



Pit

Tamales,
taco tuesdays,
Spam, soul food,
sunny side up,
schmeears, cheesecake,
cheesesteaks, chicken
and waffles, fry bread,
Frito pie, finger-lickin'
good, moonshine,
meatloaf, mayonnaise,
Cracker Jack,
cup of joe, California
rolls, deep dish,
diners, drive-ins,
and dives... **What's
the deal with
American
food?**

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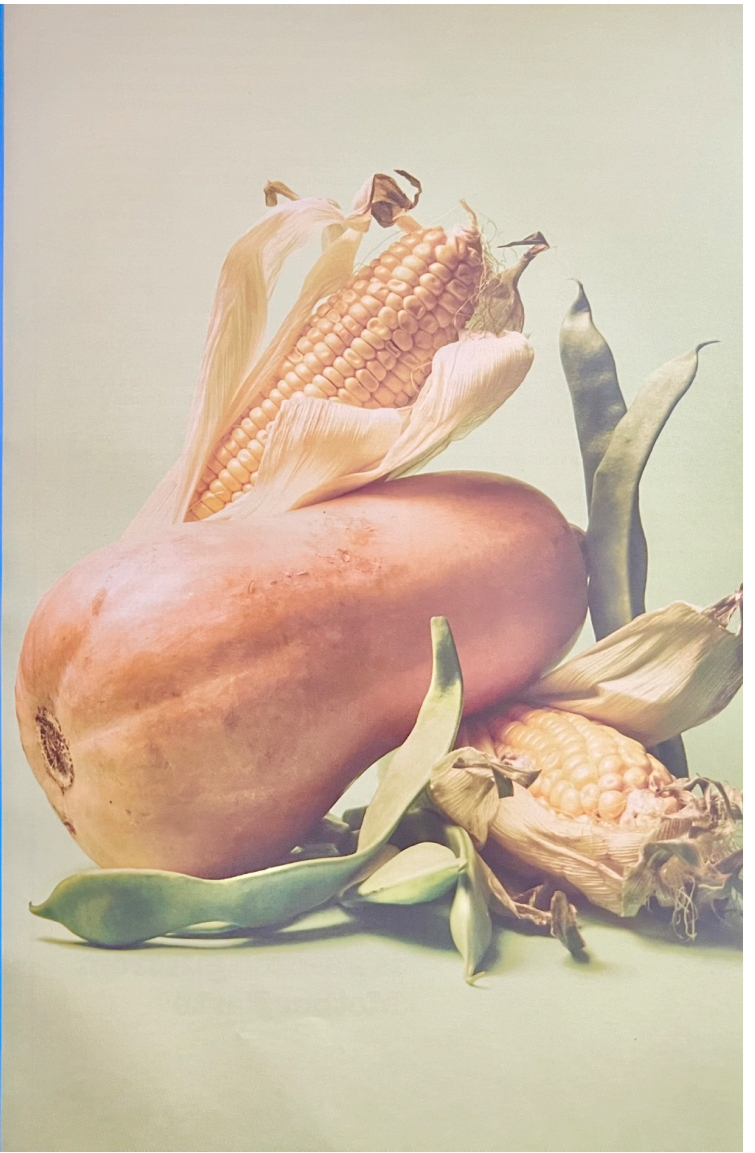
The past, present
and future of
indigenous foodways

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Photography:

Robert Billington

THE REAL LOCAL FOOD OF AMERICA



The story of Native American cuisine encompasses more than just food. It is a story of survival and seeds, tradition, sovereignty, and respect for the land. For thousands of years before European contact, Indigenous peoples of North America cultivated, fished, hunted, and foraged in ways that are as diverse as the landscapes they inhabited. Yet for many people, even in the United States, Native foods remain a mystery.

The truth is, there's no single answer to the question: what is Native American cuisine? In the United States, there are 574 recognized Native American tribes, each with their own unique and diverse culture, language, way of life, and food traditions. The dishes and ingredients of the Pacific Northwest, shaped by salmon runs and berry harvests, differ entirely from those of the desert Southwest, where corn, beans, and squash grew in irrigated fields. On the Great Plains, bison, wild turnips, and chokecherries were key ingredients of daily meals, while an abundance of seafood sustained communities along the east coast. In Alaska, coastal peoples relied on salmon, seal, and berries preserved in various ways over long, harsh winters.

Food was never simply fuel for Native people – most Indigenous communities have always viewed food as a powerful healing source and continue to weave it into ceremonies and rituals, as well as medicine. When eaten mindfully and with intention, it is thought that food can protect from illness and restore balance within the body, as well as the community as a whole. The idea of food as medicine isn't limited to physical bodies; it also helps maintain emotional and spiritual health. Across many Native American tribes,

certain plants like sage, cedar, and juniper are used both for nutrition and as remedies for physical and spiritual ailments alike. Various communities maintain unique food traditions that emphasize this healing power of food. For example, wild rice holds special significance for the Ojibwe, who consider the grain a sacred gift from the Creator, both nutritionally and spiritually sustaining.

Indigenous foodways encompass the traditional practices, wisdom, and cultural significance surrounding the cultivation and preparation of Native foods, all of which are deeply rooted in seasonal, local, and sustainable harvesting. To support this, sophisticated agricultural systems developed over millennia, seed-saving traditions ensured genetic diversity, controlled brushfires were implemented to maintain hunting grounds, and trade networks carried ingredients far from their original homelands. For many Native American Tribes and First Nations People, the concept of food as medicine reflects the belief that food is a sacred gift from Mother Earth. Traditional foods, rich in nutrients and connected to the land, are used not only for nourishment but also for healing, maintaining balance, and connecting to nature.

Because these practices are so intertwined with the natural environment, they are susceptible to the destruction of traditional food sources, whether accidental or deliberate, such as the extermination of the North American bison. The bison population was almost completely wiped out by white American settlers – from eight million in the 1870s to fewer than 500 by the 1890s – due to

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hunting, habitat loss, and the deliberate slaughter of bison to eliminate an important source of food (as well as clothing and tools) for Native tribes during war. The effects of this were devastating and long-lasting on Great Plains Native Americans, whose way of life centered on the animal.

In addition to the destruction of traditional food sources, the forced removal of Native Americans still impacts Native peoples today. Starting in 1869, Native children were removed from their families and placed in boarding schools designed to strip away their languages, spiritual practices, and cultural knowledge. These institutions didn't just ban ceremonies, they cut the intergenerational threads that passed down recipes, cooking methods, and agricultural skills. Until 1978, with the passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, it was illegal in the US to openly practice many Indigenous ceremonies, some of which centered on planting, harvest, and seasonal feasts.

Historically, the US government also effectively banned Indigenous food systems by restricting Native access to hunting and fishing grounds. By replacing traditional foods with commodity foods like lard, sugar, and flour, the government drastically changed the diets of Native peoples. This diet was completely unknown to most tribes and could not compare to the fresh, diverse foods they were used to. Out of these rations came fry bread, a deep-fried flatbread that became a staple in many Native communities. For some, it's a comfort food, but for others, it represents colonization and oppression.

Yet despite centuries of displacement and suppression, Indigenous foodways have survived. As with any cuisine, Native American food cannot be categorized into one single menu or summed up

in one individual dish. At the same time, however, commonalities across different climates, regions, and cultures emerge. For centuries, the Three Sisters – corn, beans, squash – have been staples among many Indigenous peoples, including the Haudenosaunee or Iroquois Confederacy, Cherokee Nation, Hopi, and Zuni Nations. Each of these Nations has its own legend attached to these ingredients, but most involve a story about three sisters who thrived because of different strengths that complemented one another: Sister Corn provides a sturdy stalk for Sister Bean to climb; Sister Bean in turn returns nitrogen to the soil; and Sister Squash blankets the earth with ground cover, keeping it fertile and free of weeds. The story emphasizes themes of cooperation, community, and reverence towards nature.

Today, Indigenous communities are reclaiming their foodways with seed banks and food sovereignty projects. Seed keepers have retrieved primordial seed varieties of corn, beans, and squash from family collections, replanting them in their original soils, while organizations such as the Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance connect farmers, seed savers, and educators across the United States. Community gardens on reservations and in urban Native centers are growing traditional crops alongside new introductions, teaching younger generations age-old customs connected to the harvest of each food.

Beyond seeds, the Oglala Lakota Nation on the Pine Ridge Reservation have Native-led programs that are reintroducing bison to their original homelands, restoring the prairie ecosystems and cultural and spiritual connections to the land.

In the Pacific Northwest, many Tribal Nations hold treaty-reserved fishing rights based on their status as sovereign nations. This guarantees access to their traditional waters, which is vital for culture and food security.

Across the US, Indigenous-owned restaurants, food trucks, and farmer markets are introducing their traditional foods to new diners. Some focus on authentic ingredients, avoiding those introduced by Europeans, while others create fusion dishes using ancestral ingredients in contemporary dishes. In Minneapolis, Owamni Restaurant serves dishes made with pre-colonial Indigenous ingredients, from duck with sumac to elk poyha, a meatloaf-like dish topped with seasonal berries. In Seattle, award-winning food truck Off the Rez has opened a permanent cafe offering bison fry bread tacos and wild rice bowls. In Oakland, Wahpepah's Kitchen showcases heritage cuisine of the Kickapoo, and Sac and Fox nations through vibrant, seasonal menus, featuring dishes such as manoomini, which consists of hand-harvested wild rice fritters made with apples, cranberries, zucchini, and topped with chives and pepita crema.

Beyond restaurants, cultural centers and food festivals are bringing Native cuisine to the public. Farmers' markets in places such as Santa Fe feature stalls selling blue cornmeal, hand-harvested wild rice, and Pueblo stews. The Mississippi Band of Choctaw provides fresh organic produce to the community and also holds cooking demonstrations. The tribe supports vulnerable community members, both enrolled members and non-Natives living on the reservation alike, by delivering food packages to seniors, those with diabetes, and low-income families, ensuring better access to healthy foods. Restoring traditional diets

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can improve community health by helping to prevent and alleviate conditions such as diabetes and heart disease, which are linked to decades of processed food consumption.

Then there are restaurants stepping in to provide programs Native Americans urgently need. For many Native American tribes, alcohol and drug recovery services are often too far away to reach, and frequently lack culturally competent care. In Whiteriver, Arizona, Café Gozhóó not only offers seasonal, Indigenous dishes rooted in Western Apache tradition, with many ingredients sourced from Native farmers, it also supports those battling addiction. Through its partnership with the Rainbow Treatment Center, the café provides vocational training to serve Native Americans with otherwise limited employment opportunities.

Equally important are the stories these foods carry, which connect present-day farmers to the ancestors who, over so many centuries, selected and saved the seeds that are planted and harvested today. For many Native Americans, reclaiming foodways means reclaiming the right to define their own histories, and their own futures. It's about deciding what is grown, how it's prepared, and who sits at the table – decisions once stripped away by colonial systems. The revival of Indigenous foodways is both an act of cultural sharing as well as a form of decolonization and resistance. For those outside these communities, tasting Native foods can be more than a novelty; it can be an act of connection, a way to understand that Native Americans are not simply characters in history books or films, but are still thriving today.