

Alana Yazzie's Blue Corn Mush is made with blue cornmeal, juniper ash, fresh berries, and pumpkin and chia seeds.

A Return to Their Roots

Indigenous chefs are reclaiming the traditional foods of their ancestors.

BY REBECCA L. RHOADES

Crystal Wahpepah's love of Indigenous foods goes back to her childhood. A registered member of the Kickapoo tribe with Sac and Fox ancestry, she grew up preparing meals from recipes passed down from generation to generation. Her grandfather was a hunter and forager, and her grandmother a cook. Today, Wahpepah is one of the country's most celebrated chefs. She was the first Native American contestant to compete on the Food Network show "Chopped," and her eponymous Oakland, California, restaurant, Wahpepah's Kitchen, earned her a coveted James Beard Award nomination.

"I really want to re-introduce Native foodways to our people, especially to our next generation," she says. "I grew up not seeing a Native American restaurant, and I feel like it's very important that today's young people do see Native American restaurants and Native American people representing our foods."

Wahpepah is just one of a growing number of Native chefs who are reclaiming Indigenous culinary traditions and redefining them, not only for the average restaurant diner but also for their own communities.

HISTORY AND CHALLENGES

According to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, there are 575 federally recognized and at least 63 state-recognized tribes in the U.S. — comprising more than 5 million Native Americans. But of the more than 750,000 restaurants across the country, it's estimated that only 10 to 14 are dedicated to Native cuisine, says North American Traditional Indigenous Food Systems, a nonprofit that addresses the economic and health crises affecting Indigenous communities by re-establishing Native foodways. The organization was founded by the three times James Beard Award-winning Indigenous chef Sean Sherman, best known as The Sioux Chef.

Considering that Native Americans developed and cultivated so many of the foods that are still consumed to this day, why is their cuisine so invisible? The answer is complicated.

Chef Crystal Wahpepah



Many Native American cultures, including their foodways, were lost or weakened during the forced assimilation and eradication of tribes in the 1800s by the U.S. government. Their removal from tribal hunting and farming lands resulted in a demise not just of access to ingredients but also of culinary traditions.

Native American tribes are also diverse, with each focusing on locally available resources and ingredients.

"There's still this misrepresentation of what

it is to be Native American. They think we're all a monolith, that our foods are all the same," says Alana Yazzie, an Indigenous lifestyle and food blogger and cookbook creator from Queen Creek who writes under the name The Fancy Navajo. "I think there's a belief that the Three Sisters — corn, beans, and squash — is a common thing amongst all tribes. My own personal food history is Navajo. We're from the desert. We don't eat fish. We don't grow wild rice. We don't eat a lot of beans; we're not a very bean-heavy culture. Instead, we have different varieties of corn, and our big meat staple is sheep, so mutton or lamb."



Alana Yazzie's Blue Corn Shortcake

Kai, Arizona's only Forbes Five-Star and AAA Five-Diamond restaurant that's owned by the Gila River Indian Community of Akimel O'otham and Pee-Posh, also focuses on ingredients from the Sonoran Desert. "Indigenous cuisine lives in this sandbox of the Three Sisters, but Arizona is so diverse in its climate and what grows here," says Executive Chef Thomas Riordan. "There are four seasons of mushrooms, spring onions, ramps. We have palo verde beans, cholla buds, mesquite honey. The Three Sisters is a hallmark and benchmark for what Native cuisine is, but all these products grew here year-round as well."

For Alexa Numkena-Anderson, chef and owner of Javelina in Portland, Oregon, Indigenous foods represent the specific areas from which they originate. "I'm from two different tribes that are from the Pacific Northwest and Southwest — I'm enrolled in the Hopi tribe but I'm also descended from the Yakama Nation with a little bit of Cree and Skokomish. But living in Portland, I often think of bison, elk, corn, tomatoes, peppers, salmon. I also love using maple sugar," she says.

Perhaps the closest thing to a ubiquitous Native dish is fry bread. These crispy circles of pillowy deep-fried dough are a cornerstone of Native markets, powwows, and family meals, served plain with honey or as the base of the Navajo taco, piled high with ground beef, beans, lettuce, tomatoes, and cheddar cheese.

But the dish has a dark and painful history — one that's at the heart of Native food colonization. Fry bread originated some 160 years ago during the Long Walk, the 300-mile forced deportation of the Diné people from their homelands in Arizona to New Mexico's Bosque Redondo Reservation. Hundreds died along the way; thousands more starved to death in the internment camp. In place of their traditional foods, the government gave the Diné commodities such as white flour, salt, and lard — the main ingredients of fry bread.

"What better way to starve Native Americans than to take away their food and give them flour," Wahpepah notes.

Some chefs, such as Sherman, refuse to cook the dish, citing its historical use of colonization rations. Others see fry bread

Queen Creek resident Alana Yazzie shares Indigenous recipes as The Fancy Navajo.



as a symbol of resilience and Native pride.

"I come from a fry bread family. It makes me think of my grandmother, of her corn soup and fry bread," Wahpepah says. "When I opened my restaurant, I didn't offer it because I thought it would overshadow all of our Native food producers and the whole purpose of the restaurant. You know, a lot of families were forced to eat that every day. My family had no choice but to eat it every day. But at the same time, some people haven't had fry bread since they left home. Or they haven't had it since their grandmother made it for them when they were kids. They have that connection with it, and that brings good memories and good thoughts and makes them happy."



Chef Jason Vickers harvests white flint corn, a traditional crop of tribes in New England.

HEALTH AND HERITAGE

Colonization did more than take away lands and foods — it took away identity. Many Native Americans, whether they live on tribal lands or in urban settings, are still affected by intergenerational trauma. They struggle with poverty, addiction, and health issues, such as diabetes and obesity brought about by a reliance on ultra-processed foods with high sugar content and low nutritional value.

That's why today's chefs play such a vital role in sharing, preserving, and passing on their culinary traditions. By redefining Native cuisine, they're restoring cultural knowledge, advancing sustainability, and encouraging healthier eating.

Snoqualmie Tribe member Sabeqwa de los Angeles shows off Vicker's Wapato stew.



"Food sovereignty — reclaiming our foods — is so important," Wahpepah emphasizes. "If you haven't been raised on a reservation or come from an urban Native community, knowing where your food comes from can be lost. For instance, I have a Choctaw staff member who's never been to the Choctaw Nation reservation. He's never even seen Choctaw food. My restaurant is where food sovereignty really takes play, where he can learn about the corn, the squash, things of that nature. It's saying 'Hey, these are the first foods from these lands; let's honor these foods.'"

Jason Vickers is a Seattle-based chef with ancestry in the Hassanamisco Band of Massachusetts' Nipmuc Nation. "Traditional foods weren't so prominent or popular when I was young," he says. "Now, people are realizing their importance and treasuring them in a way that they deserve."

Behind the scenes, Indigenous farmers, fishermen, and producers are supporting the chefs, supplying them with fresh, organically grown or caught vegetables, fruits, grains, meats, and seafood.

One of the most well-known is Ramona Farms in Sacaton, which re-established the tepary bean, an ancient Indigenous ingredient that was cultivated by Sonoran tribes for more than 4,000 years before almost becoming extinct. Today, the farm supplies three variations of tepary beans, as well as heritage wheat berries, corn, and other crops to Native-run markets and restaurants around the country.



Alana Yazzie's Blue Corn Stuffing

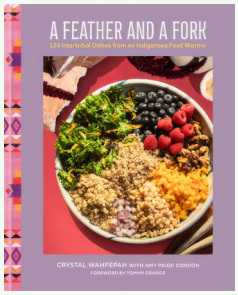
"Each traditional ingredient comes with a story and legacy, and I'm very proud to present this food and talk about it every chance I get," Vickers continues. "As chefs, we get to make sure those cultural and traditional lines stay alive and continue to thrive, and we get to normalize passing them on to future generations."

Numkena-Anderson notes that the growth and rising-popularity of Native-owned restaurants shows that generations are beginning to heal. "For so long, we've struggled as a people, and when you spend so much time struggling, you don't get to be creative. You don't get to have fun and play with these foods that we have," she says. "Today, food access is better because Native people are just a bunch of entrepreneurs. We're out here trying to do what's good for our community."

Wahpepah concurs. "We're creating spaces for that next generation, but we're also creating spaces for our health and well-being," she says. "From the beginning, our foods have represented who we are and the lands we come from. I can piggyback off Sean Sherman when he says there should be Native restaurants in every state. I agree."

3 Must-Read Books That Highlight the Flavor of Indigenous Food Culture

November is Native American Heritage Month, and books that serve up the culture and foodways of Indigenous people are on the menu. Here are two recent collections of recipes — and one searing memoir — that should be in your kitchen and on your bookshelves.



A Feather and a Fork: 125 Intertribal Dishes from an Indigenous Food Warrior

Crystal Wahpepah

The acclaimed chef weaves storytelling with intertribal recipes that heal the body and restore Indigenous foodways. Wahpepah explores the environmental, spiritual, physical, and social benefits of each dish while raising awareness of Indigenous food producers who are preserving heirloom foods. (Rodale Books, March 2026)



The Blue Corn Kitchen: A Navajo Story of Family, Food, and Tradition

Alana Yazzie

Designed for young cooks ages 7 to 9, this beautifully illustrated tale follows three generations of Navajo women as they teach why certain foods and how they are made are important to Navajo culture. Included are 10 simple recipes for drinks, snacks, and meals using fresh, healthy ingredients. (becker&mayer! kids, September 2026)



Our Knives Will Save Us: Dispatches from a White Mountain Apache Chef

Nephi Craig

This memoir by Arizona's own Nephi Craig, executive chef of Café Gozhóó in Whiteriver, chronicles his early life on the White Mountain Apache Tribe Reservation and battle with addiction and shares how culinary training and Indigenous foodways helped him achieve sobriety. *The New York Times* named it a nonfiction book "Everyone Will Be Reading This Summer." (Penguin Press, July 2026)

Crystal Wahpepah's Warm Three Sisters Salad with Cranberries

SERVES 4

Ingredients

Salad

- **1 pound arugula**
- **2 cups red cranberry beans**
- **2 cups butternut squash, cubed**
- **5 cloves garlic**
- **2 cups roasted hominy corn**
- **½ purple onion**
- **¾ cup olive oil**
- **2 cups dried cranberries**
- **1 rosemary sprig**
- **½ teaspoon fine sea salt**
- **¼ teaspoon finely ground black pepper**
- **Maple chili oil (see recipe)**

Directions

Rinse and sort the cranberry beans and soak them in enough water to cover for 1 hour prior to cooking. Drain the beans well, then fill a large saucepan with 8 cups of water, ½ teaspoon of salt, and the beans. Bring the water to a boil over high heat, then reduce the heat to low. Cover and simmer the beans for about 2 hours, until tender. While the beans cook, you can prepare the other ingredients.

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Toss the cubed squash, garlic, rosemary, oil, and the remaining salt and pepper in a bowl. Spread in a single layer on a baking sheet and roast for 15 to 20 minutes, until the squash is tender and lightly browned.

Remove the leaves from the rosemary sprigs and sprinkle over the squash. Mash the garlic into a soft paste.

Drain the cooked beans. While the beans and squash are still warm, toss the beans, squash, garlic paste, hominy, onion, cranberries, arugula, and maple chili oil together in a large bowl. The arugula will wilt slightly. Taste and adjust the salt and pepper to your liking.

Serve with a side of maple chili oil to toss.

Maple Chili Oil

- **1 cup grapeseed oil**
- **¼ cup olive oil**
- **½ cup finely chopped yellow onion**
- **1 cinnamon stick**
- **1 star anise**
- **1 chile de arbol**
- **1 New Mexican chili**
- **1 garlic clove, finely chopped**
- **1 tablespoon whole black peppercorns**
- **1 tablespoon crushed red pepper flakes**
- **1 teaspoon chile de arbol powder**
- **¼ teaspoon onion powder**
- **½ teaspoon garlic powder**
- **1 teaspoon maple syrup**
- **¼ teaspoon salt**
- **1 drop distilled white vinegar**

Directions

Combine all of the ingredients in a large saucepan over medium-low heat and bring to a gentle boil. Reduce heat to low and simmer for 10 minutes.

Remove the pan from heat and allow the mixture to cool. Strain through a fine-mesh strainer into a sealable glass container. Keep at room temperature for up to 3 weeks or in the refrigerator for up to 6 months.

