

# NATIVE AMERICAN COOKING TECHNOLOGY AND BASKETRY

## COOKING TECHNOLOGIES

Long before Native Americans invented pottery, they used clay to cook food. At least as early as 6000 B.C., Louisiana natives formed clay into rectangular, spherical, and other geometric shapes called “baked clay objects.” These were heated in a fire and then placed in pits, where they slow-roasted foods—they were early charcoal briquettes!

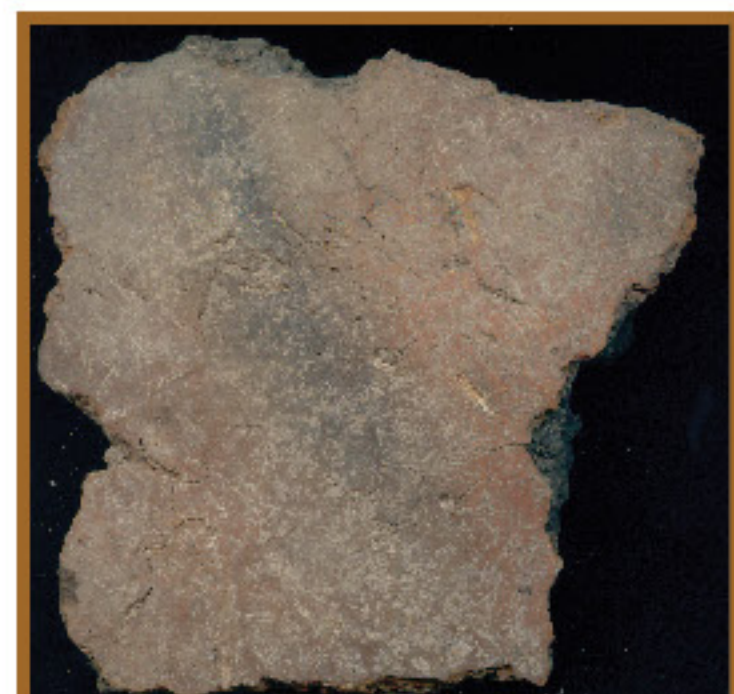
Baked clay objects (also called “clay cooking balls”) were used by Archaic cultures and as an alternative to pottery by early Tchefuncte peoples. Because it is more malleable than stone, pottery can be used to provide much more refined time markers than other artifact classes. In some cases, prehistoric social groups and social boundaries can be identified by pottery style and surface decoration.



*Baked-clay objects from the Poverty Point site. Image courtesy of Louisiana Division of Archaeology.*

The earliest pottery in the Southeast was created around 3000 B.C. along the Savannah River and adjacent Atlantic coast. It was “tempered” with plant fibers, principally Spanish moss. Temper refers to the addition of plant fiber, sand, shell, or other substances during clay preparation for the construction of a pot. Temper opens up pore spaces and so helps to control shrinkage and cracking when a pot is dried and fired. Between 1000 and 500 B.C., cultures in the Southeast replaced plant fibers with sand or sponge particles. The Tchefuncte culture, though, developed a different temper called “grog,” which consisted of ground-up potsherds. Through time, grog temper became smaller, and other technological improvements produced thinner, harder sherds. Grog tempering worked very well in Lower Mississippi River Valley clays, and it was used until Contact. However, late in prehistory, shell tempering appeared in northeast Louisiana and extreme southeast Louisiana. Shell tempered pottery is an excellent indication of Mississippian cultural influence and of a fairly late occupation.

*Surface and cross-section of a fiber tempered sherd.*



*Burnt Spanish moss*



*Surface and cross-section of a grog tempered sherd.*

*Grog*



*Surface and cross-section of a shell tempered sherd.*

*Shell Fragment*

## THE INTANGIBLES

Artifacts of durable materials like pottery and stone represent only a small portion of the material world of prehistoric Native Americans. We know from areas where preservation is unusually good—in dry caves or in wet sites—that there was a heavy reliance on wood, for everything from canoes and housing to atlatls and arrows; on cane and palmetto for basketry and matting; on gourds for containers; and on cordage for bags, baskets, footwear, and nets. Drawings of the 16th and 17th centuries also provide evidence of a rich material culture that eludes archaeologists.



*Close-up of the “alligator entrails” basket design.*

Some organic artifacts have been found in Louisiana. One thousand years ago, Mississippians traveled to Avery Island to gather salt. They used baskets in this process; the salt preserved pieces of those baskets, which were excavated in the 1960s. Basket making continued among many tribes into the present. The Chitimacha basket displayed here was purchased by Stanwood Duval Jastremski in the early 1930s from Chief Paul of the Chitimacha Reservation in Charenton, Louisiana. This double-woven ‘trunk’ basket has a pattern called “alligator entrails.” The double-woven basketry technique and the design are likely rooted in the prehistoric past. This basket and others were donated to the Museum of Natural Science by Florence Jastremski, Stanwood’s daughter.



*The Chitimacha basket displayed here was purchased in the early 1930’s by Stanwood D. Jastremski from Chief Paul of the Chitimacha Reservation in Charenton, Louisiana. This double-woven ‘trunk’ basket has a pattern called “alligator entrails.” The double-woven basketry technique likely has its roots in the prehistoric past.*

*Created by: Unknown  
Donated by: Florence Jastremski (1991)*