**Headline:** Indigenous Food Is Not a ‘Trend’: What You Need to Know

**Teaser:** Chef Brian Yazzie, Diné/Navajo, is one of the Indigenous chefs working to improve our understanding of Native American culinary history.

By Valerie Vande Panne

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**[Article Body:]**

When you think about uniquely American food or cuisine, you might think of hamburgers, hot dogs, or apple pie. For others, American cuisine is known for its dressings, sauces, or fusions of multiple cultures, from Louisiana gumbo to Korean tacos. But the fact is that people were living on this land we now call the United States for more than ten thousand years. And the people who lived here ate, and ate well, during that time.

Given the Native American genocide, it’s not surprising that in the mainstream media consciousness, Native American food is reduced to the margins (if it’s even mentioned at all) or greatly misrepresented, as in the cases of [fry bread](https://tinyurl.com/uey222r), and the myths of the [Pilgrims’ and Indians’ first Thanksgiving](https://time.com/4577082/thanksgiving-holiday-history-origins/) that are repeated with an almost religious zealotry every Thanksgiving.

Thanks to the work of a group of Indigenous chefs and the [I-Collective](https://www.icollectiveinc.org/)—a group of foragers, hunters, food scholars, traditional farmers, seed keepers, and chefs all guided by “Indigenous values that prioritize balance and reciprocity for all living things”—the awareness of Native foods is changing. This work serves as a reminder that we all come from somewhere, and our ancestral diet wasn’t processed, packaged foods.

To start with, mainstream media is increasingly paying attention to Indigenous chefs. Bon Appetit, for example, has devoted [increasing](https://www.bonappetit.com/story/indigenous-chefs-thanksgiving) [space](https://www.bonappetit.com/story/indigenous-food-canada) to the Indigenous food movement. Independent Lens has a new docuseries airing on PBS called “[Alter-NATIVE: Kitchen](https://tinyurl.com/uhkhr6p)” profiling three chefs. [The Sioux Chef](https://sioux-chef.com/), [“a company devoted to Indigenous foods,”](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/04/dining/native-american-recipes-sioux-chef.html) appeared in a recent issue of the New York Times (a publication that has recently come under fire for its current usage of [racist Native stereotypes](https://najanewsroom.com/2019/11/25/naja-calls-for-second-apology-and-audit-of-new-york-times-story/)).

The point of much of this mainstream media coverage of the Indigenous food movement, and the work of the chefs highlighted, is not only that yes, Natives are still here, but also that their traditional foods can be served up as fine cuisine. The food has also survived genocide, and is healthier than the colonized, factory farm, processed diet—especially true of the diet inflicted on Native Americans—and can lead to meaningful connections, better health, and food sovereignty for Indigenous peoples.

It’s good that the media is highlighting and learning about Native foods—even if it is in a bougie, plated-in-a-fine-restaurant way. While it’s easy for the media and the Twitterverse to talk about the issue in the fall, if only to absolve the guilt of Columbus Day or to seem savvy during Native American History Month, Native food is an issue all year long, and with increased awareness, it will be in our consciousness year-round, too, along with the remembrance that there is a long history of genocide tied to the food, and that food isn’t just something to fill the belly or serve up to high-paying customers; it’s medicine, it’s life, it’s healing, and it’s connection.

For example, fry bread and [“Indian tacos”](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taco#Indian_taco) aren’t Native foods—they were what Native Americans were forced to eat to survive. Through the perverseness of colonization, they became a comfort food, and helped lay a foundation for the health crisis in Indian Country, including diabetes, obesity, and heart disease.

Some celebrity chefs have been exploitative on this issue, Chef Brian Yazzie, Diné/Navajo, notes. Martha Stewart [calls](https://www.marthastewart.com/1160020/fry-bread) fry bread a “traditional American Indian” food. Even a chef with a cooking show on PBS, Lidia Bastianich, calls fry bread an “[Ancient Navajo House Blessing](https://www.pbs.org/food/recipes/fry-bread/).” Fry bread is only as ancient as what [colonizers gave Native Americans to survive on](https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/frybread-79191/) less than 160 years ago, after centuries of genocidal enslavement, torture, murder, and abuse. It is processed white flour, sugar, and lard—a recipe of bad health for Native Americans, who had none of that in their diets for the thousands of years prior.

“How hard is it to research that this [fry bread] came from genocide and survival, and bring an Indigenous chef in to talk about it?” asks Yazzie, marveling at the stunning lack of awareness of Stewart and others. “Or do a food that represents the culture?”

Today, many Native elders suffer from nutrition-oriented diseases, and many Native populations are still in poverty. They continue to live in the trauma of both ongoing oppression and of the past, such as [boarding schools and genocide](https://www.laprogressive.com/dawnland/).

Chefs like Yazzie are working to address these issues with food. One of his go-to dishes is wild rice with vegetables and protein—elk, venison, rabbit, etc.

For him, and chefs like him around the world, the work starts with the food that was on the land they are now on before colonization and before invasive species: pre-colonial foods of North America, with no refined sugar, wheat, or dairy, and no chicken, pork, or beef.

Wild game meats, such as turkey, duck, venison, prairie dog, beaver, muskrat, and quail, are all accessible pre-colonial proteins, depending on the region. Foraged foods, as well as domesticated plants and wild grains and nuts, are part of the cuisine, too.

Yazzie starts by procuring the food he prepares by seeking connections with local tribal communities, farms, and foragers. From there, he might go to co-ops, or as a last resort, a big chain store.

He always starts local, with elders and the tribe. “That is a big difference with the work that I do. A lot of chefs focus on regional,” Yazzie says.

Originally from Navajo Nation, now living on Dakota Territory in what is more commonly recognized as Saint Paul, Minnesota, Yazzie, 33, travels internationally, catering, doing pop-up dinners and leading cooking classes, in the call for Indigenous food sovereignty, using all Indigenous ingredients across the Americas, acknowledging that depending on where in the Americas you are, the food culture is different.

Quinoa and amaranth are both Indigenous foods that have become popular with the paleo diet, vegetarians and vegans, and unfortunately that colonization has created a circumstance where diversity in the food options has been reduced for high-yielding crops, and Indigenous people in some growing regions don’t have access to their own food because they have to sell it.

Part of the work I-Collective does, Yazzie notes, is to bring awareness of not only Indigenous food culture, but also the problems caused by this kind of cultural appropriation.

No matter where you are from, your ancestors had a traditional diet. For example, if you go back far enough, someone of white, Nordic descent is unlikely to have ancestors who regularly ate quinoa—it simply wasn’t available where they lived. Your ancestors, no matter where on earth they came to the USA from, had their own traditional diet, and it was probably a healthier one than is typical of what most Americans eat today. Finding out what your ancestors ate and returning to that diet can help prevent the challenges currently seen in traditional communities with quinoa and amaranth—and still likely be healthy for you. There is little need to appropriate food culture for health, when you know what is healthy for you—likely, what was healthy for your ancestors.

There’s also the problematic romanticization around Indigenous food. Yazzie cautions against self-recognition and self-promotion, especially when it lacks any connection to Indigenous ingredients or the tribal community.

When Indigenous people are excluded from public conversations about their food, or are otherwise unaware of what’s being taken advantage of and promoted in certain circles, a chef’s or a capitalist’s or a well-intended ally’s procurement or commodification of a food quickly becomes a recipe for a thoughtless disaster. Inclusivity, then, isn’t just necessary for the dish; it’s about a deeper understanding of history, culture, colonialism and more. Connection and awareness are essential ingredients.

“I’m representing Indigenous food,” Yazzie adds. “If I was doing Indian food [from India], and I have no identification with India, that’s a red flag for me, and I wouldn’t do anything like that,” he says.

Referencing restaurants in the Twin Cities that feature Indigenous ingredients and preparations, “they don’t call it Indigenous food—it’s a foraged plate, hunter’s plate, wild game,” he says.

“Everyone is from a certain place and time,” notes Yazzie. “I am blessed and grateful to know my Navajo [culture]. Know your culture. Know where your family came from. Know what ingredients are from there.”

Consider what your ancestors ate—not just since coming to America, or since capitalism squeezed its way into America’s belly via highly processed junk food. You might find that food more suitable, and healthy, than what you find elsewhere.

“We all have our own language and food culture,” says Yazzie.

And, “if you can’t afford to purchase programs or cookbooks, go to YouTube,” adds Yazzie, who has his own channel, [Yazzie the Chef](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCf9-pSMv_wN7H8QRLDeJmSA), sharing Indigenous foods and knowledge with everyone. Chances are, the foods of your ancestors can be found there, too. And you probably don’t need to go to a fancy restaurant to eat it.

*Learn more at* [*icollectiveinc.org/who-we-are*](https://www.icollectiveinc.org/who-we-are).