



There's a Movement to Revitalize Indigenous Cuisines and Knowledge—Here's Why That Matters

The re-indigenization of Native American cuisine through the use of Traditional Ecological Knowledge, the flourishing of Indigenous foods and the celebration of Native chefs and cooks are just a few tools to promote better health.



[Lois Ellen Frank, Ph.D.](#)

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It's cloudy today as I write this at my home outside of Santa Fe, New Mexico. There is a very gently misting rain. I can hear the sounds of the numerous birds outside, the crickets are singing, I can hear cicadas, the wind is blowing gently and there is moisture in the air, which I can smell. I am reflecting on the bounty of this land and the original cuisine that has existed here for millennia. I'm visualizing the abundance of wild foods that existed and still exists, and the knowledge surrounding those foods that were harvested by Native communities all over what is now the United States, Canada, and throughout the rest of the Americas.

Native American cuisine, like all cuisines, has a story behind it, one that is deep, rich, powerful, provocative—and a story that is often misunderstood and unknown by many. It is a cuisine that is regional, based on ingredients that are sourced by the communities that live there, as they traditionally have been for millennia.

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At the end of the summer I had the pleasure of attending a talk at Santa Fe's [Institute of American Indian Arts](#) (IAIA) by [Robin Wall Kimmerer](#), an enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation and author of *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teaching of Plants*. She said we all need to ask ourselves not what we can take from Mother Earth, but what we can give back. That resonated for me. The Earth is not a commodity for taking, she insisted, but rather our Mother and our sustainer.

As the American West experiences more drought and wildfires and as the polar ice caps melt at record speeds, we are in a time now, as Joseph Brophy Toledo, a cultural leader and elder from Jemez Pueblo, New Mexico, so eloquently states, where "we are all Earth People." Toledo says, "In order for any of us to work towards health and wellness in any of our communities, we need to work together as caretakers and stewards of our Mother Earth."

So how do all of the "Earth People" do this? How do Native American communities do this? How does pertinent information get passed down from one generation to another? These are the questions that we all need to ask ourselves. What role do you want to play in this? How can each of us be of service? What can we do to ensure that the Earth, our Mother, can sustain us for the next seven generations?





CREDIT: NATE LEMUEL

Three Sisters Stew

[VIEW RECIPE](#)

The Three Sisters refer to corn, beans and squash, which have been planted together for centuries by Native peoples.

The answer is not an easy one. Nor is there one way to do this. I like to use the analogy of the bicycle wheel. History, or a version of history, is in the middle. But how to tell the story of that history is different depending on what perspective you are telling it from. And, just like all the spokes on the wheel, there are differing perspectives of the same historical event depending on who you are and where you come from. Therefore, history is subjective, not objective. Yet in order to re-indigenize Native American cuisine, it is important to understand what happened and why the cuisine changed over time.

Leadership through Traditional Ecological Knowledge

Native Americans are uniquely poised to lead in this way because of their Traditional Ecological Knowledge. This knowledge has been passed down from generation to generation surrounding food and foodways, food sovereignty, food security and environmental justice. Traditional Ecological Knowledge has been acquired over thousands of years by observing relationships between living beings within a specific ecosystem—how people, plants, animals, landscapes and environmental factors interact. And this wisdom of how to live sustainably in the world has been passed down through traditional songs and stories. Where food is concerned, elders have traditionally served as the tribal historians. They commit to memory a body of past experiences and cultural traditions.

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When it comes to food, Traditional Ecological Knowledge includes a multitude of other information relating to food and its uses: how to prepare specific dishes; how to find wild plants and know which are edible, along with their

names and their uses for food and medicine; when to plant crops and how to help them flourish, when to harvest them and how to prepare and store them. Food is indeed more than something to eat. Food is medicine. Food is provided by Mother Earth. It is a vital method to implement positive change surrounding health and wellness in Native American communities and it connects Native people to their land, their community, and to their culture.

The Four Periods of Native American Cuisine

Over time, Native American cuisine has evolved through four distinct periods—Pre-Contact, First Contact, Government Issue and New Native American cuisine. Each of these periods brought about changes to the diets of Indigenous people, some positive, others negative. In some instances, Traditional Ecological Knowledge was disrupted and pertinent information not passed down, particularly when Native people were forcibly relocated from their ancestral homelands and Native American children were forcibly removed from their homes and into boarding schools, where they weren't permitted to speak their languages or practice their traditional customs. Even with all of these historical traumas, Native American elders and cultural leaders have found ways to pass on vital information, and this is part of the leadership through traditional ecological knowledge. Understanding what happened to the Indigenous diet helps Native community members reclaim and re-indigenize their diets.

The Pre-Contact Period

Referred to by some Native American chefs as Pre-Colonial, the **Pre-Contact** period dates back approximately 15,000 years and stretches until the first contact with European colonizers in 1492. This period is the most important on the continuum and one of the most diverse—it includes a wide variety of foods, from ancestral cultivated foods referred to as the "Magic Eight"—corn, beans, squash, chiles, tomatoes, potatoes, vanilla and cacao—to a multitude of wild plants and animals. (Side note: The Magic Eight ingredients didn't exist outside of the Americas prior to first contact. Imagine, Great Britain with fish but no chips, Italians without tomatoes, East Indian curries without chiles.)

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Those wild ingredients differ by region, and Native American communities have built their cuisines around them: wild salmon along the West Coast; shellfish like lobster, clams, mussels, oysters and scallops along the East Coast; bison in the Plains; and wild rice, called manoomin (meaning gift from the Creator) by the tribes in the Great Lakes Region, to name a few. Add to these numerous berries, wild greens, roots, indigenous nuts like the piñon (pine), acorn and pecan, and many, many more.

This historical food period is crucial to the health and wellness of future generations, and it is vital that the knowledge surrounding all of the foods, plants and animals, and information on how to use them, be passed down. It only takes one generation for a song, story, belief, recipe or process surrounding food and foodways to disappear if not passed down to the next generation.

First Contact

The second period on the historical continuum is **First Contact**, and spans from the first contact with Europeans from approximately 1492 through the 1800s. In this period, new foods were introduced to Native peoples of the

Americas, including domesticated animals like pigs, cows, sheep, goats and chickens, used not only for meat but also for their byproducts like milk, cheese, butter, yogurt and ice cream. This was probably the biggest and most profound change in the Native American diet. (Many Native Americans are actually lactose-intolerant and unable to process or fully digest the lactose found in dairy products.) Other foods introduced in this period include wheat, stone fruits, watermelon, cabbage, olives, citrus and wine grapes.





CREDIT: NATE LEMUEL

Salmon with Chokecherry-Citrus Sauce

[VIEW RECIPE](#)

Chokecherries are native to North America and grow on a shrub that belongs to the rose family. The astringent cherries are commonly made into jellies, preserves and syrups.

Government Issue

The third period, which I call **Government Issue**, began in the mid- to late 1800s and is the most problematic. This was when the U.S. government forcibly relocated Native Americans onto Indian reservations. For instance, the Trail of Tears displaced people from tribes including the Cherokee, Creek, Chickasaw, Choctaw and Seminole from their Southeastern ancestral homelands to "Indian Territory," or what is now the state of Oklahoma, from 1830 to 1850. (Other Native American communities had their own trails of tears that are not as well known.)

This made for a devastating and tremendous loss of traditional lands—lands that were once used to forage wild plants on, to fish and hunt on, and to cultivate gardens and grow crops on. Once forcibly removed from their ancestral homelands, these displaced Native communities were issued food rations that included flour, lard, coffee, sugar and canned meat. There was just enough to not starve, but never enough to not feel hungry. And this is where some of the health disparities that we see now in Native communities began. Health issues that had never been a part of Native lifeways stemmed from foods that were forced onto and into the Native American diet.





CREDIT: NATE LEMUEL

Grilled Cactus Pad Salad with Oranges & Raspberry Vinaigrette

[VIEW RECIPE](#)

This healthy salad recipe combines precolonial ingredients like cactus pads and piñon (pine) nuts with navel oranges.

New Native Cuisine

Presently, we're in a period which I call **New Native Cuisine**. In this diverse time, Native chefs are doing what feels right to them. Some are using foods only from the Pre-Contact period, while others are innovatively combining foods from all periods. I like to say that this period is the period where Native communities are going back to the past to move forward to the future. Today, Native Americans are choosing what foods they want on their own plates.





CREDIT: NATE LEMUEL

Seneca White Corn No-Bake Energy Balls

[VIEW RECIPE](#)

Kaylena Bray shared this recipe, which was passed down to her by her parents, David and Wendy Bray. They're both Seneca White Corn educators in New York State across the country.

And it's an exciting time. Through the passing down of Traditional Ecological Knowledge, from outreach like ancestral food distribution boxes and foods donated to organizations that feed urban community members, to The Cultural Conservancy in the San Francisco Bay Area, to the proliferation of social media accounts and YouTube channels by Native chefs and cooks, we are witnessing a reclamation, revitalization and re-indigenization of ancestral Native American foods and foodways.

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Let's Eat

In the recipes that follow, you'll see how Chef Walter Whitewater, who is Navajo (Diné), combined foods that his people survived on during the tragic Long Walk of the Navajo, called Hwéeldi, with one of the introduced foods from the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations and foods he had growing up, to make his **Grilled Cactus Pad Salad with Oranges & Raspberry Vinaigrette**.

Kaylena Bray, who is Seneca from Cattaraugus Territory in Western New York along Lake Erie, shares how to turn sacred Seneca white corn into **Seneca White Corn No-Bake Energy Bites** (yum!). Kaylena and her parents, Dave and Wendy Bray, have shared these sacred white corn seeds with The Cultural Conservancy, and it now grows in Marin County in Northern California.





My recipe for a **Native American parfait** features blue and white cornmeal cooked with culinary ash—a primary source of calcium in Native American communities—is layered with a mixed berry and apple compote. I'm also sharing a Three Sisters Stew, featuring corn, beans and squash. Chef Walter and I frequently prepare this recipe at hands-on trainings for food service staff through our partnership with New Mexico Department of Health's Obesity, Nutrition and Physical Activity Program, the Aging and Long-Term Services Department and the Office of Indian Elder Affairs. These trainings focus on using ancestral Native American ingredients that are healthy and easily accessible to the staff, so that they can provide meals to the elders in their tribal communities.

Chefs Lois Ellen Frank and Walter Whitewater | CREDIT: NATE LEMUEL

And from Melissa K. Nelson, who is Anishinaabe/Métis/Norwegian and an enrolled member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians, a recipe for **wild salmon glazed with chokecherry syrup**. Chokecherries are very important to Melissa's people and to many tribal communities where this berry grows. These berries are rich in disease-fighting antioxidants, full of flavonoids and chock-full of vitamins and minerals. She also **penned an essay** about the significant work being done by **The Cultural Conservancy** in Northern California.

Today is a time that is not only exciting but also empowering for Native communities. And I believe that everyone can play a role in this re-indigenizing movement and the health and wellness of all people. The time for a sustainable future is now. The time for reclaiming and revitalizing indigenous foods and foodways for Native American community members is now. What can you do? You can buy ingredients from Native American producers and growers to support these efforts and the Native American foods movement overall—from hand-harvested wild rice,

Native-grown tepary beans, culinary ash and blue cornmeal to teas, soaps and natural beauty products. Get involved and become part of the Earth People's movement for the health and wellness of not only all of our community members but also of our Mother Earth.





CREDIT: NATE LEMUEL

Corn Pudding & Apple-Berry Parfaits

[VIEW RECIPE](#)

These striking parfaits are made with two colors of corn pudding and berry compote. Culinary ash, typically made from wood like juniper, is used in Native American communities as a source of nutrients like calcium, magnesium, phosphorus and zinc.

Credits

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