



WILD HARVEST: Members of the Ojibwe Nation gather wild rice in Minnesota.



LOCAL CUISINE: Chef Sean Sherman forages for edible native plants—like wild sunflowers and bergamot petals (top left), as well as wild greens, strawberries, and gooseberries (bottom left)—to use in his dishes.



HARVESTING A FEAST

Native American chefs provide an authentic taste of their people's culture

AS YOU READ, THINK ABOUT the methods culinary experts might use to research traditional diets.

EVERY SUMMER, WILD RICE harvesters in northern Minnesota carry on a tradition passed down for generations. One person pushes a canoe through shallow water with a pole, while a partner bends stalks of wild rice over the boat's edge and taps them with a stick. The seeds fall into the boat. When the pair have collected all they can carry, they bring the rice to shore and roast it over a fire.

These harvesters are Ojibwe—Indigenous Americans whose tribal nations stretch from British

Columbia in Canada, through the American Midwest, and into Quebec. Besides providing wild rice to local Ojibwe communities in Minnesota, the harvesters also supply rice to chefs, such as Sean Sherman. He is a member of the Oglala Lakota Nation and the founder of The Sioux Chef, a company that aims to educate people about Indigenous food and bring it to new audiences. Native people once harvested wild rice throughout the Great Lakes region. Sherman points out that much of the “wild rice” sold in grocery stores today isn't actually wild. It's a

domestic variety, bred from the wild version by farmers to have specific traits. It looks and tastes much different from the rice Indigenous people harvest by hand.

Sherman and others are part of a modern-day movement aiming to preserve and revitalize traditional Indigenous foods of North America. The endeavor brings together farmers, researchers, chefs, and historians with a common goal: to preserve Indigenous culture and share it with others.

A CHANGING DIET

Before European colonists began arriving in America around the 16th century, Indigenous

people living here enjoyed a diverse diet of local ingredients. Over thousands of years, they'd developed a wealth of knowledge about their environment, including how to forage or cultivate edible native plants and fish and how to hunt local game. “This knowledge is a form of Indigenous science,” says Lois Ellen Frank, a culinary *anthropologist* who studies the role of food within societies. She's from the Kiowa Nation on her mother's side and is the owner and chef at Red Mesa Cuisine in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Europeans brought with them foods that Native Americans had never seen before, including dairy products, wheat flour, and cane sugar. Similarly, the newcomers had never encountered this continent's native foods, such as potatoes, tomatoes, cacao (the source of chocolate), and “the Three Sisters”—corn, beans, and squash (*see*

Planting Technique, p. 22). Before Europeans arrived in 1492, “none of those ingredients existed anywhere in the world other than in Indigenous America,” says Frank. This exchange of different culinary staples eventually altered food traditions for many people across the world.



TRULY WILD RICE: The real thing grows in the wild as an aquatic grass. The cultivated variety commonly sold in stores is grown in flooded fields called paddies.

The diet of Native Americans changed even more drastically when the U.S. government forced them to relocate to *reservations*. In the 1800s, Indigenous Peoples had to leave the lands they'd lived on for millennia and move to unfamiliar areas “reserved” or designated for Native American tribes.

Many Indigenous people lost access to their traditional foods. Instead, they were given government *rations*. These fixed amounts of foods included white flour, lard, and canned meats. Some foods that many people consider Native American today, such as fry bread, were developed from these European ingredients by Indigenous people displaced from their homelands. Unlike their nutritious native cuisine, the government rations were often high in fat and sugar. Studies suggest that this change to a less healthy diet may be one factor contributing to a high prevalence of

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CHEFS AT WORK: Taelor Barton, chef and member of Cherokee Nation, crushes hickory nuts for a soup (left). Chef Lois Ellen Frank teaches a cooking class focused on Native American foods with chef Walter Whitewater from the Diné (Navajo) Nation (right).



diabetes and heart disease among Native Americans today.

CULINARY CLUES

Despite the upheaval of Native Americans' way of life, much of the traditional knowledge behind their foods has not been lost—it still exists, scattered among Indigenous people across the continent. Trying to collect that knowledge takes time and effort. Sherman, for example, scours texts about archaeology,

history, and *ethnobotany*—the study of traditional knowledge of native plants. He also conducts interviews. “I’ve talked to a lot of elders at different tribal communities to see what kinds of memories they had, and dug through everything with a culinary focus to try to piece it together,” he says.

Rediscovering and sharing Native American cuisine is a group effort. Indigenous farmers and others interested in our continent’s

traditional foods collect and preserve seeds from plants used in Native cooking and then share them with any farmers who’d like to grow them. The crops are used by chefs like Sherman to create dishes based on native ingredients. These include acorn and wild rice cakes, and roasted corn with pesto made from dandelions and other wild greens. Sherman’s Indigenous tacos call for corn cakes topped with ground bison. Rose hips—fruits that form after rose flowers bloom—flavor a sauce he serves with roasted duck.

Sherman plans to create Indigenous Food Labs. These training centers would help tribal communities develop restaurants and other food-related businesses focusing on the unique cuisines of their Native Nations. The businesses would also support Indigenous farmers, such as wild rice harvesters.

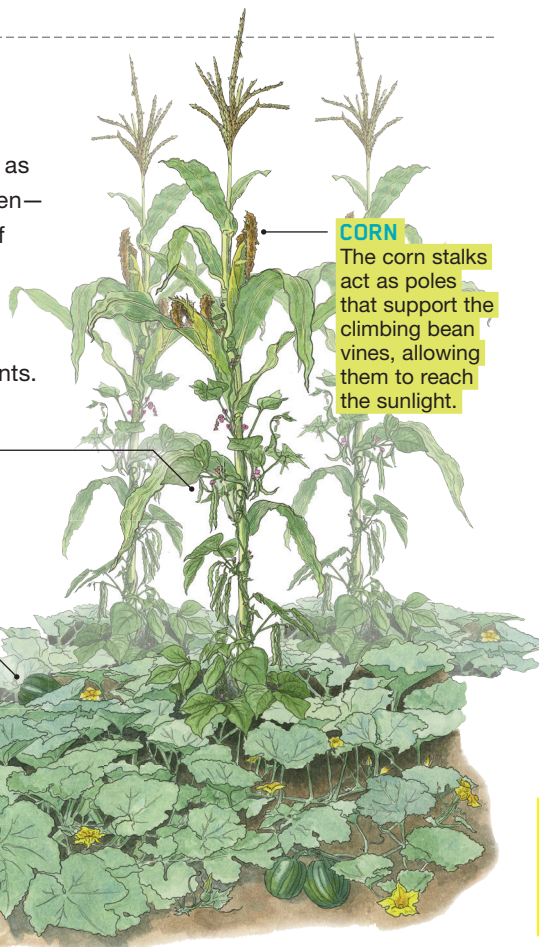
But you don’t have to wait for a restaurant to open near you to get a taste of Native American cuisine. Chefs like Frank and Sherman have written cookbooks to help anyone give Indigenous cooking a try. At the heart of these recipes are wild, local ingredients. Part of the fun, Sherman believes, is learning about the tasty plants growing all around you. 🌿 —*Jacqueline Adams*

PLANTING TECHNIQUE

Corn, beans, and squash, known as “the Three Sisters,” have long been—and still are—an important part of many Native Americans’ diet. People plant the three types of seeds together on mounds, a method that benefits all three plants.

BEANS
Bacteria on the beans’ roots draw nitrogen from air in the soil. These bacteria convert the nitrogen into a form that plants can use for food.

SQUASH
Wide squash leaves act like umbrellas to shade the soil, keeping it cool and moist and preventing weeds from growing. The prickly leaves also discourage animals that might munch on the crops.



CORN
The corn stalks act as poles that support the climbing bean vines, allowing them to reach the sunlight.

COMMUNICATING INFORMATION: How was Indigenous cuisine and culture affected by the arrival of Europeans in America?