



ALL EARS

Corn is a key crop for Indigenous peoples, who introduced the world to the now-common kernel

Lois Ellen Frank and Walter Whitewater
FOR THE NEW MEXICAN

Chef Walter's dad, Thomas Mike Whitewater, used to grow corn every year. He's gone now, but he learned how to grow corn using a dry farming tradition from his dad, Grandpa Bekay, and his grandma Susie Whitewater, a tradition that has been in his family for generations. The Whitewater family grew a cornfield every year near the family home in Pinon, Arizona, on the Navajo Nation, 120 miles northwest of Gallup.

Corn was always considered to be sacred and one of the main staples of life for the Whitewater family. All parts of the corn are used, including the husks, the corn, the silk, the pollen — even the stalks are fed to the animals, and nothing is ever wasted. Food is medicine, and everyone shares in the bounty of corn and its abundance after it is harvested.

What has always amazed me is how corn can grow in the desert at all. Native American families and farmers using this traditional dry farming method

without irrigation, with ancestral traditional knowledge that has been passed down for generations, can still produce a bountiful crop and many have mastered the art of growing corn in the arid Southwest. In addition to corn, Walter's family grew squash, beans, potatoes, melons, and sunflowers.

One year, while I was there for the harvest, I documented how the family harvested the fresh corn and steamed it overnight in an underground pit.

First a deep hole was dug in the ground. Juniper and pine wood was placed on top and burned in the pit until the ash turned white, warming the surrounding earth. The ash was then removed. The remaining embers were left in the pit, and the freshly harvested corn, which was soaked in a little water to wet it, was then placed on top of the embers to steam.

That year, about 200 or more ears of corn were put into the pit. His family poured a bucket of water over the corn to begin the steaming process. Then a canvas

was put over the corn, dirt was placed on top of the canvas, and the corn was steamed overnight. Walter always tended the fire with Chester, his blue healer. Sleeping under the stars and smelling the essence of the corn roasting in the pit was always something special, and Walter liked to do this, as it gave him a break from herding the family's sheep.

The next morning, when the sun was coming up, the earth and canvas were removed. Each family member passed around the first ear of freshly steamed corn, took a bite, and then gave what was left back to the fire as an offering to say thank you. Some of the freshly harvested steamed corn was eaten that day, with the remainder of the corn hung to dry outside the family house for winter use. It was some of the most delicious steamed corn I have ever eaten, and I am honored that I was able to help the family document the process.

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Navajo Kneel Down Bread (Nitsidigo'i')

Chef Walter made this Navajo corn recipe based on the traditional recipe that his grandmother, aunties, and relatives have always made. It is called “kneel down bread” because you have to kneel down to grind the fresh corn on a grinding stone and because the cook had to tend to this traditionally earthen-pit-cooked bread while kneeling. Walter’s dad, Thomas Mike Whitewater, was the farmer in the family and grew corn and other crops, including squashes, sunflowers, and melons. This dish was always made with the fresh corn that his dad grew. Technically it is not a true bread but a fresh corn dish that is baked in a corn husk.

While this recipe is traditionally made with fresh corn, it can be made with frozen corn kernels as well. The corn kernels are lightly ground, traditionally on a stone, but today can be made in a food processor or blender. Walter always sings during this process of preparing the corn to put the Ancestral songs into the breads before they bake, and he sang as we tested this recipe.

The moist meal or a version of a type of masa is seasoned with a little salt, sometimes herbs, and then the masa is placed in either fresh or dried corn husks that are soaked and baked. In the past, and for some Ceremonial occasions, these breads were baked in the ground overnight on the embers of a fire that has burned down, but many people today bake them in their kitchen oven. This dish truly celebrates corn in one of its purest forms.

MAKES APPROXIMATELY 6 KNEEL DOWN BREADS FOR THE CORN VERSION AND 9 FOR THE FRUIT VERSION

For the Kneel Down Bread:

8 to 9 corn husks, fresh or dried
3 cups fresh or frozen sweet white corn kernels (cut from the cob or a 1-pound bag of frozen corn kernels)
1 cup blackened corn
½ cup water
½ teaspoon kosher salt
About 6 corn husk ties (see directions)

For the Corn Sauce:

1½ cups fresh or frozen white corn kernels
½ cup water or vegetable broth
½ teaspoon kosher salt
1 teaspoon pure maple syrup

For the Fruit Version of Kneel Down Bread:

8 to 9 corn husks, fresh or dried
3 cups fresh or frozen sweet white corn kernels (cut from the cob or a 1-pound bag of frozen corn kernels)
¼ teaspoon kosher salt
1 small apple, seeded and diced with skin on (approximately 1 cup)
¼ cup golden raisins
¼ cup dried currants
1 teaspoon pure maple syrup
About 9 corn husk ties (see directions)

Preheat the oven to 400°F. Soak the dried corn husks in hot water for 10 minutes. If using fresh corn, cut both ends of the fresh corn off, first the top and then the bottom. Gently remove the fresh husks, keeping them as intact as possible. Wash the husks to remove any dirt and place in warm water to soak for 10 minutes. Cut the kernels from the cob.

Prepare the blackened corn.

In a food processor, place 3 cups of the uncooked corn kernels, add the water, and process on low until you have a rough masa. It should not be completely puréed but have some texture to it.

Remove from the blender or food processor and place in a bowl. Add the salt and the blackened corn kernels and stir together. This is your masa for the kneel down breads.

Take a soaked corn husk and place approximately 6 tablespoons of the masa into the center of the husk. Roll the husk first from the left side and fold over, then from the right side and fold over so that it covers the masa. Next take another soaked corn husk and roll over the open side of the bread, covering it. Fold over the bottom (wide side) of the corn husk and tie using a piece of the corn husk. Then fold the top (narrow side) over and tie with a torn piece of corn husk.

To make the ties, rip a piece of corn husk lengthwise that is approximately 1 inch wide by whatever the length of the husk is (which should be about 8 to 9 inches long). Tie a knot on the thick end of the torn husk and tear it into two pieces that will be tied together at the end by the knot. Now you should have two pieces of tie that are ½ inch in width and held together by the knot at the end. This should be long enough to tie around the kneel down bread.

Walter’s breads were about 5½ inches long by 2 to 2½ inches wide. Place on a sheet pan and bake in the oven for approximately 60 minutes until the breads are done and firm to the touch.

While the breads are cooking, make the sauce. Place the corn kernels, water, salt, and maple syrup in a blender and mix on high until completely smooth, for approximately 2 minutes. Pass through a fine strainer and discard or compost the contents of the strainer.

Place the sauce in a small saucepan and heat on low for approximately 10 minutes just before serving, stirring to prevent burning.

Remove the baked kneel down breads from the oven and serve immediately with the corn sauce.

To make the fruit version of this bread, prepare the masa as directed above in a food processor or blender. Remove from the blender or food processor and place in a bowl. Add the salt, apples, raisins, currants, and maple syrup, and stir together. You should have approximately 3 cups of lightly ground corn mixture. Follow the instructions for preparing the tied breads, placing approximately 5 tablespoons of the mixture in each corn husk.

Place on a sheet pan and bake in the oven for approximately 60 minutes until the breads are done and firm to the touch.

Serve these kneel down breads as a dessert with corn sauce or with Vanilla Peach Sauce (from page 211 of the book) or Chokecherry Syrup (from page 271 of the book). ◀



Top: Navajo Kneel Down Bread (Nitsidigo'i') is called such because one must kneel down to grind the fresh corn on a grinding stone and then tend the earthen-pit-cooked bread while kneeling.

Bottom: The fruit version of kneel down bread is served with corn sauce.

Opposite page: Cassandra Lyn Begay and Tiffany Georgeina Morgan harvest their grandfather Thomas Mike Whitewater's sweet corn.

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Here in New Mexico, fresh corn is also roasted in the horno. Hornos are beehive-shaped mud adobe-built earthen ovens that many Pueblo families and communities throughout Northern New Mexico use. Sweet corn is roasted to make a traditional Northern New Mexico favorite called chicos, which is sold at many farmers markets and by some New Mexico food companies.

Fresh corn has always been revered in Walter's family and considered a treat at harvest time. Fresh corn is cherished and used in recipes both modern and traditional (see recipes for grilled sweet corn, fresh corn salad, and a Navajo Kneel Down Bread, Nitsidigo'i).

These recipes are excerpted from *Seed to Plate, Soil to Sky; Modern Plant-Based Recipes Using Native American Ingredients*, which will be released on August 29. *Seed to Plate, Soil to Sky* focuses on eight plants that Native peoples gave to the world: Chapters dedicated to corn, beans, squash, chiles, tomatoes, potatoes, vanilla, and cacao feature recipes using each of these Indigenous ingredients. All of these ancestral foods didn't exist outside of Indigenous America prior to the first European contact of 1492.

Once these foods were introduced to cultures all over the world, they were woven into the fabric of those cultures, changing them forever, and can now be found in every cuisine on the planet. Think about it: The Italians didn't have the tomato, the Irish didn't have the potato, Britain had fish and no chips. There were no chiles in East Indian dishes, including curries, and no chiles existed in any Asian cuisines at all. In fact, chiles weren't introduced to South Asia until the 1500s, when they would come to dominate the world spice trade in the 16th century.

Walter and I, who collaborate as chefs at Red Mesa Cuisine in Santa Fe, are passionate about cooking with ancestral Native American ingredients and educating people on the intersection of both food and culture. We believe that food has a story of how it nurtured the ancestors and sustained generations. We hope you enjoy the recipes that follow and that you celebrate the sweet corn of summer and use them to feed your body but also to nurture your soul. ◀

Cook the book

Lois Ellen Frank, Ph.D., is a Santa Fe-based, James Beard Award-winning author, chef, Native foods historian, educator, photographer, gardener, and co-owner of Red Mesa Cuisine, a catering company that offers culinary experiences and specializes in traditional Native American techniques and ancestral ingredients. Walter Whitewater (Diné) is the chef at Red Mesa Cuisine and culinary advisor on the James Beard Award-winning *Foods of the Southwest Indian Nations: Traditional and Contemporary Native American Recipes* by Lois Ellen Frank (Ten Speed Press, 2002), and winner of the James Lewis Award for his work as a Native American chef. Find more information at redmesacuisine.com.

▼ *Seed to Plate, Soil to Sky; Modern Plant-Based Recipes Using Native American Ingredients* by Lois Ellen Frank with culinary advisor Walter Whitewater, Hachette Go (August 29), 528 pages

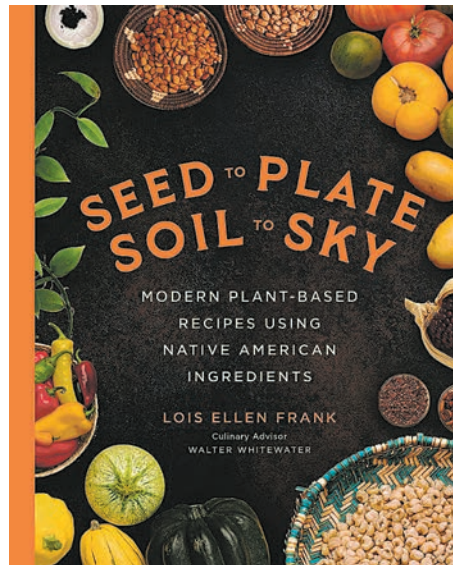


PHOTO COURTESY LOIS ELLEN FRANK

Walter Whitewater and Lois Ellen Frank
Top, left: Frank and Whitewater have collaborated on a new cookbook, *Seed to Plate, Soil to Sky*, which focuses on eight plants that Native peoples gave to the world. Right: This grilled sweet corn recipe features an emulsion rather than butter.

Opposite page, top: Thomas Mike Whitewater puts fresh corn into the pit to be steamed overnight. Bottom: Chef Walter's Fresh Corn Salad features sweet corn and purslane.

Grilled Sweet Corn

Fresh grilled sweet corn on the cob is one of the best dishes to showcase summer. The Santa Fe Farmers' Market sells sweet corn for a limited time, and this is the perfect recipe to use when it is available. Terri and Brian Graves of Anasazi Roasted Corn sell it on the Santa Fe Plaza; folks line up for blocks to get their perfectly roasted corn on the cob. The biggest dilemma has always been providing a good marinade other than melted butter.

When we tested this recipe on the grill, Terri was amazed at how delicious our alternative to butter is. The flavor of the corn has a little spice to it from the chile, the lemon brightens the emulsion, and the blackened garlic adds a savory component that is not overpowering to the corn. Salt brings out the sweet flavor, making a delightful grilled ear without losing the corn's fresh essence.

MAKES 4 SERVINGS

For the emulsion:

- 1 tablespoon lemon juice (approximately 1/2 lemon)
- 1/2 cup sunflower oil
- 1 teaspoon New Mexico green chile powder (mild)
- 1 teaspoon New Mexico red chile powder (mild)
- 1 tablespoon blackened garlic
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt, or to taste
- 1 tablespoon water

For the sweet corn:

- 4 pieces fresh white or yellow sweet corn

For the emulsion, place all the ingredients into a blender and mix, starting on low, and then turn up to high, for approximately 30 seconds. Pour the emulsion into a bowl and reserve.

For the fresh corn, peel down the husk from the top and remove the corn silk from the corncob.

Compost, discard, or save and dry the corn silk for later use. Tie the outer corn husk leaves together using a piece of the fresh corn husks as a tie so that it holds together on the bottom of the corn. This is what you and your guests will use to hold the corn so you can eat it right off the grill.

Brush on some of the emulsion and place the corn on the grill. Rotate it four times, cooking approximately for 45 seconds to 1 minute, brushing a little more of the emulsion onto the exposed corn with each rotation, so it blackens but does not burn. Corn will be ready in approximately 3 to 4 minutes, depending on the size of the corn and the heat of your grill.

I use a charcoal grill and charcoal wood pieces. Look for a locally made charcoal in your area.

I let the charcoal burn down so that it has just the hot embers to cook the corn on the cob. And because you are using fresh corn, you don't want to overcook it; you just want to cook it enough so that it remains sweet and tender.

Once the corn has cooked, remove it from the grill and serve immediately.

Note: For those of you with a spicier palate, you can increase the amount of chile or use a hotter chile in the emulsion. ◀



Walter's Fresh Corn Salad

Fresh corn reminds me of summer. This simple salad features sweet corn and purslane. Purslane, also called verdolagas in Spanish, is an annual weed from the family Portulacaceae, the genus *Portulaca* and of the species *P. oleracea*, that grows wild in disturbed soil areas all over the United States as well as in other parts of the world. It is a succulent-looking plant with green flat leaves that are tender, edible, and very nutritious that are often eaten in salads, soups, and stews. It is not as bitter as arugula but similar in flavor. If you can't find or harvest purslane, substitute arugula as it has a similar flavor and is readily available. While I recommend making it with fresh sweet summer corn from your local farm stand or farmers' market, it works perfectly with organic frozen sweet corn any time of year.

MAKES 4 SERVINGS

For the vinaigrette:

- 2 tablespoons elderberry balsamic vinegar or any balsamic vinegar
- 1 tablespoon water
- 1 teaspoon smooth Dijon mustard
- 1 teaspoon whole-grain Dijon mustard
- 1 teaspoon agave sweetener
- 1/4 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

For the Salad:

- 1/2 small red onion, thinly sliced (about 1/2 cup)
- 1/2 pound cherry tomatoes, halved (approximately 2 cups)
- 2 cups fresh organic white or yellow sweet corn kernels (or frozen if fresh is not available)
- 1 cup purslane (in summer) or arugula (in winter)
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh chives, for garnish

In a large bowl, whisk together all the vinaigrette ingredients. Add the onion, tomatoes, corn, and purslane and gently toss together.

Garnish with the chives. Serve immediately. ◀