

## AUTHOR'S NOTE



**T**he story of fry bread is the story of American Indians: embracing community and culture in the face of opposition. It is commonly believed that the Navajo (Diné) were the first to make fry bread over 150 years ago.<sup>1</sup> The basic ingredients may appear simple—flour, salt, water, and yeast—yet the history behind this community anchor is anything but.

Despite colonial efforts throughout American history to weaken tribal governments, fracture Indigenous communities, and forcibly take ancestral lands, Indian culture has proven resilient. In strange, unfamiliar lands, exiled Natives strived to retain those old traditions and they created new ones, especially for food. Survival meant adapting, and those ancestors, isolated from familiar meats, fruits, and vegetables, got by with what they had. Without the familiar indigenous crop of corn, historic farming practices and dietary traditions drastically changed.

Many tribes trace the origin of modern Indian cooking to this government-caused deprivation. From federal rations of powdered, canned, and other dry, government-issued foods, fry bread was born.

### FRY BREAD IS FOOD . . .

When I make fry bread, I start with a big bowl that can hold everything without spilling. I have a metal bowl so big, I gave my newborn daughter baths in it. The beautiful dish held by the grandmother is modeled after a different bowl made by Afton Quall, a 1969 graduate of Wewoka High School in Oklahoma. Wewoka, where my mother's family has lived for generations, is the home of the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma. Afton, who now lives in Arkansas, made this bowl with poplar wood, milliput (a black putty that hardens when it dries), and dowel rods. This bowl was featured in the collection of the Seminole Nation Museum, which promotes artists and craftspeople from the area.<sup>2</sup>

My recipe for fry bread uses cornmeal. Fry bread is a food of inheritance and family, and this is the legacy that was passed down to me. This may be a surprise not only for traditionalists, but for many Natives who have never heard of such a thing. Perhaps the use of cornmeal in my recipe is a Southern influence that reflects the blending of African American and Native American cultures in my family. In my opinion, this does not make my rendition of fry bread any less authentic, less Indigenous, or “right” than any other version.

Even though fry bread is common to so many tribes, it can still be controversial. It is a highly subjective food. People simply love the fry bread they grew up with and are suspicious of other versions. Like barbecue, pizza, cheesesteaks, sushi, hummus, or kimchi, feuds of food inevitably bring up the common refrain of, “Wait, that’s not . . . *this* is . . .” If there is one thing that all Natives can agree upon about fry bread, it’s that everybody else’s version is wrong.

## FRY BREAD IS SHAPE . . .

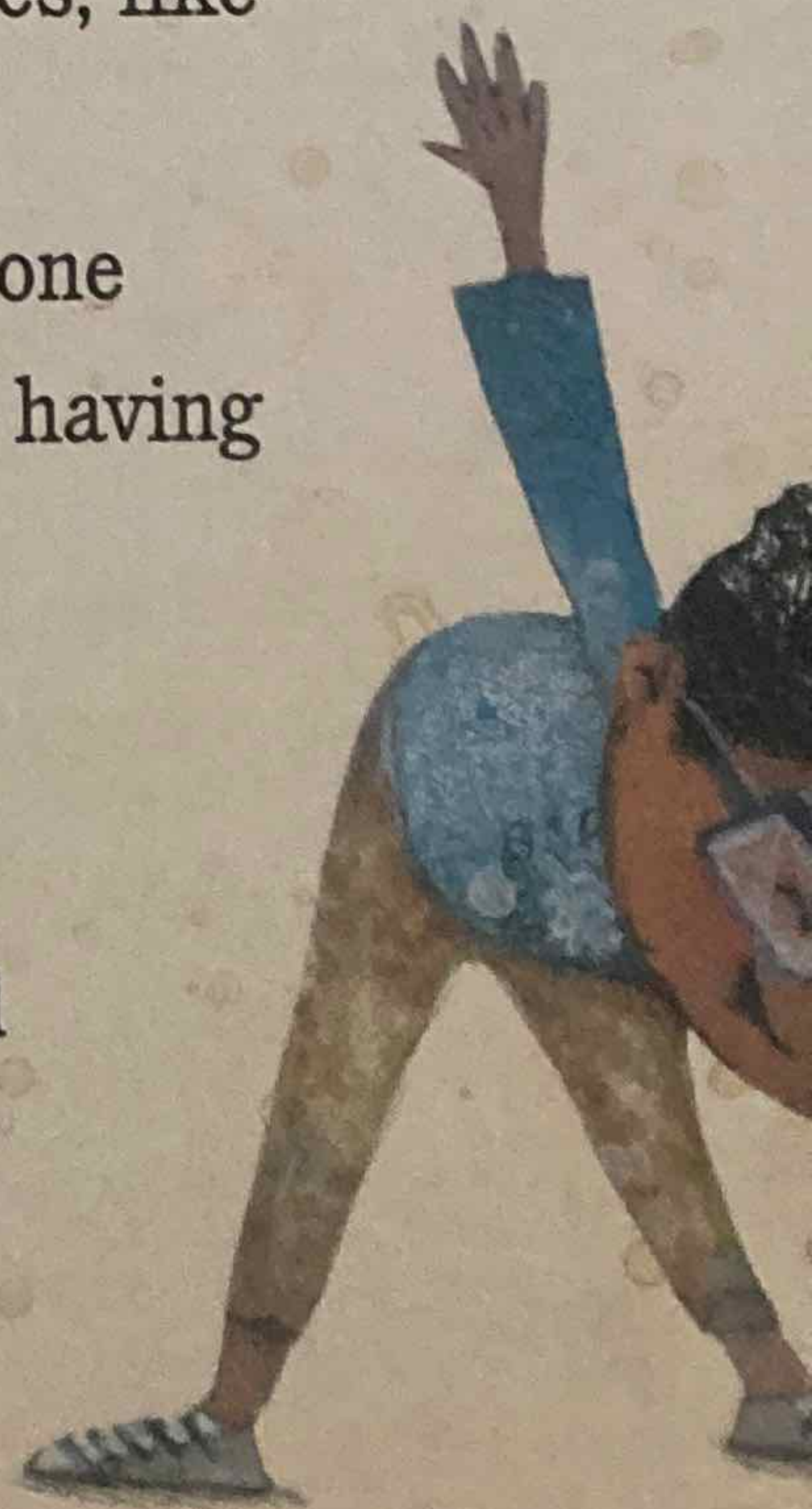
Some people may be familiar with fry bread that is flat, similar to a Mexican sopapilla, South Asian naan bread, or Middle Eastern pita bread. The fry bread that I make is rounder and puffier, a mix between a hush puppy and a sourdough roll. I love the pancake kind of fry bread, and I also like the funny-shaped kind that my aunts taught me to make.

Some people may use a rolling pin to flatten the dough, and others may use their hands to pat it into shape. I use two spoons to shape the dough (because it’s sticky), and no two dough balls are the same. Sometimes they come out looking like the shape of Florida, and other times, like a lopsided orange. They are all equally delicious.

Just like people, there is no one shape, body type, or shoe size that makes anyone better than anyone else. For fry bread, it is the same. The most important thing is having fun and learning how to make something special with the people that you love.

## FRY BREAD IS SOUND . . .

The father of the family handles the skillet; note the Seminole symbols tattooed onto his wrist. The large zigzags are lightning, and the smaller double crossed letter “ts” are trees.<sup>3</sup>



Father steadies the pan of hot oil as the children await the delicious food. They listen, smell, and hear the bread. To them, fry bread is like birthday cake or Halloween candy: a special treat to be cherished and savored.

Yet there are some Natives who strongly oppose fry bread because it exacerbates existing health problems. For these critics, fry bread is an easy target for a much larger problem of being forced to deviate from a traditional Indigenous diet.<sup>4</sup> Some, but not all, communities have no fresh market or a convenient place to buy fruits and vegetables.<sup>5</sup> Fast food is plentiful, cheap, and unhealthy. Access to quality health care and medical facilities may be difficult in underserved areas. Diabetes, obesity, and heart problems are longstanding problems.

Fry bread as a daily cuisine is no solution.<sup>6</sup> Like the previously mentioned birthday cake, fry bread is not an every-meal staple, like naan bread or jasmine rice. It is best enjoyed in moderation.

Even so, there aren't many healthy adaptations for fry bread, like baking instead of frying or replacing ingredients with low-calorie alternatives, so in keeping with those that came before me, I adjusted it. To fry the dough, I prefer unrefined coconut oil, which tastes better than the traditional lard or shortening. And it fills the kitchen with a wonderful aroma that announces the arrival of something special.

## FRY BREAD IS COLOR . . .

The population of Americans that identify as Native American is diverse and varied. Of the five million people identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native on the 2010 Census (out of a total of 308.7 million census respondents), slightly less than half, 2.2 million, claim that identity in combination with White or Black ancestry.<sup>7</sup> Today, over half of all people claiming Native ancestry marry and have children with people of a different race.

Most people think Native Americans always have brown skin and black hair. But there is an enormous range of hair textures and skin colors. Just like the characters in this book, Native people may have blonde hair or black skin, tight cornrows or a loose braid. This wide variety of faces reflects a history of intermingling between tribes and also with people of European, African, and Asian descent.

The racial aspect of being Native American differs from the political status of tribal membership, which is so different and so complicated across Indian country. Not



all American Indians are enrolled as citizens of a tribal government. Some have never enrolled in any tribe, while some have been forcibly disenrolled. Additionally, each nation has different membership requirements based on blood and descent, which may be enough for one tribe,<sup>8</sup> but prevent similarly situated applicants from obtaining citizenship in another.<sup>9</sup> In addition, someone may be enrolled as a full-fledged member and never have any contact with Native culture.

So what makes a person American Indian? Blood? Enrollment? Physical appearance? Cultural ties? People that identify as Native American come in all colors and shapes and live in urban and rural areas. And many love to eat fry bread.

## FRY BREAD IS FLAVOR . . .

Everyone has a different opinion of what fry bread *should* be—everyone's a critic. Just like a strong opinion of the best barbecue or pizza, tastes are deeply personal, like one's own identity. The way I learned how to make fry bread in Wewoka, Oklahoma, was the *only way* to make fry bread. When I moved to Michigan in my mid-twenties, all those Midwestern Chippewas let me know how wrong I was—*theirs* was the only way, and it was also *the best*. It's literally a matter of taste.

Fry bread reflects the vast, deep diversity of Indian Country and there is no single way of making this special food. But it brings diverse Indigenous communities together through a shared culinary and cultural experience. That's the beauty of fry bread.

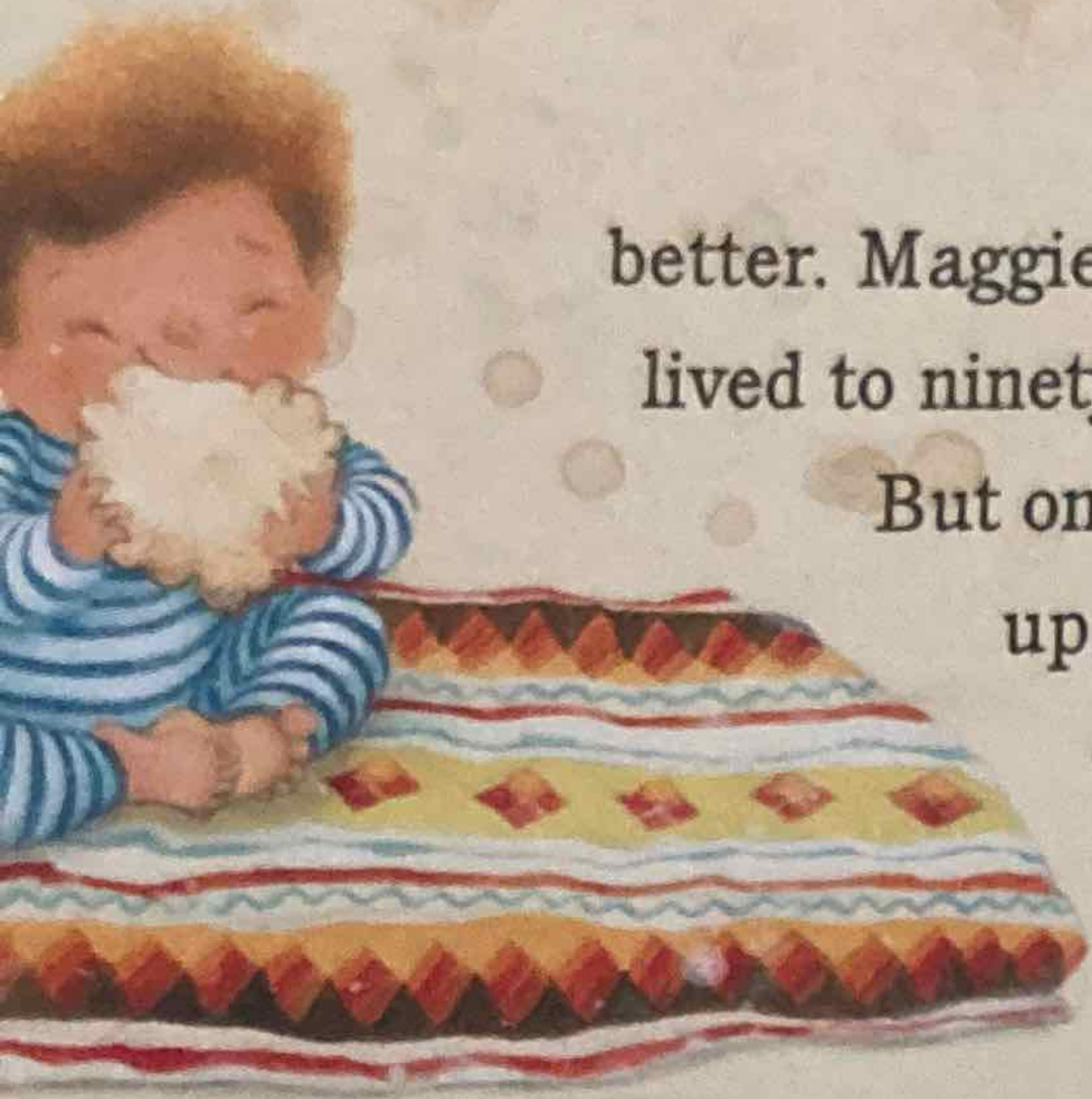
The ceramic pot on the left page copies the geometric pattern commonly found on ceremonial sashes worn by Seminoles around their waists or over their shoulders. These colorful zigzags may also be found on patchwork skirts, shawls, and jackets. Blues, reds, oranges, purples, greens, and yellows make beautiful rainbows and patterns in these tribal fabrics and crafts.

## FRY BREAD IS TIME . . .

Most Native families have a "fry bread lady," usually a grandmother or an old aunt who holds a special recipe that she passes on to her female successor.

In my family, two aunts competed for the title. My Aunt (we say "ahwnt") Fannie was the "town" aunt and a fan of complicated recipes, so her version of fry bread was culinary, scientific, and definitely





better. Maggie, her sister, was the “country” aunt and runner-up to the bread battle, but lived to ninety-nine, long after her gourmand sister.

But once Aunt Maggie started to burn the fry, I took over. No one else was taking it up, and I wanted to learn. Family dinners and holidays were always fun, but definitely less tasty without fry bread. The first few batches were long, messy learning moments, but now, my family and friends request it at every opportunity.

Gender requirements aside, I became that “lady.”

## FRY BREAD IS ART . . .

The handmade dolls and coil baskets featured on this spread are part of a rich inherited history of both the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma and the Seminole Tribe of Florida. After the Great Depression, tribal members in Florida opened tourist villages and sold handicrafts as an alternate source of income during a period of economic insecurity. Enterprising Seminoles sold crafts, fabrics, and keepsakes to visitors to the villages. Dolls dressed in traditional clothing were a signature souvenir.

Dollmaking grew into a cultural tradition passed from ancestors to their descendants, like a grandmother teaching a grandchild. The doll bodies held by the children on the right page can be made from the fronds of a palmetto tree or sweetgrass leaves. The dolls may also have elaborate beadwork sewn together from tiny glass balls to form different patterns. Traditional Seminole patchwork designs are shown on the dolls’ clothing and also on the sitting woman’s skirt, with bright stripes of all colors.

The large baskets shown on the left page have many purposes: holding fruit, cleaning vegetables, hauling wood, protecting valuables, or anything else that could fit inside. Baskets may also be purely interesting to admire and share with others. Before the creators begin, they make sure they have plenty of leaves or fronds to weave into tight coils. The baskets may be colorfully decorated, either with paint or by weaving different leaf shades into the pattern.

The craft of basket weaving is also shared by coastal African American communities in the South, with whom the Seminoles have a long and intertwined history.

## FRY BREAD IS HISTORY . . .

Native Americans are Indigenous peoples, meaning they are descendants of the original inhabitants of the country we know as the United States.<sup>10</sup> When Europeans made first contact, there were violent, bloody struggles for control of the land. Colonists stole property and killed people who had lived here for thousands of years. In contrast to the amicable relations taught at school and celebrated at home every Thanksgiving, the vast majority of relations between Indian nations and the American government have been marked by war, genocide, and conflict. Antagonism, while not as violent, persists to the present day.

Under President Andrew Jackson, the government evicted Southeastern tribes from their homelands under the Indian Removal Act of 1830. American soldiers forced entire families out of their ancestral lands, took all of their belongings, and made them walk across the country to lands unseen in the West.

This fateful resettlement, where thousands of people died along the way, was endured by many Indian nations, and in some it is known as the "Trail of Tears."

Removal and displacement of Native Americans occurred—and is still occurring—in every state in the country. Pequots lost land to colonists in 1638 Connecticut. The Sac & Fox fought with Europeans for their land in the Great Lakes region and now have reserves in Oklahoma, Kansas, and Nebraska.<sup>11</sup> Mid-century Indian termination and relocation policies sought to dissolve tribal nations with a goal of destroying sovereignty and assimilating members into mainstream society. This resulted in the termination of over one hundred tribes and the loss of over 1.3 million acres of land.<sup>12</sup> And in 2017, the Standing Rock Sioux protested the federal government's support of construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline on tribal land in North Dakota and surrounding states.<sup>13</sup>

## FRY BREAD IS PLACE . . .

The map shown on this spread goes beyond the borders of the United States. The lines you're used to seeing drawn between states and countries have been left out since they are federal demarcations that came after the creation and preexistence of tribal lands.

Some Native Americans live on tribal land and others live in cities. The majority live outside of reserved areas, about 78 percent according to the 2010 Census. The largest reservation, the Navajo, was home to almost 174,000 people, and in New York City alone, there were over 111,000 Native people.<sup>14</sup>



## FRY BREAD IS NATION . . .

At the time of this book's publication, there are 573 federally recognized Native American tribes in the United States. There are also 67 state-recognized tribes. (In Canada there are over 600!) Recognition means that the United States government or a state government has acknowledged the tribe as a sovereign entity, much like France establishing diplomatic relations with Nigeria.

The recognition process is very long, and each tribe is required to prove that they have a shared history, a shared culture, a strong government, and a common origin, among other things. This can be very difficult since so many tribes have suffered from immense amounts of relocation and cultural stripping. Sometimes, a group applies for federal and state recognition, but is denied by both, even though they are Native Americans whose ancestors have been in North America for thousands of years. When the personal opinion of being Native differs from the political opinion of being Native, it brings up hard questions about who and what counts as authentically Indian.<sup>15</sup>

In the spirit of inclusivity and as a celebration of Native pride, the list in this book gives voice to the Indigenous nations and communities within the United States. This includes large tribes like the Navajo and the Choctaw, smaller tribes like the Kickapoo and the Duckwater Shoshone, rancherias in California like Shingle Springs and Pinoleville, and Alaskan Native villages like Kwigillingok and Mary's Igloo. This list also includes groups who were not successful in their attempts to achieve official status with the U.S. or state governments, like the Duwamish or the Little Shell Chippewa. In the pages and end pages of this book, however, they are recognized.

We researched or reached out to each nation listed here to confirm the common usage of their tribal name. We wanted to be as accurate as possible and to include tribes in the process.

## FRY BREAD IS EVERYTHING . . .

Bread nourishes and comforts in so many cultures, religions, and communities around the world. Its synonyms speak of sustenance and survival: dough, manna, money, life. They are loaves and



leavens, bagels and braids, crepes and cakes. They are communions, meant to be shared and loved with others, because bread is not meant to be cooked for one.

## **FRY BREAD IS US . . .**

While so much of United States federal policy has acted to weaken Indigenous governments and undermine tribal sovereignty, Native nations continue to exist and demand recognition of their endurance and strength by the United States. Native America is not a past history of vanished people and communities. *We are still here.*

## **WE STRENGTHEN EACH OTHER . . .**

If you look closely at the kitchen cabinet, you can see names and doodles etched into the side. Each of the names included are people that have been involved in the creation of the book, along with some family members. Juana's children, Ethan, Aidan, and Eva, hand wrote the names.

The picture hanging in the kitchen and also on the right of the recipe page is my Aunt Fannie, who taught me how to make fry bread her way, without reservation.