

Red Mesa Cuisine owner aims to bring ‘ancestral foods back to the table’

By Adrian Gomez / Journal Arts and Entertainment Editor

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Beans, corn and squash are known as the Three Sisters in Native American cuisine. (Courtesy of Red Mesa Cuisine)

Lois Ellen Frank (Kiowa) has dedicated her life to culinary arts – specifically Native American cuisine.

With her company, Red Mesa Cuisine, she and chef Walter Whitewater (Diné/Navajo) work together to help educate Native communities.

“It’s about bringing all these ancestral foods back to the table,” she says. “It’s important to know why the three sisters are important. Our ancestors cooked with them and were healthy.”

Frank will be a guest on New Mexico PBS’ “¡Colores!,” which airs at 4 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 17. The episode is airing to coincide with the Santa Fe Indian Market.

During the episode, Frank talks about the “magic eight” foods and the indigenous foodscape.

The “magic eight” foods are corn, squash, beans, chile, tomatoes, potatoes, cacao and vanilla.

Frank says Whitewater often visits Native communities to teach classes on how to make meals from the land.

“Walter is on the Navajo Nation helping the staff at a center learning how to make contemporary Native American food,” she says. “Why should we serve bacon and eggs when we can serve the three sisters – beans, corn and squash? It’s about having the Native American community take back their food.”

Frank says that’s the mission of Red Mesa.

The company features a culture and cuisine experience in which guests are educated on the history of the foods they eat and how these Native American foods are gathered, grown and harvested.

“It’s not taught in history classes how these Native American ingredients have spread all over the world from the Americas,” she says. “Can you imagine Italy without tomatoes? It’s also not a one-way street.”



Lois Ellen Frank

Frank and Whitewater have traveled across the globe spreading their mission. They've been guest chefs and lecturers in the U.S., as well as Guam, Ukraine, Italy, the United Kingdom and Russia.

Frank has spent the past 25 years with this mission. She won the James Beard Award for her book "Foods of the Southwest Indian Nations."

And she often takes her skills to the community as a featured cooking instructor at the Santa Fe School of Cooking, as well as being an adjunct professor at the Institute of American Indian Arts, where she teaches a science class on the Indigenous Concepts of Native American Food, from a curriculum that she developed.

"We are passionate about cooking with Native American ingredients," she says. "When we prepare the foods, we revitalize and nurture them."

ON TV

Lois Ellen Frank will appear on New Mexico PBS' "¡Colores!" at 4 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 17, on Channel 5.1. It will repeat at 8 p.m. Aug. 23.

Contact the writer.

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