tânisi ka-isi-nihtâ-pimihkêyan ☞ How to Make Pemmican

You will need a very large cutting board or a very large, flat cutting surface, one really sharp and longish knife, a lot of practice, strong hands, a good sense of using a knife without de-limbing—or should I say de-digiting—youself, and certainly some experienced tutelage from an old Cree woman, or a Dene woman, or an Ojibwe woman, or a Blackfoot woman, or an Apache woman. I was asked recently, “Why can’t men make pemmican?” No reason, other than the men were likely off hunting. The knife needs to be more than very sharp to make it easier for you to slice the buffalo meat into thin slices. Now, it doesn’t have to be buffalo meat; it could be deer or moose or muskox or elk, too, but I’ve made it with buffalo meat (paskwâwi-mostosowiyâs).

Now, I owe all my knowledge of pemmican to four individuals. Olive Modersohn and Alice Harkness, who are sisters, have worked at the Fort Edmonton Park Native Encampment for many years; they and their other sister, Mariah, taught me how to do this. I also credit Dr. Anne Anderson for her description, the one I read in a little book called Let’s Learn Cree: Namoya Ayiman. My Dad knew Dr. Anderson because he grew up at Frog Lake where Dr. Anderson lived, but unfortunately I did not have the honour of meeting her before she died.
Alice and Mariah are very good meat cutters. They and Olive are from Nipawin (correctly spelled in Cree *nipawiwun*), in Saskatchewan, and they learned from their own mother and grandmother there. I would say, based on my memory of doing this about six or seven years ago, to cut the meat about a quarter of an inch thick. I also remember that Mariah, who was especially good at cutting the meat, would study the meat very closely to determine the grain of it and then she would cut along that grain. Now, she *would not* cut right through the roast. She would stop cutting the meat maybe a quarter of an inch before cutting each slice right off; then she would turn the roast over and slice it through from that side. This way, the slices of meat would come off shaped almost like the two wings of a butterfly, each wing being about the size of one of my hands—palm and fingers included.

I understand if this is hard to visualize, but the written word does have its limitations!

*êkosi*, so now at this point the meat cutter must muster up as much patience as humanly possible and not be too frustrated by the chunky, choppy results she or he may be getting. Slicing the meat as expertly as Mariah, Alice, and Olive do takes decades of experience. Keep slicing the meat as best you can until you have it all sliced up. I should have mentioned you should also have a large stainless steel bowl to place the meat slices in.
Once all the meat is sliced you are ready for smoking and drying. Except you will have prepared your tripod or meat-drying rack (akwâwân) well in advance even of slicing the meat. For this very important phase in making pimihkân (correct Cree spelling) you will need a large fire pit over which you will set your drying rack. Now, before you bring the meat to the rack, it is very crucial that you build a large fire and let it burn into hot, hot coals. You will also need to have done considerable work gathering wood and chopping it into small firewood. You will need A LOT of small firewood, and it needs to be small because when you actually dry your meat YOU DO NOT WANT A FIRE. YOU WANT A SMUDGE. I apologize for yelling in the printed word, but it is really important that the meat is SMOKED AND NOT COOKED. This is also why you need to burn a fire for a long time before actually smoking the meat, so that you can build up a very hot bed of coals on which to put the small firewood. When you smoke the meat several conditions must exist. First the fire cannot be a fire: it must be a smudge. Oh yes, I already said that, but I think it merits saying again. Next, (sorry I have to shout again) YOU DO NOT WANT ANY MOISTURE AT ALL TO GET ONTO OR INTO THE MEAT. For this reason, you must smoke your meat only on a hot, sunny day. If it starts to rain, quickly gather up the meat, place a cloth over it, and run for cover. Two things will hasten the process of the dried meat going bad: heat and moisture.
èkosi, so I haven’t mentioned and should that if the environment around you has any moss or punky wood this is very useful material in quelling a smudge that is too big for its britches and wants to be a blaze. A blaze, like a fire, you definitely do not want. So, if you put your small firewood (chopped about the diameter and length of my forearm — and I am a rather smallish woman, in stature that is) onto the bed of coals and that damn chopped-up firewood is impudent, throw some moss or punky wood on it. What on earth do I mean by punky wood? Well, Olive showed me.

We went for a walk into the thick, prickly, brambly woods behind the teepee at Fort Edmonton, along the North Saskatchewan River. Now, I think Olive is about sixty-five years old so she knew what she was doing. We walked and looked, and before long she found what we were looking for: a tree that fell over kayâs (a long time ago) and that was now progressing into the finer state of earth, namely soil. This takes kâh-kïnwês (quite a long time) and you will find that tree in varying states of progression (I think that’s the word that biologists use for this process of tree decomposition). Choose only the punky wood — that is, the wood that is thready and moist and almost earthy. Pretend like you are not a woman or a human being, but maybe a cat of some kind, yeah a cougar that does not mind wallowing around in the earth and getting a bit, well not dirty, but earthy. Now, you will need quite a lot of this punky wood so
hopefully you have a bucket or some other portable vessel into which you can gather it. We had a big, old, wooden wheelbarrow, on which we had placed a very large barrel, into which we poured punky wood from our two smaller buckets. We had to do this several times to fill up the barrel. This involved tromping up and down through the briars and the brambles and the prickles back and forth from the fallen, progressing tree down in the woods and the wheelbarrow up on the dirt road. I really forgot that I was a woman just then because I didn’t want Olive to get all scratched up, so we went and got another, younger historical interpreter to help with this labour.

One time, a few years after Olive showed me all this, I went for the punky wood search with another young, keen interpreter. We got all our gear ready and placed on the road and off I went down into the scratchy thick. I left Liam up on the road so I could shout at him, when I found the right tree in an excellent state of progression, to wheel the barrow over to the place on the road nearest me and the tree. As I walked I was watching very carefully for holes in the earth, because I had just missed stepping into one that was at least as deep as my short leg is long. Had I stepped into that hole I might have started progressing — that is, decomposing — myself! ēkosi, so then I found an appropriately progressed tree and called up to my young helper. He wheeled the barrow over and brought down two buckets and two fire irons. Oh yes, the fire irons. These we found extremely helpful
in digging around inside the tree and loosening the bark to get at the punky wood. I prefer an L-shaped fire iron because it works good. Once we filled up our two buckets, we turned to climb up to the road.

This time I narrowly missed stepping on a wasp’s nest. Yes, those damn buzzers nest in the ground too! Now, this would have been an excruciating and possibly even worse experience if I had actually stepped on that wasp nest because at Fort Edmonton the woman interpreters inside the fort wear long, loose skirts that we often describe as the “pillow-case skirt.” Into *Vogue* magazine the skirt will not get you, but into serious trouble with a horde of wasps if they fly up your skirts into your nether regions, the skirt will take you. I always wore a pair of gym shorts under my skirt, precisely because of my fear of being stung you know where…

Whew!

Back to the *pimîhkân*. Get a real good smudge happening and then place your meat slices carefully on your drying rack. Please, please be sure that it’s not raining. If the wings of the butterfly have a spine, that would be the thicker part that actually contacts the drying rack. Watch that smudge closely and give it hell, I mean moss and/or punky wood, if it tries to be a fire. The more smoke the better, because that will scare away all the bugs, especially those wasps that have followed
you up from their hell in the ground. You will find the wasps par-
ticularly pesky, moreso than any other insect. Wasps are even more
carnivorous than humans. Now, all that smoke might scare away
the men too, but if a man is scared of smoke I don’t need him.
I want a man that can live with me, smells and all!

How long do you smoke the meat? For several days, as long as those
days are hot and sunny, and for as long as the day is long. I would
say it takes about four or five days of smoking and drying until the
meat is dried and brittle enough for pounding. If even one raindrop
falls out of the sky, catch it on your tongue and get that meat to
safety! As the meat smokes and dries it will curl up and change from
a bright red colour to a darker brownish colour. Keep drying and
smoking until it is brittle enough to tear and break off into pieces.

Once all the meat is really dried and smoked, break it into quite
small pieces, as small as a toonie or a loonie if you can manage it.
You want to do this because it will facilitate pounding the meat into
as fine a powder as you can. It’s best to have a leather or rawhide bag
in which you put the meat, because all that pounding with a rock
really takes a toll on the bag. For all our efforts at Fort Edmonton
Park, we didn’t have a rawhide bag so Alice made us two thick
canvas bags with special stitching so they wouldn’t blow apart with
the first blow. We had lots of help with the pounding, and we had
little kids and big dads and strong moms pounding the meat with us. It really needs to be pounded an awful lot, about ten times more than you will think it needs and about twenty times more than you will want to pound, because the finer the powder and the fewer the chunks the better the *pimihkân*.

With your bowl of pounded meat—you will notice the quantity seems a whole lot less than the big roast you started with because all that drying and smoking has evaporated all the moisture and reduced the size—prepare for the final stages of making the *pimihkân*. Ah yes, try to do this in mid-to-late July when either the saskatoons or a little later the chokecherries are ripe. Pick a bunch of berries and try not to eat too many. Dry them for a couple of days with your meat. Cheesecloth works good at the top of your drying rack. We constructed a little shelf up there with smaller sticks fastened onto the main branches of the tripod. Once your berries are dried, really dried, you can crush and grind them and pound them similarly to the way you made minced meat. If you use chokecherries it is okay to crush and grind the pits of the chokecherries too. But some people will tell you not to.

Okay, so now you have dried and pounded meat and berries. You need one more ingredient: rendered buffalo fat or the fat of whatever kind of meat you’ve dried. If there is anything that will attract a
wasp but scare a man away, it is rendering fat! That is one smelly job that stirs up quite a stink. Build another fire and get a big, cast iron pot that won’t mind being used for rendering fat. Throw the fat into the pot and place the pot over the fire. This takes some time too, as the fat needs to boil for awhile until the solid chunks separate. These solid chunks, by the way, will look and smell suspiciously like Kentucky Fried Chicken. As the fat cooks, remove the chunks. When the fat has cooked for quite some time and you’re quite certain all the chunks have emerged that are supposed to, you have finished rendering the fat.

This is one job you will definitely want to do in clothes that you don’t much care about.

Remember a ways back when I said there are two things you need to avoid in preparing pimîbkân? Heat and moisture. This means that when you add the fat to the meat and berries, you must LET IT COOL. Don’t cool it so much that it starts to solidify again; just cool it so that it’s tepid and you can touch it with your fingers. THE FAT CANNOT BE HOT. Mix the crushed berries with the pounded meat first; do this thoroughly. Now pour some cooled liquid fat onto this mixture. For the life of me, I can’t say with any exactness what the quantities are. I will stress, however, that you don’t want to overdo it with the fat because it will be too greasy.
Basically put only enough cooled, liquid grease in until the meat and berry mixture starts to bind or stick together.

This brings me to the nutritional value of *pimihkân*. The meat provides much-needed protein and good taste. The berries provide fibre and vitamin C and the fat acts both as a binding agent and somewhat as a preservative. Men in the fur trade carried the burdens of beasts and their employers needed to feed them accordingly. When meat was plentiful and competition stiff, men were allotted six to eight pounds of fresh meat per day. A quarter of a pound of *pimihkân* was the equivalent of a pound of fresh meat, so men might eat about two pounds of *pimihkân* per day, along with a loaf of bread and a fish or two.

I credit my knowledge to Alice, Olive, Mariah, and Dr. Anne Anderson, but I have read that Peter Pond, who worked for the Northwest Company, wrote in his journal of *pimihkân* in about 1779 when he made it up into Athabasca Country. I am taking all this from memory, including what I read of Peter Pond.

In my estimation, *pimihkân* is even more ingenious than more modern inventions, because Indigenous peoples were able to process meat for long-term storage in the absence of spices and refrigeration.
We had two responses to our *pimihkân*, and I think I have made it three times: great interest or great distaste. You will either like it or not like it, and, out of necessity, if you have to eat it for survival, you will grow to like it. I went to a real Ghost Dance at Kehewin First Nation about four years ago and I tasted their *pimihkân*. I would say that my third effort at Fort Edmonton was very close to the *pimihkân* I tasted at Kehewin.