

A Diné Chef Shares Food for Thought

On a visit with Walter Whitewater, centuries of ancestral food wisdom are dispensed through stories —and everyone gets fed.

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WHEN I ARRIVE, WALTER WHITEWATER is already in the kitchen. He asks if I want coffee or if he can make me an egg. He refreshes his knife blade on a sharpening steel before resuming the work in front of him. As he attends to a bowl of cut vegetables that are headed for a stockpot, he carefully adds carrot peels, onion skins, celery ends, and herb stems to another bowl, so the edible odds and ends won't go to waste. "I'll lay them away from the house where the wild animals come, so everybody gets to eat," he says.

I've known the Diné chef for several years now, having had the privilege of cooking with him on many food projects throughout Santa Fe. I've seen how he prepares food for guests and at his home. I have worked in all sorts of kitchens with all kinds of chefs. I've never cooked with anyone like Whitewater.

He's been cooking since childhood, thanks to his grandparents and father, who taught him the connection between food and all living things via storytelling, cooking methods, and living in community. Born in Piñon, Arizona, on the Navajo Nation, Whitewater has been cooking professionally since 1992, when he took a job with chef David Tanis at the late Cafe Escalera, in Santa Fe. He also spent time at Bishop's Lodge, as well as at the now-shuttered Mu Du Noodles. Eventually, he and fellow chef Lois Ellen Frank joined forces as the Native American catering company [Red Mesa Cuisine](#), in Eldorado. These days, he splits his time between Arizona and New Mexico, catering private events and teaching cooking classes across the region.



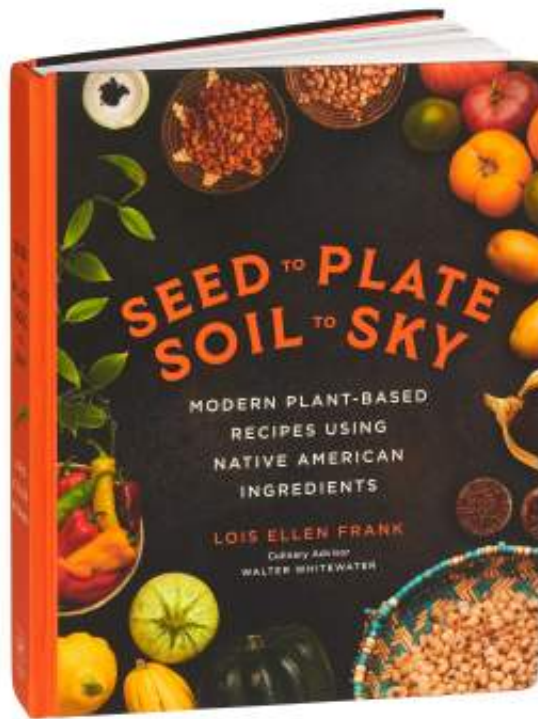
Chef Walter Whitewater with a harvest.

As he adds vegetables to the pot, I realize how much I love being here. It's a time when I put aside everything I think I know about preparing food. Instead, I have the chance to observe and record—a task I've done with Whitewater enough times to know that I need to type as fast as I can, hoping I can somehow translate the uniquely light touch he uses to bring dishes to life.

Sometimes I'll gently interrupt to ask a question, usually to confirm an ingredient amount. But when Whitewater cooks, his energy is entirely focused on both cooking and telling stories. Storytelling is not something he does to pass the time; it's an integral part of the cooking process.

For the most part, he doesn't follow recipes. And it's not only because he cooks from a deep well of memory and taste. He simply couldn't care less about following a straight line of ingredients and methods.

That's a feat, when you consider the labor that went into his position as the primary culinary advisor for two cookbooks written by Frank. In 2003, the first one, [***Foods of the Southwest Indian Nations***](#) (Ten Speed Press), won a James Beard Award, the very first Native American cookbook to receive the honor. The second, [***Seed to Plate, Soil to Sky***](#), was published by Hachette Go this past summer. It focuses on eight plants that Indigenous people introduced to the rest of the world—corn, beans, squash, chile, tomato, potato, vanilla, and cacao—and features more than 100 recipes.



The chef served as culinary advisor for Lois Ellen Frank's latest book "Seed to Plate, Soil to Sky."
Photograph by Inga Hendrickson.

Maybe the intuitive way Whitewater works in the kitchen frees his mind for other things, more important things. At the kitchen island, he shows me how he picks dried thyme leaves off the stems. These herbs will be used throughout the fall and winter until new thyme blooms appear in the yard next summer.

"After we make the stock," he says, "we will work on the corn." Like many plants in Indigenous culture, corn is not simply considered food. "All the hard work, all the work that goes into it, praying for the rain to provide the food and medicine that we need," he says reflectively. He recounts what happens after the corn harvest—how they dig a four-foot-deep pit, fill it with wood, and feed a fire throughout the day.

"At the end of the day, when the sun starts setting and the ash has turned white, we know it's time," he says. The wood charcoal is removed, then the corn goes into the hot pit. It gets doused with water before the covering process begins—first goes a layer of canvas, then dirt, then it's topped with

hot wooden embers. Someone stays to add wood to the hot coals throughout the night. When the sun comes up, each layer is gently removed to reveal the steamed corn. A single ear is taken out of the pit and passed around. Everyone takes a bite.



Kneel Down Bread is wrapped in corn husks before baking.

“As the steam comes out of the ground,” Whitewater says, “we sing the corn song. Whatever is left from the ear of corn is given back to the fire to show respect to the fire, water, and dirt we have used. The corn is hung to dry, and this is our food for winter.” The corn is shared with elders and others in the community, ground to make creamer for coffee, or saved for ceremonial occasions.

“This is how my family made steamed corn,” he says. “Nothing goes to waste. We say thank you with how we treat the husk, the cob, the corn silk.”

The sweet smell of corn, herbs, and roasted chicken fills the house while we talk. For Whitewater, the flavors of fall are about seasonal availability: apples, dried fruit, sumac berries, green chile, savory herbs, turkey, and wild game.

But perhaps even more, they recall the connections forged through his memories of trading. "When I was a boy, there was a family that came to our house every fall. My grandfather raised animals that we could trade for goods. But we also shared language with each other, and, over the years, friendship."

At the end of our time together, he stands at the sink, washing the spoons we've been using for tasting throughout the day. "One day you realize, maybe I should have listened a little bit more," he says.

"Our elders made such an effort to teach us traditions, language, songs, and the best time to collect seeds from the squash. I'm lucky to have these memories. These stories are how our connection is not lost."

[Read more: Acoma blue corn, long lost to the pueblo, grows again as Indigenous farms take root and Native food sovereignty blossoms.](#)



WALTER WHITEWATER'S STUFFED GAME HENS WITH MOLE AND NAVAJO KNEEL DOWN BREAD

This dish celebrates fall flavors and the intersection of Indigenous and Mexican cuisines. It features roasted Cornish game hens along with Navajo Kneel Down Bread, so named for the cook's traditional necessity to kneel while tending to the pit-baked bread. Mole comes from the Nahuatl word *mōlli*, meaning "sauce."

CHICKEN STOCK

- Sunflower oil, a drizzle
- 5 carrots, peeled and sliced
- 5 celery stalks, trimmed and sliced
- 1 onion, roughly chopped
- Garlic cloves, one handful, toasted in a skillet
- 1 roasted or rotisserie chicken, broken into pieces
- 2 Roma tomatoes, roughly chopped
- 12 cups cold water
- A bundle (or stems) of dried or fresh thyme, sage, marjoram, and rosemary
- A handful of whatever roasted and chopped (or dried) chile is on hand (optional)
- Pinch of salt

KNEEL DOWN BREAD

Yields 8–10 breads

- 5 large ears of sweet corn, or 4 cups of frozen kernels
- 20 dried corn husks (only if using frozen corn), soaked in hot water for 10 minutes
- Pinch of kosher salt

MOLE

- 4 dried ancho chiles
- 3 dried guajillo chiles
- 4 Roma tomatoes
- 2 tablespoons sunflower oil
- 1 medium white onion, finely chopped
- 3 garlic cloves, toasted
- ½ cup pecans, toasted and chopped
- 2 tablespoons tahini or ¼ cup sesame seeds, toasted
- ¼ cup pumpkin seeds, toasted
- ½ teaspoon ground canela or cinnamon
- 2 teaspoons kosher salt
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- ½ cup dried apricots, chopped
- ½ cup dried tart cherries
- ½ cup dark raisins
- ½ cup Mexican chocolate, chopped
- ½ cup dark chocolate
- 7 cups reserved chicken stock
- Salt and pepper to taste

STUFFING

- 1 cup dried wild rice
- 3 ½ cups chicken stock, divided
- Sunflower oil drizzle
- ½ large onion, roughly chopped
- 3 tablespoons garlic, blackened and finely chopped
- ½ cup dried blueberries
- ¼ cup piñon nuts, toasted
- 1 tablespoon fresh sage, chopped
- 1 teaspoon mild red chile powder

- ½ teaspoon kosher salt

CORNISH GAME HENS

- 4 Cornish game hens
- 3 tablespoons butter, softened to room temperature
- ½ teaspoon kosher salt
- 1 tablespoon fresh sage, chopped
- 4 cups reserved stuffing
- Sunflower oil drizzle
- 4 pinches mild red chile powder
- 4 pinches kosher salt

Serves 4

CHICKEN STOCK

1. Drizzle a little oil in a large stockpot. Add the carrots, celery, and onion and let the vegetables brown.
2. Add garlic cloves, chicken pieces, and tomatoes. Add water and scrape the pot to get anything on the bottom unstuck and stir everything in the pot together. Bring to a boil and then lower the heat to a simmer.
3. Add the herbs. If you use chile, taste it first so you'll know how hot it is (remove the seeds if you want it milder). Let slowly simmer for about two hours.
4. Strain the stock, picking out all the chicken meat and reserving it for a later use, for tamales or sandwiches. Reserve the stock for both the mole and wild rice stuffing.

KNEEL DOWN BREAD

1. Preheat the oven to 350°. With a sharp knife, cut the bottom heel from each ear of corn, then slice lengthwise down the center of each ear of corn only to the kernels. Carefully remove the husks and silk from

around each ear, keeping the husks as intact as possible and saving them for wrapping the bread.

2. Whether you're using fresh husks or dried and soaked husks, the process is the same: Tear 8 long strands of husk (around an inch thick) for tying. (Save the leftover cobs for corn stock, or feed to animals.) Process the corn kernels in a food processor or blender until they are relatively smooth but still textured. Strain this newly created masa through a strainer to remove the excess water.
3. Place approximately 3 tablespoons of the masa in the center of a husk. Similar to folding a letter in thirds, 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. Take another piece of corn husk and roll it over the open side of the masa, covering it. Fold up the bottom of the corn husk and tie together using a strand of the corn husk. Place the bundles on a sheet pan and bake for about an hour and a half, or until the bread is firm to the touch.

Note: For a fruit version of *Kneel Down Bread*, make the same base as above and add 1½ cups of dried fruit. A good combination is ½ cup each of dried goldenberries (also called ground cherries), dried blueberries, and dried cherries. This may yield a few extra breads.

MOLE

1. Toast the chiles in a 350° oven for three minutes, then take off the stems, remove the seeds, and break the chiles into pieces. Using a cast-iron cooking grill or open flame, roast the tomatoes until the outer skin is blackened. Remove the tomato skins and dice them when they are cool enough to handle.
2. In a large saucepan over medium heat, heat oil until it is hot but not smoking. Add onions and saute until they are translucent, stirring as you go. Add the garlic and ancho and guajillo chiles, and cook for a couple of minutes while stirring. Add the pecans, tahini, pumpkin seeds, canela

(or cinnamon), salt, and pepper. Cook for approximately five minutes, stirring occasionally.

3. Add apricots, cherries, raisins, and both kinds of chocolate, and cook for another few minutes. Add the chicken stock and bring to a boil. Lower the heat to a simmer and cook uncovered for about 30 minutes, stirring occasionally to prevent burning.
4. Working in batches so as not to overcrowd your blender, blend the mole on high until it is completely blended. Return the mole to a saucepan and simmer over low heat for about 15 minutes. If the mole seems too thick, add a little water to thin it out.

STUFFING

1. Put rice and three cups of stock in a medium saucepan and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to low, cover, and cook for 40 minutes.
2. While the rice is cooking, place a large skillet over medium-high heat and add the oil. After a minute, add the onion and cook for about five minutes. Add garlic and cook for another few minutes.
3. Add the onion-garlic mixture to the cooked wild rice, along with dried blueberries, piñon nuts, sage, mild red chile powder, salt, and the remaining half cup of chicken stock.

CORNISH GAME HENS

1. Preheat the oven to 400°. Dry the outside of the game hens. In a small bowl, mix the butter, ½ teaspoon salt, and fresh sage. Divide the butter mixture between the four hens, sliding the butter underneath the skin of each bird.
2. Stuff each hen with a cup of wild rice filling. Tuck the wings under and tie the legs together with a piece of corn husk or kitchen twine. Rub a bit of oil over each bird and sprinkle with a pinch of red chile powder and a pinch of kosher salt.
3. Roast the game hens for about one hour, or until the internal temperature reaches 180° and the temperature of the stuffing reaches

165° on a thermometer. Let the hens rest for 10 minutes.

To serve: For each plate, put a generous spoonful of mole down first. Then place a Cornish game hen on top. Serve Kneel Down Bread on the side.

Note: *A variation of the stuffing uses a combination of cooked Navajo Kneel Down Bread folded into the wild rice before stuffing the game hens. For this version, remove four cooked breads from the husks and mix with half of the wild-rice mixture, as with a porridge, before stuffing. This should leave you with four additional breads to serve on the side along with extra wild rice.*

Recipes for Mole and Navajo Kneel Down Bread are adapted from *Seed to Plate, Soil to Sky: Modern Plant-Based Recipes Using Native American Ingredients* by Lois Ellen Frank and Walter Whitewater, the book's culinary advisor.