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**HOLIDAY ENTERTAINING** The Sioux Chef's Quest to Revive Indigenous Cooking

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*Three voices speak up in an attempt to define an elusive cuisine.*

by: CORAL LEE

May 2, 2019 | [9 Comments](#)





PHOTO BY MARK WEINBERG

SAVE

9 COMMENTS

**W**hy aren't we talking about Indigenous food? The answer to this question will vary depending on whom you ask.

“Well, are you talking about pre-colonial, post-colonial, American Indian, Native American, or today?” poses M. Karlos Baca (Tewa/Diné/Nuche), an Indigenous foods activist. “And where? Spanish, Mexican, or Protestant-colonized from the east?”

David Rico, of the Choctaw Nation and a line cook at José Andrés' America Eats Tavern, presses further, “What even *is* Indigenous cooking? The techniques? Ingredients? Cooking off the land solely, using whatever it gives you? Or can you use non-pre-colonial

ingredients as well? Are you responsible for removing invasive species? It all depends on your concept of [Indigenous] identity.”

Because Rico’s elders were forcibly removed from their lands again and again, there were no lasting memories, lessons, or relationships with *one* home or place to pass down. “It feels like we’re just now waking up, looking around and asking: What just happened? What even is ours, and what was imposed upon us?”

## Join The Conversation

TOP COMMENT:

“I’d love to learn more about indigenous ingredients and how they were utilized before the European settling happened.”

— Panfusine

 COMMENT

Sean Sherman, of the Oglala Lakota Nation and author of *The Sioux Chef’s Indigenous Kitchen*, is a bit more succinct in his answer. “Just look at the history,” he tells me, laughing drily. “It’s [marked by] perpetual oppression.”

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While these three disagree on many things, there are a couple key points they agree on: The first is the preference for the term “Indigenous” over “North American,” and over the more outdated “Native American” and “American Indian.”

“It’s a hotly contested debate within, ha, Indian Country,” Rico explains. “It’s incredibly important how we self-identify, and younger generations are beginning to correct older ones on the [more offending] terminology, but you can’t really tell other people how to identify themselves.”

The second is that to fully understand the current state of contemporary Indigenous cuisine requires an understanding of the history of Indigenous oppression, displacement, and dispossession.

“If you can control your food, you can control your destiny,” Sherman says. “That’s the definition of food sovereignty.”

Forcibly relocated to some of the most unforgiving food-growing territories in an ever-expanding America, Indigenous populations have had to set up new homes in rural, arid parts of the country. Their ecosystems were destroyed, their lands stolen. This remoteness drove them to rely heavily on U.S. government programs and food aid. The resultant diet, of which a staple was commodity biscuit mix and canned applesauce, was a far cry from the hunted game, fresh-caught fish, and wild foods of their ancestors. In the process, countless Indigenous hunting, fishing, and cooking techniques and spiritual practices were lost.

“I was a chef for decades, and could name hundreds of dishes in Italian and French cuisine,” Sherman admits. “But I had no clue what Lakota foods are or were.”

How do you even begin to reclaim a culinary culture that’s been so long buried and

inaccessible?

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**The current disparity of literature on the subject**, and a desire to empower other Indigenous peoples, is what pushed Sherman to write *The Sioux Chef*. In tracking down Lakota dishes and techniques, none fused or infused with colonial influence, he turned to family elders and to regional ethno-botanical texts.

Rico, whose not-too-distant ancestors walked the Trail of Tears, relies on the intense, personal connections to the world around him. “The land still has lessons [for us],” he believes. By observing and tasting what his surroundings offer, Rico’s “ancestral memories” have been revived in him. “It wasn’t all that long ago that this knowledge was held back from us,” he explains. “The good thing is that it’s not all on my shoulders; there are a lot of us who are willfully stepping backwards, marching our way back

through history, and building foundations for the next fire-keepers, for the next seed-gatherers. Who knows what they'll find?"

“

*It feels like we're just now waking up, looking around and asking: What just happened? What even is ours, and what was imposed upon us?*

”

DAVID RICO

Baca, who subsists solely on the food he grows in the mountains of Colorado, believes that the only way to decolonize our food system is to exist wholly apart from it. “The more I engage with the land I exist in, the more I remove myself from Western ideology,” he tells me. “I don't use the word ‘chef’ anymore; it's not part of my ideals.” For him, everything he needs to eat—a kitchen, pantry, or grocery store—is outside, and it is sometimes unpredictable. “I don't get to have a militaristic say about what's coming up, or going to happen, or what nature is doing.”

His hyper-local approach and definition of Indigenous cuisine may be the strictest of the three. “I use only the foods of where I'm from,” he states. In visioning a sustainable and healthy contemporary Indigenous cuisine with respect to tradition and history, Baca wrestles with which practices he will continue and which he will abandon. To start, he is working with others to re-indigenize surrounding forests that have been clear-cut, with Pinyon and Juniper.

“But,” Baca says, “when I go back home, my grandma will give me frybread to take with me. And I take it; I don't eat that food, but I don't tell my grandma that.”

 SAVE

ARTICLE

## The Sioux Chef's Quest to Revive Indigenous Cooking

**Cooking and consuming “Indigenous food”** means existing in a symbiotic state with our community and environment: to produce just enough, without incurring damage to the people and wildlife around us. This approach is hard to reconcile within our current food system's preference for mega-mono-cropping and capitalistic ventures.

Sherman, however, believes the two goals can co-exist. His organization, NATIFS (which stands for “Native American Traditional Indigenous Food Systems”), has just achieved

501c3 nonprofit status. This year in Minneapolis, he plans to open the first of many Indigenous Food Labs; the hope is for these IFLs “to strengthen local communities through Indigenous food knowledge and access.” Each location will offer an Indigenous restaurant and educational programming (classes on wild foods, ethnobotany, preservation, history), as well as a vigorous research and development program.

What’s more, NATIFS hopes to create, educate, and train local tribal community food businesses, which would be staffed by those who have undergone culinary training at IFL. By creating a market for Indigenous ingredients and methods, and putting education and food into the minds and bellies of anyone and everyone hungry to know, Sherman hopes to grow and bolster support for Indigenous communities.

Others, like Baca, are less optimistic. “Maintaining a constant supply of Indigenous foods for a restaurant is nearly impossible,” he says. “Those systems will never be big enough. I stepped away from that ideology because our own people are hungry; our own people need that food. We need to build from within by putting foods, information, and profit into our own people.”

Rico, who lives in Washington D.C., seems to toe the line. “I’m a line cook, for all its benefits and deterrents, at a restaurant serving ‘American food’ as interpreted through a Spanish-colonial lens. It’s clarified, for me, the difference between American and Indigenous food. They’ve asked me for ‘authentic’ recipes, and I’ve learned to say no.”

There may never be a set of mother sauces or cooking techniques to characterize “contemporary Indigenous cuisine.” Even within tribes, there are huge and hotly contested questions of values and identity. But there does seem to exist a through line: a universal commitment to controlling one’s own food and, in a very “American” way (as complicated as that may be), finally creating one’s own destiny.

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WRITTEN BY:

**Coral Lee**

Coral Lee is an Associate Editor at Food52. Before this, she cooked food solely for photos. Before that, she cooked food solely for customers. And before that, she shot lasers at frescoes in Herculaneum and taught yoga. When she's not writing about or making food, she's thinking about it. Her Heritage Radio Network show, "Meant to be Eaten," explores cross-cultural exchange as afforded by food. You can follow her on Instagram @meanttobeeaten.

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**Camille** February 22, 2020

Ms. Lee, I love all of your work on this site, especially your analysis in the ABCs of Good Food. Thank you so much for all of your writing, it is so necessary to be aware of the context surrounding the food we eat to live.

Upvote (1) | Reply | Flag Inappropriate

**AUTHOR COMMENT**

**Coral L.** February 22, 2020

Camille, hi! Thank you for the kind note, and for following along!

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 **Nova**  November 12, 2020

I agree with Camille you are absolutely amazing Ms. Lee

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**Christine L.** May 3, 2019

Yes. Mak-ámham/ Cafe Ohlone in Berkeley makes an amazing savory hazelnut muffin. And while I am no expert, eating indigenous food has given me heightened awareness and appreciation for what existed before us. I would love insight into the processes and techniques of indigenous cooking (of varying regions throughout North America)...not to appropriate, but to learn what has been erased and being reclaimed.

FYI--Cafe Ohlone is a pop-up in the SF/Bay Area.

<https://www.sfchronicle.com/restaurants/article/The-Bay-Area-s-most-intriguing-new-pop-up-13724206.php>

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**Leigh** May 2, 2019

I would love to see some indigenous recipes on Food52, even those vague suggestion recipes I usually hate. Every few years I go on a quest for native cuisine. I see a lot of fry bread tacos, which are, like corned beef and cabbage, spaghetti and meatballs, and chili, delicious modern, ethnic-American foods. But I'm curious to see (and taste) the sort of dishes that people are rediscovering.

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**Panfusine** May 2, 2019

This is a priceless Venture. Wishing you all the best for success. I'd love to learn more about indigenous ingredients and how they were utilized before the European settling happened.

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**tripletree** May 2, 2019

This is such an important topic to consider -- thank you for starting the conversation. I'd love to see more writing (and recipes) on this subject!

Upvote (7) | Reply | Flag Inappropriate

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**Erin A.** May 2, 2019

I couldn't agree with you more, tripletree.

Upvote (2) | Reply | Flag Inappropriate

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**Eric K.** May 2, 2019

On it!

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