inconspicuous ovens have long confounded archeologists.

Discuss the following questions in your group:

What do people use today instead of earth ovens powered with hot rocks?

Which one do you think is more effective, an earth oven with hot rocks or the modern invention? Why?