



Traditional Native Foods and Health

Traditional foods are an integral part of American Indian, Native Alaskan and Native Hawaiian cultural practices, values and belief systems. Our grandparents teach us that planting, gathering, fishing and hunting traditional foods leads to a healthy, meaningful and rich life. Our elders often talk about the “old ways” and how we used to be healthy and active before European contact and how more recent government policies took away our Native food systems, our balanced diets and our good health.

While access to fresh and healthy food is still very challenging for many in Native communities, there is a movement underway in Indian Country to embrace the wisdom of our ancestors and a return to traditional diets. Our elders knew that these foods are nutritious and today we learn that they are also recommended for the control of weight and to combat many of the health issues prevalent in Native communities today, such as diabetes, heart disease and obesity.

Native communities are taking a leading role in local food systems and that means regaining control of our health. Native people are establishing community gardens, farmers’ markets, organic farms, cooking classes for children, and foraging field trips by schools, among other initiatives. In addition, community members are advocating for policies that require schools, hospitals and other community institutions to provide healthy and traditional foods. Native people are asserting local control and demanding access to culturally appropriate healthy food as an act of sovereignty.

True or False?

- ◆ The traditional Native American diet is the gold standard for nutrition

True. Nutritionists highly recommend a traditional pre-reservation diet for all people. That’s because traditional Native diets were plant-based and full of lean meats, protein, fruits and healthy grains. Traditional foods are also low in fat, sodium and have no refined sugars.

- ◆ Foraging is a lost practice

False. Foraging is experiencing a current revitalization. Many foods that can be gathered are considered superfoods, nutrient dense and healthful. For example, Ciolim or harvested cholla cactus flower buds can be dried. Two tablespoons of dried cholla cactus flower buds provides as much calcium as a glass of milk. Milk has over 100 calories while ciolim only has 28 calories.¹



¹ Tohono O’odham Community Action. Retrieved October 2013 from, <http://www.tocaonline.org/assets/spring-2013-toca-newsletter.pdf>

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- ◆ Farming can provide a livelihood for young people

True. In Southern Arizona, brothers Noland and Terrol Johnson are farming traditional crops like “60-day” corn and tepary beans, which are well-adapted to desert conditions. Terrol Johnson says. “I always tell people, ‘You’re not just looking at a tepary bean. You’re looking at a whole culture.’” The brothers helped launch Tohono O’odham Community Action’s (TOCA) New Generation of Tohono O’odham Farmers apprenticeship program in 2011. TOCA is an independent nonprofit established to reconnect youth with Native customs and tribal elders and to help establish an on-reservation food economy. The internship program pays apprentices \$18,000 a year, nearly twice the average per-capita income on the reservation.²

Healthy food and entrepreneurship

The demand and need for healthier, more traditional Native foods is translating into exciting new projects and businesses.

Some examples from First Nations Development Institute’s Native Agriculture and Food System Initiative project include:

- ◆ Alaskan tribal members are developing a cold-storage facility to prepare for tribal ceremonies or other large community gatherings. Aside from subsistence use, tribal members who fish and hunt can also use the facility to store, process and sell fish and other game directly to consumers, keeping money in the community.
- ◆ The Oneida Tribe of Wisconsin is expanding upon its tribal program – Tsyunhehkw^ (“Life Sustenance”) – which is an 83-acre site for organic farming and processing that grows the tribe’s heirloom white corn. They recently purchased a dehydrator to increase their production of the heirloom corn.
- ◆ The Pueblo of Nambe established a community farm that has served important dual purposes: revitalizing traditional farming methods and producing more than 4,000 pounds of food to eliminate senior hunger on the reservation. Many of the fruits and vegetables planted in the community garden were grown and harvested by tribal youth with guidance and supervision of provided by their elders, preserving and continuing cultural knowledge and wisdom from one generation to the next.
- ◆ To access an excellent report with details on the three projects described above on efforts to reclaim food sovereignty, go to *Reclaiming Native Food Systems: Part One*, which can be viewed at www.firstnations.org/KnowledgeCenter/NativeAmericanFoodsAndHealth/Reports.



² Bregel, E. Arizona Daily Star (August 8, 2013). Retrieved October 2013 from, http://azstarnet.com/news/local/sowing-the-future-for-tribal-youth/article_248e2a30-05b7-50dd-b431-5e4d902e325f.html.

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For more information, visit:

- ◆ American Indian Health and Diet Project (AIHDP). A website devoted to recovering the health of Indigenous peoples. <http://www.aihd.ku.edu/>
- ◆ *Native Foodways*, a magazine that celebrates Native food, including stories about Native farmers and gardeners, fishers and hunters, foragers and wildcrafters, chefs and homecooks. www.nativefoodways.org
- ◆ The Intertribal Bison Cooperative is committed to re-establishing buffalo herds on Indian lands in a manner that promotes cultural enhancement, spiritual revitalization, ecological restoration, and economic development. <http://itbcbuffalo.com>
- ◆ Tohono O'odham Community Action. "From I'toi's Garden" is a book about Tohono O'odham food traditions, including information about foraging. www.tocaonline.org/book-from-i-itoi-s-garden.html
- ◆ The Cultural Conservancy. Excerpts from interviews with 11 Native American food practitioners, each representing a different Native nation, a different tribal territory and history, and distinct foodways. www.nativeland.org/foodways_prog.html
- ◆ Tohono O'odham Community Action (TOCA). Information about TOCA's efforts to create a healthy, culturally vital and sustainable community on the Tohono O'odham Nation, including food systems and wellness. www.tocaonline.org/index.html

