

A photograph of several bright yellow squash blossoms with green stems, arranged in a small woven basket with blue and white stripes. The basket sits on a dark wooden surface. A few more blossoms are scattered on the wood in the foreground. The background is a soft-focus view of more blossoms.

COOKING FRESH

SEED TO PLATE, SOIL TO SKY

PLANT-BASED RECIPES WITH AMERICAN ROOTS

Words, Recipes, and Photos by Lois Ellen Frank

Food has always been more than something to eat. For me, food is the medicine that nurtures us all. *Seed to Plate, Soil to Sky: Modern Plant-Based Recipes Using Native American Ingredients* (forthcoming from Hachette on August 29) is the story of eight plants that Native people gave to the world: corn, beans, squash, chiles, tomatoes, potatoes, vanilla, and cacao. Prior to 1492, these plants existed only in the Americas, and, I believe, are truly some of the most miraculous indigenous foods that originated on this continent. The traditional ecological knowledge surrounding their cultivation and preparation is both vast and extensive.

Now found in almost every cuisine all over the world, these “magic eight,” as I like to call them, have sustained Native American cultures for millennia. The foods and plants celebrated in this book were not only important in the past; they are crucial to the future. These food traditions are alive and vibrant, and their importance is realized by many different cultural groups that now share the Southwest.

I and Chef Walter Whitewater, with whom I creatively collaborate and cook at Red Mesa Cuisine, are passionate about cooking with ancestral Native American ingredients and educating people on the intersection of both food and culture. We believe food has a story of how it nurtured the ancestors and sustained generations, and these plants, including the Three Sisters (corn, beans, and squash), are integral to the foods we prepare for health and wellness at Red Mesa.

What Chef Walter and I have found is that many people want to incorporate more plants into their diets but were never taught how to cook them in new, fresh, and creative ways. We decided that we would work together on a plant-based cookbook with easy-to-follow, healthy, and modern as well as ancestral ways to prepare these nutritious plants. And so, each of the eight chapters in the forthcoming cookbook focuses on one of the magic eight plants, with recipes that range from savory to sweet, familiar to unexpected, and simple to complex.

Many people are unaware of the contribution Native people of the Americas have made to the foods they eat every day. In preparing these foods, we can revitalize everything associated with them. And when we feed people these sacred foods, we nurture them while still honoring the ancestors.

Here, in sharing a few recipes from the cookbook, we invite all of you to join us in celebrating these indigenous plants and to prepare some of the special dishes that feature them.

SUMMER FRIED SQUASH BLOSSOMS

Squash blossoms are one of my favorite things to eat during the summer months. For several weeks each year, they can be purchased at farmers markets throughout the state. Native American communities learned to use the male squash blossoms to cook with because they never bear fruit and they have a long narrow stem and stamen. The female blossoms become the fruit, and they will always have a tiny fruit under the flower. They are not harvested in the flower stage to allow them to produce the squash fruits. As long as some

of the male blossoms are left in the squash patch for pollination, the bees will do the rest and the additional male blossoms can be harvested. The male blossoms are used widely throughout Mexico in a variety of dishes including quesadillas and soups; in northern New Mexico, they are primarily stuffed with cheese and batter-fried using heavy cream. This recipe makes a unique crispy, stuffed version of a dish that is traditionally not plant-based. Enjoy them while you can during their short summer season.

- 1 batch Lois’s Pico de Gallo, prepared in advance (below)
- 12–16 male squash blossoms (depending on size)

For the blossom stuffing:

- 2 teaspoons sunflower oil
- 1/2 small white onion, finely chopped (approximately 1/4 cup)
- 1–2 garlic cloves, peeled
- 1 New Mexico green chile, roasted, seeded, peeled, and finely chopped
- 1 vine-ripened tomato, seeded and finely chopped (approximately 1/2 cup)
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1/2 can (15.5 oz) organic great northern beans, pureed (approximately 2/3 cup)

For frying and for the batter:

- 1 liter (about 4 cups) sunflower oil
- 1/3 cup cornstarch
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1/4 cup plus 2 tablespoons white rice flour
- 1/2 cup sparkling water, cold

First, blacken the garlic. Heat a small cast-iron pan over high heat until it is hot but not smoking. Place the raw peeled garlic in the pan and cook, stirring occasionally and rotating frequently, until the garlic begins to blacken on all sides (4–5 minutes). Remove from heat and cool, then chop finely.

Preheat a medium cast-iron pan over medium heat until it is hot but not smoking. Add the sunflower oil and the onion and sauté for 3–4 minutes until the onions begin to caramelize. Add the chile and 1 teaspoon of the blackened garlic and sauté for another minute, stirring to prevent burning. Add the tomato and continue to cook for an additional 3 minutes. Add the salt and stir. Remove from heat, taste, adjust seasoning if desired, and then place in a small bowl and allow to cool to room temperature.

While the mixture is cooling, prepare the bean puree. Place the beans in a food processor and process until smooth. Then fold the onion mixture into the bean puree. Your mixture is now ready to stuff inside the blossoms. Each blossom should have the stamen removed (the stamens are edible, but I think they taste bitter). I make a single cut lengthwise to each flower so that it is easier to get the stuffing in.



a piece of paper towel to absorb any excess oil that drains off. Cook all the blossoms and then turn off the heat.

Place 3–4 blossoms onto each plate and serve with Lois’s Pico de Gallo. Serve immediately.

LOIS’S PICO DE GALLO

I love fresh salsa. It is one of my favorite things to eat with almost everything. It adds a nice zest of flavor to lots of recipes, and while I think every chef and home cook has a version of how to make this kitchen staple, this version is mine and I make it all the time. I serve it with many recipes in *Seed to Plate, Soil to Sky*, including Summer Fried Squash Blossoms.

Makes approximately 3 cups

- 2 large vine-ripened tomatoes or 4 ripened Roma tomatoes, diced (approximately 2 cups)
- 1/2 red onion, finely diced or minced (approximately 1/2 cup)
- 1 jalapeño, minced (approximately 2 tablespoons)
- 1 tablespoon blackened garlic
- 1/4 cup fresh cilantro, finely chopped
- 1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon freshly squeezed lime juice (approximately 1 small lime)
- 1/2 teaspoon kosher salt, or to taste

In a medium-sized mixing bowl, combine all the ingredients and gently stir together. Serve immediately or refrigerate for later use.

Note: The longer this salsa sits, the hotter it will get due to the chile. For a spicier salsa, you can increase the amount of jalapeño or add 1 finely chopped serrano chile.

Fill each blossom with approximately 1 tablespoon of stuffing mixture, then gently twist the flower at the top in a circular direction to seal in the filling. Set aside on a sheet tray.

Pour the oil into a deep saucepan or cast-iron dutch oven that is at least 4 inches deep so that the oil doesn’t splatter while frying. Because frying with oil can be dangerous, it’s important to note that whatever pan you use, you need to make sure that there is plenty of room up the sides of the pan to prevent oil from bubbling over. Over medium to high heat, heat the oil until hot but not smoking. You can test a little batter once the oil is ready to make sure that it is hot enough. The batter will begin to cook immediately, bubbling in the oil, and turn brown shortly after being placed in the oil.

While the oil is heating, prepare the batter. In a medium mixing bowl, mix all the dry ingredients and then add the cold sparkling water. Using a whisk, stir to make sure there are no lumps. Then, one at a time, dredge each stuffed squash blossom into the batter so that it is completely coated. Then gently place in the hot oil and cook until it turns brown, for approximately 3–4 minutes. I use a spoon or round mesh kitchen skimmer (also called a kitchen spider) to immerse the stuffed blossom completely into the oil, making sure that it cooks evenly. Then remove it from the oil and place on a sheet tray covered with



Top: Joel Gonzalez from Gonzalez Farms putting fresh corn into the horno to make chichos for sale at the Santa Fe Farmers' Market. Bottom left: Grace's Corn Ice (Da'yis tiin). Bottom right: Dried corn.

GRACE'S CORN ICE (DA'YIS TIIN)

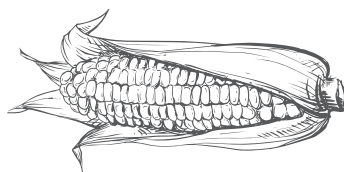
Before there was refrigeration on the Navajo reservation, this dish was prepared and then put outside in the snow overnight. In the morning, kids would eat the frozen corn mush for breakfast. Chef Walter remembers his grandmother, Grandma Susie Whitewater Begay, making this for him when he was a child.

Plant-based Navajo cook Grace Tracy shared her version of this corn dish with me and said that it was a variation of a popsicle she likes. She said, "The elder teaching is 'Ash repels evil, as it has spiritual significance to protect. White corn is our identity and a gift from the Creator.'"

The delicate flavor for this corn ice is lightly sweet from the corn and maple syrup, and the texture is a lot like shaved ice. For those of you with a sweeter palate, drizzle some additional maple syrup onto the plate when serving. This recipe was inspired by both Grace, whose recipe I adapted, and Chef Walter's memory of this dish while growing up.

Makes 3 5x8-inch frozen containers

- 2 cups finely ground white cornmeal
- 5 cups water
- 3/4 cup pure maple syrup, plus more for drizzling
- 1/2 teaspoon kosher salt
- 1/2 teaspoon culinary ash (optional)



First toast the cornmeal. To do this, heat a large cast-iron skillet or heavy-bottomed pan over medium heat, then add the cornmeal and toast for around 10 minutes or until it turns a golden brown, stirring frequently to prevent burning and ensure that the cornmeal toasts evenly. The cornmeal will turn from a white color to a light brown. Remove from heat and reserve.

In a large saucepan over medium heat, bring the water, maple syrup, salt, and culinary ash (if using) to a boil. Whisk in the toasted cornmeal, lower the heat to a simmer, and cook for 30 minutes, stirring frequently with a heatproof rubber spatula or whisk to prevent burning.

After 30 minutes, transfer the mixture to a heatproof container or containers so that it comes up the sides approximately 1 inch. Let cool to room temperature before covering and freezing overnight. Place in an oblong, flat, hard plastic container so that it is easy to cut into small squares for serving after it has frozen, and then freeze.

Remove from the freezer and let thaw for approximately 40 minutes before turning it out on a cutting board and slicing into small squares. Serve with a drizzle of additional maple syrup if desired.

Note: I used three hard plastic to-go containers that were approximately 5x8 inches. One container served four people.

A NOTE ON CULINARY ASH

Culinary ash dates back thousands of years and has been used by Native communities throughout the Americas for millennia. It is primarily made from shrubs and trees growing near or around the Native communities that use it. The Navajo primarily use juniper ash. Chef Walter Whitewater and his family have been using juniper ash in their traditional dishes since he was a little boy.

Juanita Tiger Kavena, author of *Hopi Cookery*, who has since passed, talks in her cookbook about the Hopi using the ash from corncobs, corn silk, and corn husks, as well as the four-wing saltbush (*Atriplex canescens*), which is also called chamisa. Her son, Wilmer Kavena Jr., whom I know as Chibbon (which is Creek for "little boy"), says

that the four-wing saltbush is the preferred bush for the Hopi but that ash can be made from burning any bushes. He prefers to make ash from the four-wing saltbush since these bushes are more alkaline and work better with the corn. And Brandon Baugh from San Felipe Pueblo, my student from the Indigenous Concepts of Native American Food class at the Institute of American Indian Arts, researched the use of ash in his community and at San Felipe Pueblo for his final paper and presentation, and found that in his community they use juniper, four-wing saltbush, and onion ash. Other Native communities all over the United States use various materials, including the ash from certain types of wood.

Culinary ash can be sourced from Shimà of Navajoland and Blue Corn Custom Designs, among others.



PUMPKIN SEED TRAIL MIX

Trail mix is an easy and healthy way to have a snack that is not only nutritious but also very flavorful. The seeds, dried fruits, and chocolate may be what you expect; the red chile powder adds a spicy kick that complements the sweetness of the fruit and chocolate.

Makes 4 cups

- 1 cup hulled raw sunflower seeds
- 1 cup hulled raw pumpkin seeds
- 1/2 teaspoon sunflower oil
- 1/2 teaspoon kosher salt
- 2 teaspoons New Mexico red chile powder, mild
- 3/4 cup dried tart cherries
- 3/4 cup dried apricots, quartered
- 1/2 cup dark chocolate chips

In a large bowl, toss together the sunflower seeds, pumpkin seeds, sunflower oil, and kosher salt. In a large cast-iron or heavy-bottomed skillet over medium heat, toast the seeds until they are golden brown and crispy (about 15 minutes), stirring frequently to ensure they cook evenly and don't burn.

Transfer seeds back to the large bowl and allow to cool completely at room temperature.

Gently stir in the red chile powder, cherries, apricots, and chocolate chips. Store in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 1 month. 🌱

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