Honoring North America’s Native Cuisines
by The Global Culinary Initiative Committee

The Global Culinary Initiative embraces global communities through culinary connections. In this issue, we explore the food traditions and heritage of North America’s Indigenous Peoples, specifically the Native cultures within the Continental United States and Canada. (Mexico was a focus of The Latin Issue, October 2016.) Currently, there are 567 American Indian and Alaskan Native tribal governments federally recognized by the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs and 634 recognized First Nations governments in Canada. Under the provisions of the 1794 Jay Treaty, Indigenous Peoples can freely travel across the U.S./Canadian border. Vancouver, B.C. has one of Canada’s highest populations of Indigenous Peoples with over 52,000 of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (Arctic area) ancestry.

American Indian or Native American?

According to the National Museum of the American Indian, the terms American Indian and Native American are acceptable. American Indian and Indigenous American are sometimes favored over Native American, since anyone born in America is native to America. “Indian” is a legal term used in U.S. federal law. Confusingly, it also refers to a person from the Indian subcontinent. Most Native Peoples prefer to be identified by the tribe they belong to; each one has its own history, culture, and language.

Native American Contributions

Early Native Peoples lived in organized societies with their own forms of government. Originally hunters and gatherers, they began cultivating plants to supplement their diets. Their vast contributions to our modern way of life include domesticated foods, Native arts and crafts; pharmaceuticals, and activities like lacrosse, canoeing, and sign language. We use countless Native words like opossum, kayak, caribou, avocado, papaya, persimmon, and squash. Of U.S. state names, 26 are Indian words. Because of a deep respect for the land, conservation methods are practiced and encouraged.

Indigenous Foods

After years of seeking out food secrets from China to India, Sweden to Brazil, Americans have discovered a rich culinary heritage in their own backyards with foods that owe their origins to the American Indian. Canadians are also turning back to the indigenous ingredients of the First Nations, e.g., caribou, ptarmigan, muskox, yak, and whale blubber.

Twenty-five years ago, kitchens in the Indian nations and professional chefs began putting their own stamp onto traditional American Indian dishes to bring them into the modern kitchen. Native cuisines are now returning to their roots; chefs are reaching back for the healthier, sustainable meals of their ancestors. Pre-Columbian, indigenous foods from the Americas included tomatoes, potatoes, wild rice, pumpkins, peanuts, bison, quinoa, chocolate (Mesoamerica), and blueberries. Foods varied according to the environment where each Native group lived. Sacred corn (maize), a gift from Mexico, was cultivated over 7,000 years ago. One of the most important foods, corn is roasted, cooked with beans and squash and dried for making popcorn, hominy, grits, and cornbread. Black walnuts, chestnuts, hickory nuts, and acorns, prized by the Northeastern Natives, are used for breads, puddings, and even baby food.

Native peoples shared their culinary gifts with the world: barbecues, clambakes, steamed lobsters, Brunswick stew, succotash, and Boston...
baked beans. Raw cranberries were eaten with maple syrup or pounded with deer meat and dried to make pemmican. The Three Sisters (see photo) is a holiday-worthy dish of maize, beans, and squash. When Europeans arrived in America in the early 1600s, the Iroquois (Haudenosaunee Nation) had been growing the vegetable trio together over three centuries. Spiritual rituals and celebrations are often connected with food. Tribal groups in the Pacific Northwest Coast of the U.S. and Canada celebrate with a ceremonial gift-giving feast called a potlatch.

**Native American Chefs**


Oglala Lakota Chef Sean Sherman’s work is part of a slowly gathering movement—“new Native American cuisine”—to revive Native food cultures in contemporary kitchens. He finds culinary inspiration in the indigenous foods of the Upper Midwest.

Navajo Chef Walter Whitewater; Red Mesa Cuisine, explains that traditional foodstuffs can be used to create gourmet meals and they’re native to many American communities. The Indian Health Service encourages action among American Indians and Alaska Natives to fight obesity and raise their physical, mental, social, and spiritual health.

**Chapter Programs**

Learn about Powwow etiquette. Host a chapter activity to rejuvenate Dames with herbal teas.

Holly Arnold, a Colorado Chapter founding member, owns The Fort restaurant in Morrison, Colorado and founded the Tesoro Culture Center. Invite her to host a podcast about the center and its programs, several of which feature heritage foods.

Create a program around the history of the development of the Native American diet from this website.

Tocabe is a restaurant in Denver that serves Native American dishes. Chapters could use this menu (or a similar restaurant menu) for inspiration to create a potluck dinner. Search our section on Native American Recipes to find similar dishes and recipes.

Beverly Cox is a Colorado Chapter member. Secure a copy of her James Beard, award-winning cookbook (listed below in Cookbooks) for a chapter review, tasting, and discussion.

**Cookbooks**


**For Further Study**

A Powwow is a cultural/social gathering featuring Native dances and singing. Dancers wear traditional regalia that embody their tribal affiliation and ancestry. Many traditional foods are served.

**Native Food** is dedicated to Native American Indians and other Indigenous Peoples and their rich culture, history, and food.

**GCI Committee**

Susan Fuller Slack (Charleston) and Roberta Duyff (St. Louis), Co-chairs; Teresa Farney (Colorado), Martha Marino (Seattle), Trina Kaye (Los Angeles), Gail Forman (Washington, D.C.), Advisors: Sandy Hu (San Francisco) and founder Suzanne Brown (Atlanta).

Photos, Page 1: Delores Patencio was a basket maker, she is shown grinding corn in a hopper. Dianne Nance Cohee (Palm Springs); Three Sisters Salad and Cedar-Planked Fire Roasted Salmon (The Mitsitam Cafe Cookbook). Photographer Renée Comet, (D.C.).

Page 2: Dame Zola Nichols (Palm Springs) shares this 1957 photo of herself and her uncle Harold dressed in regalia just before he dances at a Powwow. Zola, an enrolled member of the Eastern Band of Shishones, was born on Wyoming’s Wind River Reservation.

Our exploration of Native American cultures will continue at the 2018 GCI Conference Breakfast in Seattle.