What foods did Indians eat during the thousands of years they were here before the intrusion of the white man? Hollywood productions depict Indians hunting buffalo and other animals. They did, along with many other foods. But as to daily subsistence, scientists are still trying to put together a menu of what these people were likely to have eaten — region by region and site by site.

Based on recent archaeological discoveries, researchers believe that Indians had a fairly varied diet. With Louisiana's abundance of plants, it's easy to imagine Indians sitting outside their mud and wattle huts and munching on a variety of nuts and seeds, which included roasted acorns, or biting into a persimmon — though not a large, meaty persimmon as we know it today.

Visiting specialist Gail Fritz is as eager in her hunting of foods eaten by Indians as the Indians themselves must have been to gather them many centuries ago. She talked about her field — paleoethnobotany — with students informally. She gave a lecture and slide presentation one evening on the foods of Indians.

She's from the Museum of Anthropology at the University of Michigan, a researcher who analyzes seeds and charcoal (for burned plant remains) found at sites used by early civilizations. "Being here one week will give me the background I need to study the plant remains," she said, "found at the site, she said.

She studies the relationships between plants and people: eating, medicines, drugs and house- and canoe-building.

Filotation (using water to make light objects float to the top of a barrel) has revealed lots of acorns and persimmons at the Louisiana site. The acorns had been cooked, as opposed to merely falling from trees to the site.

Fritz tries to get an idea of vegetational communities when a site is being studied. "Land surveyors recorded trees every mile and half mile," she said. "Before I write up a report on this site, I have to do research on the plants that would have grown here.

"After 1000 A.D., Indians were altering their environment more than they thought they were," Fritz said. "We're getting away from the notion of the noble savage living in the forest primeval. It's commonly believed that people of that period were farming. We hope to find the remains of maize," she said, as evidence that the people at the Louisiana site did engage in agriculture. "It's possible that there was trade among the communities. Perhaps one specialized in growing maize, while another grew something else.

Plants found at some of the early North American sites include barley, gourds (5000 B.C.) and squash (2000 B.C.). The earliest garden beans date to 800 A.D., Fritz said, and maize was established somewhere between 900 and 1200 A.D. The large green-striped squash, with a neck, called cushaw around here, was introduced around 1400 A.D., she said, based on recent findings.

There are "really exciting and revolutionary changes in ways of looking at food production based on years of gathering, studying and discussing discoveries. The latest textbooks do not contain all this new information," she said. "It used to be portrayed that pottery and agriculture began in the Woodland era, about 1000 B.C. Actually it started earlier," she said.

"At the end of the Ice Age (10,000 B.C.), people were primarily hunters; they did not grow plants so far as we can know. We don't really know what the environment was like, especially this far South. Evidence for plant use is hard to come by," she said. Foods in use probably would have included nuts, acorns, flowering plants and seeds, fruits, roots and greens, Fritz said.

Her slides demonstrate that a big difference between wild seeds and domesticated ones was in size. The more domesticated seed, the thinner the shell was; wild seeds had thick shells. In excelling village sites, the thickness of seed shells would help researchers determine whether these foods were domesticated or gathered.

So far, Ann Rameńośky said, it appears that the people who once inhabited the Catahoula Lowlands site were sedentary hunters and gatherers. Further excavation will be required before any conclusions can be reached, however.

What kind of background is required to pursue research as specialized as Fritz's plant work? "Paleobotanists tend to have Ph.D.s in botany with some background in archaeology. I got my Ph.D. in archaeology at the University of North Carolina with a specialty in plant remains," Fritz explained. She has worked extensively at sites in Arkansas and Oklahoma, studying plant remains.

There's still a lot to learn about what early man had for dinner. "When you start at zero and you go to one — that's an improvement of magnitude," Fritz said.