

Indigenous Youth, Food Knowledge & Arctic Change

# EALLU



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**YUKAGIR:**

# **ANCIENT FOODS FROM FISH AND REINDEER**

**BY VERA CHEBOKSAROVA & VALENTINA TOKHTOSOVA**



Yukagir are a small numbered people spread across three regions of Eastern Siberia: the Republic of Sakha (Yakutia), Magadan and Chukotka, along the Kolyma and Indigirka rivers. They have become known as Tundra and Taiga Yukagir. Together they number just over 1500 people. Yukagir have traditionally been nomadic and semi-nomadic hunters, with wild reindeer being one of the preferred game, along with moose, wild sheep, sable, and of course fishing. Yukagir in the tundra regions also practiced small-scale reindeer herding primarily for transportation purposes. Yukagir are today settled, but some lead a semi-nomadic life during reindeer migration and hunting seasons.

Known for our hunting and fishing skills, Yukagir are one of the earliest indigenous people known to be living in North-Eastern Asia. Our traditional villages were located along the many river basins of the region, which are rich in Arctic and sub-Arctic fish so our fish related food culture is exceedingly rich. Fish is eaten fresh, dried, boiled, fried, baked, and in winter - frozen. Each dish has its own terminology and manner of preparation and some share characteristics with other indigenous peoples of the region. Reindeer also form a significant part of our diet.

#### **YUKOLA:**

**(TEL'YIEDAL'GZA<sup>(\*)</sup>; Y'UKULE<sup>(\*\*)</sup>):<sup>†</sup>**

*Yukola* is a traditional dish of the Yukagir, which is made from white fish species including pike, peled (*Coregonus peled*), longnose sucker (*Catostomus catostomus*), broad whitefish (*Coregonus nasus*) or similar. Freshly caught fish are scaled, gutted, and the fillets are separated from the spine. The spine can then

be used for soup or given to the dogs. Fillets are divided into 4 slices with skin on. On the inside, one should then make cuts in the form of stripes, or «Christmas trees». Today, fish fillets are placed in salted water for 2-3 hours, but traditionally fillets were immediately dried. The fillets are dried on special hangers, first on a windy, sunny spot, and then smoked in a wooden structure in the same shape as a *chum* or traditional tent.

#### **KERILE**

*Kerile* is a popular food for our hunters. Smoked and dried *Yukola* is ground into a powder, or a fish flour. Add this flour to boiling water and then add a little wheat flour to make a creamy soup. Add salt and spices to taste.

#### **KUL'YIBAKHA**

*Kul'yibakha* is a dish of boiled fish with caviar and berries. Fresh fish is scaled, gutted, boiled, and then deboned. The prepared fillet is cut into small pieces and mixed with blueberries, fish oil and caviar.

#### **LULLEGUL**

This dish is made from lean fish, mostly Arctic cisco (*Coregonus autumnalis*). Cisco is boiled, crushed and dried in the sun, resulting in *corile*, a flour that can be stored for an extended period. It is eaten with fish oil and fresh berries. This flour is called *lullegul* or *yullegul*, which translates as 'smoky food'.

#### **PORSA**

Fish were dried in the open air until 'half done', care taken that it not be over-dried. Then the



Two stages of Kerile. Photo: Alena Gerasimova



Prepared Yukola. Photo: Svetlana Avetkva.

<sup>†</sup> (\*) and (\*\*) signify two Yukagir dialects: Yakubity and Ombokity.

fish was deboned, cut into small pieces and fried in fish oil. After that the dish was put in a pouch or a barrel. The resulting product can be stored for a long time because of the way it is cooked, so it is also a popular food for hunters.

#### **ANIL KERILE <sup>(M)</sup>; ANCHUU YILEGUL <sup>(O)</sup>**

Scale fish and boil until half 'done'. The broth is strained and the fish is dried in the sun, spread out on a special flooring. The fish is then crushed into the consistency of flour. This fish flour is stored in bags sewn from burbot skins. This dish is popular in winter when it is boiled in water, to which reindeer blood is added and cooked until ready. Add salt to taste.

#### **FISH GUTS**

Intestines of large fish are washed, cleaned and then boiled, and the resulting broth is strained out. Wild rose berries and fish oil are added to the boiled intestines and the mixture is poured into birch bark cups and frozen for winter storage. Thaw before use.

#### **FISH BELLIES**

Usually Arctic cisco is used for this dish. The

fish is cleaned, gutted, and the belly is cut out and fried in fish oil, then dried and ground in a bowl. To the resulting mass, berries and crushed caviar are added, making a high-calorie and nutritious food.

#### **FISH PANCAKES**

Freshly caught fish is cleaned, gutted, washed in cold water and boiled. Then the bones are carefully removed and the fish is cut into small pieces. Add crushed caviar and salt to taste, mixing well into a smooth paste. Then mix with wheat flour, kneading into a strong dough from which you roll out flat pancakes. Fry on a low heat in a greased pan. Before serving, the pancake is cut or broken into pieces, and served with melted reindeer fat.

Traditionally, Beloribitsa (*Stenodus leucichthys*) was used to make a well-known Northern delicacy – *chahee*, better known as “*stroganina*”. Although this fish is now extinct in the wild, it can be made using other species. To prepare it, use a large white fish such as muksun, Arctic cisco, nelma or broad whitefish). Skin a freshly caught fish and immediately deep-freeze it. Once frozen, cut off its fins and tail and cut thin slices of the fish away from the body





< Photos: Vera Cheboksarova

with a sharp knife. Slices of frozen fish without bones are eaten raw, and dipped into a mixture of salt and pepper.

Other tasty Yukagir fish recipes include **Caviar juice**, which is fresh caviar, usually from broad whitefish (*Coregonus nasus*), which is carefully crushed into a liquid state, and to which salt is added. This is stirred and cooled. Poured into cups, it is consumed as a soft drink. **Al'ga-dal'aa'i** is frozen fish liver cut into small cubes, eaten with salt. **Coca** are fish heads, which are eaten fresh and raw. Head cartilage is also considered as a special delicacy. **Togorol** is fish that has been cleaned and deboned, cut into pieces and slowly cooked in a frying pan with fish oil.

### CHUMUODODJE

*Chumuododje* (smoked reindeer meat) is a popular dish from reindeer meat as it can be used while traveling and its long digestion time provides an enduring sensation of satiety. It can also be used for meat soup, the resulting broth

being light, easy to digest and possessing a specific taste.

Cut the meat along the broad backbone sinews in lateral parts, and separate the meat carefully. Cut the meat in flat pieces and dry it in the sun until it has completely hardened. Then keep it over the fire and smoke in the chum. After a time, the meat is ready. Cut the smoked meat in pieces and serve with reindeer fat.



Photos: ICR

