

For nourishment, there's nothing like 'first foods'

Pre-colonization diets provide far more than sustenance for the body. They also fortify and deepen ancestral relationships among tribes and families.

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Linda Black Elk holds a dryad's saddle mushroom while on a foraging walk with her son Wawikiya in Minnesota in 2020. (Photo courtesy of Linda Black Elk)



Written By Kathleen Purvis

When the time comes for Linda Black Elk to stock her freezers, the task isn't as simple as going to the nearest supermarket in Bismarck, North Dakota.

An ethnobotanist, which is someone who studies the relationship between native plants and people, Black Elk teaches food sovereignty skills at United Tribes Technical College. As a mother of three sons 5, 17 and 19, she and her family spend hours each week gathering, hunting, butchering and preserving foods that are part of their Lakota heritage.

“I'm actually sitting next to a rack of drying (bison) right now,” Black Elk said, laughing, when asked about how America's tribal communities work indigenous foods into their daily lives. “When you eat first foods, preservation is a constant activity.”



Ethnobotanist Linda Black Elk shows off spiralized squash in this 2020 photo shot in the gardens at the Yankton Nakota Reservation in South Dakota. (Photo courtesy of Linda Black Elk)

In tribal communities, there are several names for the foods people use in both community events and their daily lives: first foods, indigenous foods, pre-colonization diets.

“A lot of people use those interchangeably,” Black Elk said. “It’s like the phrase *organic food*. I saw a meme once that said: ‘I like to buy organic food, or, as our parents called it, food.’”

Generally, “first foods” are foods that were on the continent before Europeans arrived, though “Indigenous” can vary depending on who’s talking.

While the internet lists many foods considered Indigenous, there are debates. Corn is accepted. Winter and summer squashes, beans, tomatoes, tomatillos and grains, such as amaranth, are accepted, too.

Potatoes are debated – they’re native to Peru, but they’ve been so hybridized that white potatoes don’t bear much resemblance to the native ones. Dandelions are controversial because they’re associated with European colonization, but some people believe that there were native dandelions that may have cross-pollinated with the European ones.

“Some people consider colonized foods, like fry bread, to be indigenous,” Black Elk said. “It’s special to people, and a lot of people love it. But it’s not a first food.”

Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills is director of Native American Studies at Nueta Hidatsa Sahnish College in New Town, North Dakota. The biologist is also a social science researcher at the University of Montana, education director and a member of the Three Affiliated Tribes, also known as the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation.

“To me, coming from a biology background, when you think about indigenous and you think about our foods, basically, we co-evolved in this place,” Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills said. “For thousands of years, that’s what we were going to eat. When you think about diet, it’s those ancestral relationships with the natural world. Where did my ancestors come from, and what did they eat?”



Biologist and educator Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills holds a wild, or prairie, turnip in this 2020 photo shot on her father's property in Mandaree, N.D. Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills is a member of The Three Affiliated Tribes. (Photo courtesy of Ruth Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills)

Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills uses the idea of tribal migration – the movement of Indigenous people around large swaths of territory that brought them into contact with other tribes – to widen what she includes in her diet.

To avoid white sugar, for example, she buys maple products from [Dynamite Hill Farms](#), an Ojibwe family business in Michigan. Buying what other tribes produce isn't just about

nutrition, Plenty Sweetgrass-She Kills said. It's a way to support tribal businesses, and to take back a lifestyle that was lost when Indigenous people were put on reservations. In many tribes, knowledge and food skills are coming back after being lost for several generations after tribal children were sent to boarding schools to learn European ways. Lisa Iron Cloud, a Lakota who lives in Rapid City, South Dakota, is admired by people who know her skills in hunting and butchering bison. She teaches cooking and skills classes, and she keeps three freezers full of meat, which she often shares with her community. But Iron Cloud had to learn what she now teaches. At a sewing circle in 2016, she heard older women talking about traditional foods and realized how much she didn't know. "In my family, my mom and all my aunties, they didn't know," Iron Cloud said. "I had to go outside of my family to learn. They grew up in boarding school. They have stories but that was it.

"It was just wanting to get that back, especially the old style of eating. Especially the organ meats – the lungs, the hooves, the hearts," she said. "Everybody wanted the muscle meat, but not the organs. That's where it started, wanting to teach people."

Iron Cloud worked with [Richard Sherman](#), the Oglala Lakota uncle of chef and cookbook author [Sean Sherman](#), founder of the company The Sioux Chef in Minneapolis.

Besides starting the nonprofit, North American Traditional Indigenous Food Systems, Sean Sherman wrote "The Sioux Chef's Indigenous Kitchen" (University of Minnesota Press, 2017). He also started a series of nonprofits called The Indigenous Food Lab, and he's scheduled to open Owamni, his first brick-and-mortar restaurant in Minneapolis, in May 2021.

Interest in Indigenous foods is growing, said Sean Sherman, recipient of two food awards from the [James Beard Foundation](#). "In the beginning, when I talked to journalists, it was just curiosity," he said. "And then it started to be where people started having a better sense of how to define North America indigenous foods."

Beyond gathering food and preserving it, there are other hurdles to keeping an indigenous diet. People have to know the land around them – where it's safe to forage or hunt, or where oil fields might have contaminated the ground.

They also have to get used to new tastes. A lot of wild foods can be bitter, for instance, because of the alkaloids that make them nutritious. Iron Cloud learned to switch to game meat slowly, because it's richer than farm-raised meat, and the body needs time to adapt to that difference. People also have to accept that fat was a valued part of native diets. It's the binder in a lot of recipes, such as corn balls.

Black Elk estimates that 60% to 70% of her family's diet involves indigenous foods, although sometimes it's a hybrid. For example, they make spaghetti, like most families, but they make their own sauce from tomatoes and add ingredients such as hawthorn berries.

Her family's favorite dish is Bapa soup – dried-meat soup – made from dried buffalo, dried squash, wild turnips (also called prairie turnips), hominy, and traditional flavorings including wild onions, mint and bee balm, which has a flavor similar to oregano.

“It's way more tasty and nourishing than you'd think,” Black Elk said. “Dried squash melts into the broth and gives you a silky texture that's like nothing else, and the texture from prairie turnip – it's chewy.”

Black Elk thinks her sons will stick with indigenous foods, especially the healthfulness of it. “It's always been in their lives,” she said. “One of my sons said one day that a friend of his went to the doctor for a cold. He was like, ‘Why? Why wouldn't his mom just give him an elderberry elixir?’”

One of Iron Cloud's favorite parts of working with indigenous food is taking things to older people in her community. “Food has been a trigger for so many elders; they just go back to the time when they were kids,” she said. “You can see them – they get giddy. It reminds them of Grandma. Or their mom who's already passed on.

“A lot of times, they'll forget things. But if you bring out a certain kind of food, like dried meat, they'll remember,” Iron Cloud said. “It makes me feel so good, seeing them happy. It's almost like time travel.”

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