

## Indigenous Foodways

### HISTORY OF NATIVE DIETS

Several time periods describe the American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) diet before and after European colonization.

#### 1. Pre-Contact Foods and Diet

The variety of cultivated and wild foods eaten before contact with Europeans was as vast and variable as the regions where AI/AN people lived. Foods harvested generally included seeds, nuts, corn, beans, chile, squash, wild fruits and greens, herbs, fish and game, including the animal's meat, organs and oils. Foods were dried, smoked, stored for later use.<sup>2</sup>

#### 2. First-Contact Foods and Changes

In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, European settlers brought sheep, goats, cattle, pigs, horses, peaches, apricots, plums, cherries, melons, watermelon, apples, grapes, and wheat. Spanish sheep changed the lifeways of the Navajo (Diné). Europeans adopted foods indigenous to the Americas such as the tomato, potato, and chile.<sup>2</sup>

#### 3. Government-Issued Foods and Forced Relocation

The forced removal of American Indians to reservations and the destruction of traditional food sources were deliberate governmental efforts to terminate AI/AN peoples. The impact is still felt as Tribal Nations actively work to reclaim their language, culture, and traditional foodways.

The U.S. government issued food rations known as commodity foods – lard, flour, coffee, sugar, and canned meat (also known as Spam) to AI/AN peoples. The distribution of commodities



**“If Native communities control local food systems, food can become a driver for cultural revitalization, improving community health and economic development.”<sup>1</sup>**

**–Carolyn J. McClellan**

created dramatic dietary changes among American Indians. The government never provided enough food to feed all tribal members, and the diet is linked to a multitude of poor health outcomes, including diabetes.<sup>2</sup>

AI/AN people disproportionately experience lower life expectancy, more chronic health conditions, disease, violence, poverty, and an overall lower quality of life – as well as food insecurity.<sup>3</sup>

They may live in a “food desert,” an area with few or no affordable healthy food choices. People often resort to eating commodity foods and overly processed foods sold at convenience stores or fast food restaurants.

## Tribal Food Sovereignty

### The Seven Pillars of Food Sovereignty

1. Focus on food for people
2. Build knowledge and skills
3. Work with nature
4. Value food providers
5. Localize food systems
6. Put control locally
7. Food is sacred<sup>3</sup>

Tribal Nations are restoring traditional food systems and rebuilding relationships with the land, water, plants, and animals. Food sovereignty is an act of self-determination that revitalizes the local economy, cultural identity and traditions, health and wellness, language, community, and family.

### Examples of Food Sovereignty Activities

1. Food cultivation through Tribal farms, communities, schools, and family gardens.
2. Health fairs with information about harvesting, growing, eating, and cooking traditionally.
3. Professional development for food entrepreneurs in the form of workshops, seminars, and ongoing business planning and support.
4. Elders teach youth in school, at summer camps, and in summer jobs programs about gathering, growing, hunting, fishing, cooking, preserving, storing, and cultural traditions connected to food such as prayers, songs, and dances.
5. Heirloom seed saving and seed banks
6. Composting workshops

### SOURCES

<sup>1</sup> McClellan, Carolyn. "Food Sovereignty." American Indian: A Magazine of Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian. Summer 2018. Vol. 19 No 2. <https://www.americanindianmagazine.org/story/food-sovereignty>.

<sup>2</sup> Frank, Lois Ellen. "History on a Plate: How Native American Diets Shifted After European Colonization." (November 11, 2021). <https://www.history.com>.

<sup>3</sup> Minassian, Liana. "Indigenous Foods: How Colonized Diets have made Native Nations Sick – And What's Being Done About It Today." (February 3, 2021). Food Revolution Network. <https://foodrevolution.org/blog/indigenous-foods-systems-food-sovereignty>.

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### DIET RECOMMENDATIONS

You can prepare healthy traditional recipes and cook with traditional ingredients that can preserve and promote your culture. Here's how to get started:

1. Eat whole foods like corn, beans, lentils, chickpeas, and grains like wild rice, quinoa, and buckwheat.
2. Eat fresh fruits and vegetables such as bell peppers, berries, apples, squash, and salads.
3. Eat small portions of healthy proteins like nuts, seeds, eggs, pasture-fed meat, and wild fish.
4. Cook by sautéing, baking, broiling, roasting, boiling, and steaming. (Avoid fried foods.)

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