

'This is not a trend': Native American chefs resist the 'Columbusing' of indigenous foods

By Maura Judkis November 22, 2017



Sean Sherman, who is known as "The Sioux Chef," prepares dinner at the James Beard House in New York. (Rina Oh for the James Beard Foundation)

Earlier this fall, Karlos Baca, an indigenous food activist known for cooking beautiful foraged meals using traditional Native American ingredients and cooking methods, was approached by a regional food magazine: Would he like to provide a recipe for their Thanksgiving issue?

"Instead of getting a recipe from me, they got three pages of activism," he says. Baca, along with some other Native Americans who see the holiday as whitewashing the harm colonists did to indigenous people, refers to it as "Takesgiving" or "Hatesgiving." Typically, he won't participate in the dinner: "I have a tradition of fasting," he says.

But this year, Baca, who is Diné/Tewa/Nuche and lives in southwest Colorado, will be serving a seven-course meal in New York. The event was planned by the I-Collective, a group of native herbalists, seed-keepers and chefs, though he rejects that last label. ("A chef is a French European concept that I'm not even interested in anymore," he says.) It follows on the heels of a six-course October dinner at the James Beard House by Oglala Lakota chef Sean Sherman, who is known as the Sioux Chef, a homonym to another French culinary concept .

Native American chefs, whose foodways the culinary establishment has long neglected, have lately found themselves in high demand by a food media hungry to churn out trend pieces and by food-savvy urbanites eager to try cuisines they view as "exotic." First it was Filipino food, then Hawaiian, then Jamaican. Now, recent coverage in food publications is calling Native American food the next big thing. And that's precisely the problem.

"This is not a trend," says Sherman. "It's a way of life."



Wild rice salad from the Mitsitam Cafe at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. (Renée Comet Photography, Restaurant Associates and Smithsonian Institution)



Indigenous food activist Karlos Baca, foraging ramps, morels, and nettles in Gun Lake, Mich. (Tashia Hart)

Thinking of Native American food as a trend perpetuates a number of misguided notions: first, that Native American food is a monolithic thing. The food of our nation's indigenous people — some, like Baca, do not like the term "Native American," because his ancestors predate the naming of America — is as diverse as the country's 567 federally recognized Native American nations. Outsiders tend to think of them in the aggregate, noting fry bread, a fried dough with various toppings, as one food that many share. Around Thanksgiving, one of the few times that schools teach students about Native Americans, many include fry bread as part of the curriculum.

But Baca, Sherman and other chefs reject fry bread, which they see as a symbol of resilience under colonial oppression. The fried dough recipe, Sherman writes in his recently released cookbook, "The Sioux Chef's Indigenous Kitchen," is the product of the government commodities that Native Americans were given during their forced migration, which separated tribes from their traditional foods. Baca and Sherman are among the Native American chefs who serve "decolonized" meals, prepared with no pork, beef, dairy, processed cane sugar or wheat flour, ingredients that Europeans introduced into native diets. Avoiding these ingredients is also healthier, they say.

The colonists "purposely destroyed food systems, first as a means of control, and the aftermath of it is horrendous," says Sherman, noting that Native Americans have an average life expectancy four years shorter than all other races and ethnicities in America. According to the Indian Health Service, they also die at higher rates than other Americans of such ailments as liver disease and diabetes.



Kshitay, or acorn soup, was among the dishes served at the Sioux Chef's James Beard Foundation dinner. (Rina Oh for the James Beard Foundation)

[The hard lives of Native American children]

But because of the chefs' focus on health, the native food sovereignty movement has been conflated with faddish diets — native foods are seen as "superfoods," or they're likened to the Paleo diet, whose adherents eat only things our Paleolithic ancestors could have eaten.

Native American diets "have been here for a long time, whereas the Paleo diet was designed as a food trend," says Sherman, scoffing at the idea of "Captain Caveman's diet."

And reducing a deeply spiritual food culture to its trend potential or its nutritive value is another example of a phenomenon called "Columbusing" — the practice among white people of acting as if something created by people of color didn't exist until they took note of it, like the intrepid explorer who "discovered" America, where indigenous people had been living for centuries. This happens frequently to food that becomes suddenly trendy: pho, collard greens and matcha have all been Columbused in the past year, becoming the domain of bearded white chefs with full-sleeve tattoos. And now, Native American food is going through the same thing.

"I've seen some pop-up restaurant start-ups start to come around where nonnative people are trying to do Native American food," says Sherman. "And we had a conversation with them — 'You know, you can do whatever you want to do, but if you call your food Native American food and you don't even have any native people on your staff, then it's completely cultural appropriation.'"



Chef Freddie Bitsoie of the Mitsitam Cafe at the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. (Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian)

Not all native chefs share Sherman's view. For Lois Ellen Frank, a longtime Kiowa native chef and researcher who lives in Santa Fe, N.M., it doesn't matter who's making the food as long as Native American providers, such as wild rice harvesters and salmon fishermen, are reaping benefits.

"The truth is, we've been sharing recipes for millennia," she says. "How is someone else cooking a rack of venison and using a chokecherry reduction appropriation? If that encouraged them to buy their wild rice from a native organization, I've succeeded. I haven't been appropriated."

[How I taught Russians to love Native American food]

Freddie Bitsoie, the Diné (Navajo) executive chef at the National Museum of the American Indian's Mitsitam Cafe, says that seeing nonnative chefs step in "lit a fire under native chefs, and got them to open their own places." But he bemoans a lack of respect from chefs with European training, which doesn't acknowledge that Native American cooking uses different techniques.

"It's part of the technique to use as much as possible. We don't peel the carrots, we don't de-slime the cactus," says Bitsoie. "Native chefs are told they're doing things wrong."

Moreover, preparing a meal is about much more than techniques and ingredients. It's about spirituality: Sherman, for example, starts every dinner with a prayer and an offering of a "spirit plate," with samplings of all the food. It's also about teaching guests the history of the food and the native people, which can get into some uncomfortable conversations for people on either side of the hospitality relationship: You can't tell the story of decolonizing Native American food without talking about genocide.

"It's not necessarily that I do it over every dinner, but we do just lay it out there that this is stuff that has happened," says Sherman, though the subject wasn't part of his speech at the \$175-a-plate James Beard House dinner, where he served braised elk leg and maple red corn pudding.

Frank says she tends to avoid the topic.

"I don't want to dwell in the place of what happened," she says. "I find that when people feel the hurt and the trauma, they're paralyzed."



Native American chef Lois Ellen Frank uses indigenous ingredients at a cooking class. (Daphne Hougard Photography)



Lois Ellen Frank's pumpkin corn soup with ginger lime creme. (Lois Ellen Frank)

So for native chefs, the focus is on moving forward. For Sherman and his partner, Dana Thompson, it means founding North American Traditional Indigenous Food Systems, or NATIFS, a culinary nonprofit group designed to help tribes preserve their foodways. It will offer education, grants and business plans for the tribes to start food businesses that will bring jobs and money to reservations, which have high rates of unemployment. They're also working with scientists to cultivate rare heirloom seeds that were part of the tribes' pre-migration agriculture.

"For us, part of it is righting a wrong, part of it is putting something back" into the community, says Sherman. And part of it is showing people the beauty of what nature provides to the Native American menu. "When you want to learn people's culture, it's so much easier to approach it through food."

So Thanksgiving is both a sore spot, and an entry point.

"It's the one time of the year that people, whether they know it or not, are largely making indigenous-based foods," says Sherman. "There's turkey, squash, cranberries — and all these pieces that represent indigenous America."

That's why Bitsoie has planned a big Thanksgiving meal at the Mitsitam Cafe, with maple-and-thyme-glazed turkey, wild rice salad and corn bread. It's another chance to tell that story, and honor the ingredients.

"Even though Thanksgiving is the biggest lie in American history," he says, "it's a lie told over dinner."