

ON FOOD, CULTURE, AND STORYTELLING



Food is our medicine. Food carries an emotional memory. Certain aromas and flavors make an imprint in our minds and have the power to return us to a particular feeling. This is part of the magic and medicine in all forms of cooking, but indigenous foods in particular are steeped in a history of both comfort and pathos that reaches far beyond the ingredients themselves. People often ask me to share recipes for traditional foods I cook, and I am always happy to do so. But no matter how precise, I feel these recipes always fall short of the true representation of the dish. At the heart of every traditional dish is a story.

Storytelling is an important part of Indigenous cultures, and many of our stories contain lessons about not only how we nourish our bodies, but also where we come from and how we should treat one another. When you hold a strawberry in your hand or pull the husk from an ear of corn, knowing their stories, they become more than ingredients to measure and manipulate. That ear of corn is so much more than a vegetable - she is an ancestor, she is our mother; a reminder of who we are, what we've been through, and why we must continue to survive. Every meal has the potential for ceremony, a direct link between our ancestors before us and the future of our people.

Which brings us to food sovereignty. Before the colonization of North America, our ancestors were healthy and strong because they were active and subsisted on a diet of corn, beans, squash, berries, greens, wild rice, fruits, nuts, seeds and game that provided complete and balanced nutrition specifically fitted for people in their region. With the arrival of European colonizers, this balance was immediately, drastically, and often violently interrupted. Europeans brought with them their own livestock and crops from their "Old World", which they were intent on propagating throughout their "New World." Indigenous foods, because they were different from the staples of wheat, beef, pork, and chicken and various vegetables and fruits that comprised the European diet, were viewed as inferior and unfit for consumption by the colonizers. The second, more strategic, motivation was that people are easier to subdue and contain when you have control over their food source. Europeans cleared vast amounts of land that formerly sustained all the plant-based foods and game Native peoples relied on, and introduced privately owned livestock and crops. In addition to the invasion of foreign food sources, the establishment of governments and the physical removal of Native people from their traditional lands resulted in a loss of culture and access to that healthy and balanced traditional diet and lifestyle, and created a dependence on government assistance for sustenance. Federal policies and programs like boarding schools, allotment acts, the Indian Adoption Project, the Urban Indian Relocation Program and others disrupted cultural practices and intergenerational knowledge, assimilating Native people to a mainstream culture that values profits over relationships and balance.

Indigenous food sovereignty is a movement to reclaim the traditional food ways of our ancestors in an effort to restore the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health of our people. Our reliance on processed foods, which lack both soul and nutritional value, has created a disconnect from the relationship we once had with the plants and animals that sustain us. But those plants and animals are still there and our relationship can be mended with our efforts to keep their stories alive at our dinner tables. Each time we make the decision to forgo the box or bag of instant dinner, and instead prepare a simple meal with fresh traditional ingredients, recalling the significance of those ingredients as we prepare it, we nourish our bodies and connection to our culture. **Our ways, our memories, our cultural identity, live on inside us with every bite.**