

More Than Just a Snack Food

by Sandie Lee

It's been around for over 5000 years. It was an important staple to the Aztec Indians and it even helped in the inventing of the first microwave oven. Can you guess what it is? That's right, it's popcorn.

The oldest corn ever discovered, was found in a New Mexico rock formation called "the Bat Cave." These ears of corn ranging from smaller than a penny to about 10cm long, are thought to be approximately, 5600 years old. Kernels of corn have also been found in tombs in Peru and some still pop after 1000 years.

Popcorn was known as *momchitl* to the 16th century Aztec Indians, and played an important role in their lives. They used it not only as a food source, but also in their ceremonies.

Garlands and headdresses were made from thick rows of popcorn and used in traditional dances. Popcorn was also thought to bring peace and goodwill. Perhaps that is why, statues of one of their most important gods, Tlaloc (*Tlah-loc*), their ancient god of rain, was also adorned with popcorn necklaces.

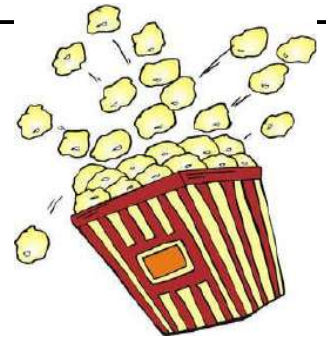
One account tells of the Aztec people scattering *momchitl* before the fishermen went out to sea. The popped corn represented hailstones and was given to the god of water, in hopes of a safe journey for them.

Popcorn poppers have changed drastically over the years. Some ancient poppers were made out of soapstone or clay. This covered bowl was hung from a tripod-like holder and placed directly over the fire. Another method of popping corn is from the Winnabago Indians. They just stabbed a pointy stick through the entire cob, then held it close to the fire. When finished, it was eaten like corn-on-the-cob.

Today, we have microwave ovens that do all the popping for us. In fact, it was popcorn that actually helped invent the first microwave. In 1946 an engineer by the name of Percy Spencer was experimenting with a new vacuum tube called a magnetron. (Magnetrons are used to produce the high energy that is used in microwaves.) When he was working with the magnetron, he realized the candy bar in his pocket had melted. So being the electronics whiz that he was, Percy Spencer had an idea and immediately sent for some popcorn. This time he placed the popcorn kernels near the tube and soon history was made. The kernels popped and he went on to create the first microwave oven.



Who knew popcorn had such a history? From caves to ceremonies to microwaves, this fun food has seen it all. Perhaps that's why it has stood the test of time and still remains a favorite today.



Did You Know...

The first microwave oven was 6 feet tall and weighed 341 kilograms. That's 750 pounds! Microwave popcorn sales amount to 250 billion dollars a year.



Popcorn Shapes

Popcorn pops into one of two shapes. The snowflake, which is big and fluffy or the mushroom which is round and firm.

The biggest popcorn ball recorded today is from The Popcorn Factory in Lake Forest Illinois. It weighs in at 3,423 pounds and is 8 feet in diameter and 24.5 feet around. That's about 50,000 times bigger than normal popcorn balls and it's all edible.



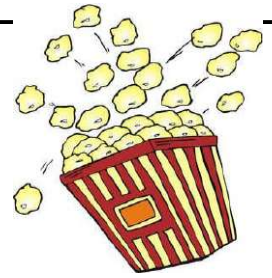
Happy Popcorn Day!

There's actually a National Popcorn Day. It's celebrated on January 19th. So get popping and celebrate.

Name: _____

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1. When did people first start popping popcorn?
 - a. shortly after the microwave was invented
 - b. in 1946
 - c. about one thousand years ago
 - d. over 5,000 years ago
2. When is National Popcorn Day?
 - a. the first or second week in January
 - b. the third or fourth week in January
 - c. seventeen days after New Year's Day
 - d. the last week in January

3. Draw a detailed picture of an ancient clay popcorn popper cooking on a fire.

Use information from the article to form your illustration.



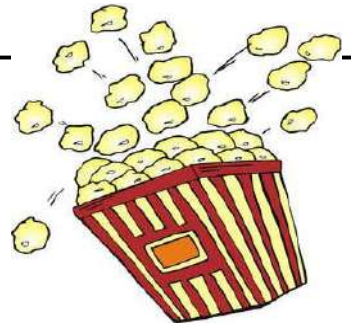
4. Explain how the Winnabago Indians cooked popcorn.

5. Who was Tlaloc?
 - a. the Aztec god of popcorn
 - b. the Aztec god of fishing
 - c. the Aztec god of rain
 - d. the Aztec god of peace and goodwill
6. Which sentence is an opinion?
 - a. Many people enjoy popcorn today.
 - b. Aztec people of long ago believed that popcorn brought peace and goodwill.
 - c. The biggest popcorn ball in the world is in Lake Forest, Illinois.
 - d. Today, the best way to pop popcorn is with a microwave oven.

Name: _____

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Fill in the missing letters to create a word from the article. Then, write the full word on the line. Be sure you spell each word correctly.

1. _ _ _ r _ _ _ _

clue: piece of corn

1. _____

2. _ _ _ e _ _ _ i _ _ s

clue: events performed on special occasions

2. _____

3. _ _ _ t _ _ _ i _ _ g

clue: spreading around

3. _____

4. _ _ _ _ s _ _ _ _ s

clue: balls of ice that fall from the sky

4. _____

5. _ i _ _ _ _ e _

clue: distance across the middle of a circle or sphere

5. _____

6. _ _ _ p _ _ _

clue: three legged rack

6. _____

7. _ _ _ t _ _ _ a l _ _ y

clue: in an extreme way; severely

7. _____

8. _ _ _ o _ _ _ _ d

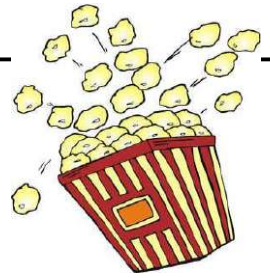
clue: decorated; added beauty

8. _____

ANSWER KEY

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1. When did people first start popping popcorn? **d**
 - a. shortly after the microwave was invented
 - b. in 1946
 - c. about one thousand years ago
 - d. **over 5,000 years ago**
2. When is National Popcorn Day? **b**
 - a. the first or second week in January
 - b. **the third or fourth week in January**
 - c. seventeen days after New Year's Day
 - d. the last week in January

3. Draw a detailed picture of an ancient clay popcorn popper cooking on a fire.

Use information from the article to form your illustration.

Picture should contain a tripod, with a covered clay pot suspended over a fire.

4. Explain how the Winnabago Indians cooked popcorn.

They stabbed a stick through the cob and placed it over a fire. The popcorn popped on the cob. They ate it like corn on the cob.

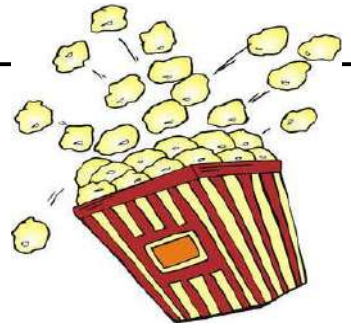
5. Who was Tlaloc? **c**
 - a. the Aztec god of popcorn
 - b. the Aztec god of fishing
 - c. **the Aztec god of rain**
 - d. the Aztec god of peace and goodwill
6. Which sentence is an opinion? **d**
 - a. Many people enjoy popcorn today.
 - b. Aztec people of long ago believed that popcorn brought peace and goodwill.
 - c. The biggest popcorn ball in the world is in Lake Forest, Illinois.
 - d. **Today, the best way to pop popcorn is with a microwave oven.**

Note: Choice A is not an opinion because it can be proven (by popcorn sales, surveys, etc.)

ANSWER KEY

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Fill in the missing letters to create a word from the article. Then, write the full word on the line. Be sure you spell each word correctly.

1. k e r n e l

clue: piece of corn

1. kernel

2. c e r e m o n i e s

clue: events performed on special occasions

2. ceremonies

3. s c a t t e r i n g

clue: spreading around

3. scattering

4. h a i l s t o n e s

clue: balls of ice that fall from the sky

4. hailstones

5. d i a m e t e r

clue: distance across the middle of a circle or sphere

5. diameter

6. t r i p o d

clue: three legged rack

6. tripod

7. d r a s t i c a l l y

clue: in an extreme way; severely

7. drastically

8. a d o r n e d

clue: decorated; added beauty

8. adorned

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Bibliography

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