

The Cultural Importance of Indigenous Foods

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Halito, Chim achukma? Hello. How are you? My name is Devon Mihesuah and I am an enrolled citizen of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, author, and enthusiastic foodie.

I spent a lot of time in my grandparents' kitchen, either eating or sitting at the table playing with something until meals were ready. I never waited long. My grandmother, an original enrollee of the Choctaw Nation, cooked her dishes--especially the ones made in summer-- from fresh ingredients from her large garden. If she needed an onion or an herb, she just walked outside and gathered more or reached into her pantry. I never saw her eat meat, but she often cooked my favorite fish—that is, catfish.

I dutifully followed grandfather Big Tom through his straight rows of corn, squash, beans, amaranth and along the thick rasp and blackberry vines that grew on the fence. My grandparents also grew non-indigenous okra, watermelon, apple and peach trees. Okra stalks loved the heat and grew more than six feet tall. One morning in early summer Big Tom gently pushed his pitchfork into the soil next to some wilted greenery and revealed a pile of potatoes covered in dirt. I was only around four years old, but I recall my astonishment at learning potatoes grew underground and not on trees. Nana took the bounty of green pole and bush beans, crookneck and zucchini squashes, sweet corn, okra, purple and red tomatoes, and watermelon, and transformed them into colorful and nutritious plates of food that I prefer over any other. I cannot think of another meal that evokes in me such a physical and emotional reaction as the distinctive and earthy flavors of that garden plate.

These foods—along with bears, deer, and turkeys—are the same foods my ancestors cultivated and hunted. Almost every Choctaw family made the staple *tanfula*, created from finely ground and sifted corn, water, and wood ash lye. One might add walnuts, pecans, squirrel, or turkey to the mixture and allow it to cook all day. Another dish I often prepare instead of bread is *banaha*, made of cornmeal, hickory oil, and meats boiled in corn shucks. It looks and tastes similar to Mexican tamales, but because there is no lard in the mixture, it has a coarser texture.

My first novel, *Roads of Relations*, is based on seven generations of my family stories, with the family garden serving as a symbol of cultural continuity and a source of emotional strength through each generation, especially after the arduous and horrifying ordeal of removal from the Southeast to Indian Territory in the 1830s. At my home in Kansas, I have attempted to emulate my ancestors' gardens. I grow plants in raised beds, a large in-ground garden, and a modest greenhouse where I can control the moisture and sun intensity with makeshift shades of old bedsheets and curtains. Smaller cold frames are constructed of rebar, PVC pipes, binder clips, and painter's plastic. If you want to grow something, you will find a way. Gardening, seed saving, foraging, and caring for pollinators is a direct connection to our culture, a tradition that has been instilled into my children.

Through my cultural and familial knowledge, scholarship, food photography, speaking, and teaching, I try to educate others about the consequences of inactivity and poor diets and the physical, emotional, and spiritual benefits of revitalizing our traditional ways of eating. My book, *Recovering*

Our Ancestors' Gardens: A Guide to Diet and Fitness and the anthology *Indigenous Food Sovereignty in the United States* have won numerous national and International book awards. I continue my message by managing the website *American Indian Health and Diet Project* and try to show by example that even home cooks with modest kitchen skills can create nutritious and appetizing meals. Each fall, this year it is November 22-28, as an alternative to the American Thanksgiving holiday, I facilitate the "Week of Indigenous Eating" on my Facebook page Indigenous Eating that has over 8000 followers. If you are interested, take a look at *Indigenous Eating* to learn about the plethora of wonderful foods that kept Indigenous people of this hemisphere healthy for millennia.

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