



PAIUTE WINNOWING TRAY

The Paiutes are a Native American tribe divided geographically into two groups: the Northern Paiute who occupy parts of California, Nevada and Oregon; and the Southern Paiutes whose ancestral home lies in Arizona. The word "Paiute" means "Water Ute," or "True Ute." Both groups were hunter-gatherers, however, because Oregon land was more productive, the Paiutes there established permanent villages. As nomadic groups, the Great Basin Paiutes became very proficient basket weavers.

Great Basin Paiute women are experts at making twined baskets. They are well-known for their utilitarian styles, especially their storage baskets, *ollas*, and winnowing trays. The last items are large and small fan-shaped trays that are used for processing wheat, nuts and sunflower seeds. Willow and sumac fibers were used to make the trays as those fibers are easy to manipulate when wet, and very strong when dry. Winnowing trays were always created with their end-use in mind. Paiute women wove open-twined trays for gathering seeds and nuts as the open weave allowed dirt and pine needles to fall through the spaces. The women created finer, more closely woven trays to winnow and sift seeds and nuts. The process was both simple and universal.

The problem with most seeds and nuts is that a harder outer casing protects them. We call this a "shell" when referring to nuts, and "chaff" when talking about wheat and other seeds. This outer protection must be removed in order for the nuts and seeds to be edible. The first step in that process is called "cracking." With wheat and sunflowers, a mano and metate are used to "break" or "crack" the hard casing. Pine nuts are mixed with hot coals until they "pop." This means that the shell has weakened and begun to crack. When this occurs, the pine nuts and coals are separated, and the nuts are then rolled with a mano and metate. In both cases (seeds and nuts), the edible item and the outer casing are now mixed and need to be separated. The process that accomplishes this is called "winnowing," or "moving air through the grain in order to remove the chaff."

To winnow the nuts or seeds, Paiute women place the seed and chaff mixture into a finely woven tray and toss the mixture rhythmically into the air. Sometimes, they pour the mixture from shoulder height onto a blanket. This action allows the breeze or wind to separate the chaff from the seeds. Since the chaff is lighter than the seeds or nuts, it blows away leaving the edible wheat grains, sunflower seeds, or pine nuts in the tray.

Winnowing trays are vital tools in the processing of nuts and grains. They serve in the gathering, "cracking," and winnowing phases of preparing grains and seeds for cooking and eating. As hunter-gatherers, it is no wonder that Paiute women became excellent basket weavers.