

# TAKE ME BACK TO MY INDIAN FIRE

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## **Abstract**

This article explores how food is connected to health, not only by the physical body but through a connection to our culture, our community, our ancestors, and the earth. Establishing food security and sovereignty – access to traditional foods and control over food supply – is crucial to decolonization and healing for Indigenous people. This article combines teachings from Elders with insights from an Indigenous chef about how food can heal. It takes the reader on a culinary journey through a heart-warming event “Community Kitchen: Food, Medicine and Memories” held by the First Nation House at the University of Toronto.

## Résumé

On examine dans cet article la nourriture et son lien à la santé, non seulement physique mais encore en lien avec notre culture, notre communauté, nos ancêtres, et la terre. Mettre en place sécurité et souveraineté alimentaires -tant l'accès aux aliments traditionnels que le contrôle de son origine- est crucial dans le contexte de la décolonisation et de la guérison des peuples autochtones. Dans cet article on lie des enseignements d'ainés et des perspectives d'un chef cuisinier autochtone sur le rôle qu'a à jouer l'alimentation dans le processus de guérison. On y entraînera le lecteur dans un parcours culinaire au moyen d'un événement touchant (« Community Kitchen: Food, Medicine and Memories ») organisé par la maison des Premières Nations de l'Université de Toronto.

How food is grown and prepared is a part of culture; it is important that this aspect of traditional knowledge is conserved, in the same way that it is important to conserve language, in order for a culture to remain alive. Culinary customs hold information about where a group of people came from and their relationship to the earth. Certain food and dishes have a way of deeply comforting humans and connecting us to each other in the present, and to our ancestors through memory.

I attended "Community Kitchen: Food, Medicine and Memories" at the First Nation House at the University of Toronto. It was an event where we cooked traditional Indigenous food with Anishinaabe chef John Croutch and had a discussion guided by Robert Sleeper, a Haudenosaunee from the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte about food's connection to medicine and memory, with a focus on food sovereignty for Indigenous people. Along with warming my stomach and my heart, this event called to attention the importance of keeping the knowledge of Indigenous recipes alive, as well as providing modern Indigenous people today with control over their food sources as a way of achieving health, both through food as medicine and food as a connection to our origins.

In the cozy kitchen in First Nation's House, we started out by making "Three Sisters Soup" from scratch, under the direction of Chef Croutch. The main ingredients of this soup – beans, corn and squash – are named the Three Sisters. They are the staple food of the traditional Haudenosaunee diet and are so intrinsic to the culture that they stem from their creation story itself. In the story, these three plants grow from the mound of soil of the buried body of the Sky Woman's daughter: Mother Earth (Olan, 2013). The Haudenosaunee people had great knowledge of the earth, and grew these plants together for agricultural reasons, well before the advances of modern farming. The plants benefit each other allowing each to prosper: the large squash leaves provide shade to keep

the soil moist, the strong corn stocks give the vine-like beans a structure to climb, and the beans hold the sisters together with their entwining vines and keep the soil rich with nitrogen (Boeckmann, 2013). For the soup, we did not use the common canned yellow corn often found on shelves in supermarkets today, we used a specialty white corn called Hominy. Chef Croutch explained that this was the type of corn that Indigenous people grew and prepared in a particular way, before colonization, in order to ensure easy nutrient absorption.

Colonization has negatively impacted Indigenous people in many ways, one of which can be seen in this simple example involving Hominy corn. The Indigenous people had their land, and the knowledge and traditions passed down through the generations, that enabled them to grow, process and utilize this special Hominy corn. This special corn was processed by soaking it in a lye-rich ash liquid and pounding it in order to break down the hard husk so that nutrients, such as niacin, could be absorbed in the digestive process (Diemer-Eaton, 2011). This is a small example of critical knowledge passed down through generations. The loss of access to the physical land, the loss of their relationship to it, and the intergenerational disruption that came with residential schooling and the post-colonial way of life, all resulted in an interruption in the passing down of knowledge and traditions essential for survival, which ultimately interfered with Indigenous peoples' ability to grow, harvest, hunt, gather and prepare food in the way they had for centuries. This has contributed to the food crisis: the malnutrition and diet related health problems that afflict many Indigenous people in Canada today (Kamal, 2018). The less nutritious, canned yellow corn is the primary kind of corn available in most supermarkets today. Indigenous people, those living in cities, reserves and many living in remote communities, now buy the majority of their food at such supermarkets (Subnath, 2017). This is only one example of the ways in which rural and remote Indigenous peoples are limited in their access to the diversity of their nutritious traditional foods. Restrictions on hunting, fishing, and land use, in addition to the disruption in sharing intergenerational knowledge, play a part in this lack of food sovereignty for the Indigenous people of Canada today. On top of this lack of access to traditional foods in many remote communities, only unhealthy, packaged food is affordable, while access to and acquisition of healthy fresh foods are not viable financial options (Lyman, 2010).

For Indigenous people, food is inseparable from the concept of holistic health. This is illustrated by the Cree language where the word for health, *miyupimaatisiium*, translates to 'being alive well' and the concept includes the requirements of having shelter, being able to hunt, and having *iyimiichim* ("food meant for the Cree") to eat (Grey, 2015). At the Community Kitchen event, we discussed food sovereignty as we ate our first course: Three Sisters Soup with Bannock (traditional bread).



INDIAN WOMAN MAKING BANNOCK, LOON LAKE, SASK.

*Indigenous women making bannock on a fire. Loon Lake, Saskatchewan (1940)-1949). Image from Saskatoon Public Library, Local HIstory Room.*

Food sovereignty is “the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems (Sélingué, 2007)”. Many of us at the event had not heard of this concept before, even though lack of food sovereignty is a pressing issue that impacts many people today. Robert Sleeper, who is focusing his research on food security and sovereignty for Indigenous people in Canada, explained that there is a call to action for the power to be returned to Indigenous people so they can control their food supply and have access to the resources they need in order to provide healthy, traditional foods

in a self-sustaining way. There is a lot of work to be done before the power has been returned to the Indigenous people, but there are several ways in which action can be taken.

Indigenous gardens within cities are an important resource for Indigenous people living in urban centres, as these gardens can be used to grow plants for food, and medicinal and spiritual purposes (sage, tobacco and sweetgrass). Establishing Indigenous grocery stores could also be a way to help Indigenous people benefit from modern infrastructure (Food Secure Canada, 2017). Currently, while hunting and fishing rights are meant to be guaranteed under the constitution, the courts are defining laws on a case-by-case basis, which often results in lengthy court battles to fight for specific rights and lead to uncertainty, and therefore trepidation, about specific restrictions on hunting and fishing rights for Indigenous peoples (White, 2017). Furthermore, laws that prevent Indigenous people from selling fish and game to friends or neighbours have a huge impact on the ability of Indigenous people to supplement their wealth with cash, a necessary commodity in modern society's economic system (Jenkins, 2015). Establishing consistent fishing and hunting rights that make it safe and stable for Indigenous people to find food in their traditional ways would be a beneficial step for returning food sovereignty. However, this does not address the problem of the population decrease of some of the animals (Buffalo, for example), which are a traditional food supply, brought on by diminishing resources due to aggressive settlement, industrialization and climate change (Roberts, 2010; Loring, 2017).

The lack of affordable healthy food in remote communities and the dependence on external suppliers remains a big obstacle in not only food sovereignty but food security as well (Lyman, 2010; Loring, 2017). While lowering food prices and implementing programs such as school breakfasts and lunches are important, Indigenous people in the north have been calling for the subsidization and increased availability of non-food items, such as ammunition, fuel and equipment, which would allow them to obtain their own food and not rely solely on outside food supply systems (Daborn, 2017).

I believe a community-led approach is paramount to resolve these issues, as people outside the communities may not understand what the Indigenous people know to be important for them to gain control over their food systems. For example, an outsider might overlook the spiritual elements of food, the importance of intergenerational knowledge transfer, and opportunities such as holding Elders Lunches events for the guidance and teaching of youth, and therefore, any money being spent in ways determined by outsiders might not be used in a relevant way to help the people it is meant to benefit.

I was reminded of how disconnected from the land many people feel today during the Seven Grandfathers teaching I attended, held by

Andrew Wesley, Maškēkowak Cree and the elder in residence at First Nation House. He expressed that while there is nature to be found in the city (such as in High Park), it is not the same as when he is at home near James Bay where he knows the names of the trees, knows how to talk to them: there is a mutual respect between him and the land. Indigenous people have a deep, inherent connection to the land, the plants and the animals that humans share with the earth. In the Haudenosaunee creation story, the birds, trees, and animals all worked together to break the fall of Sky Woman as she tumbled from the sky. The turtle gave his shell for the woman to land on, hence the name of the land on which humans live: Turtle Island. The land, water, plants and animals are given the utmost respect and are seen as older ancestors that hold great wisdom (Olan, 2013; Bodirsky & Jon Johnson, 2008). Authors Margot Greenwood and Sarah de Leeuw (2007) tell a story passed on to them by Neskonlith Elder of the Secwepmec (Shuswap) Nation, Mary Thomas:

"See these scattered pine cone pieces?" asked Mary. "If you look carefully, you will find a pile of pieces nearby. Underneath the pile will be a cache of pinecones belonging to a squirrel. The little cones will be arranged in rows with the tops pointed downward. This is what my Grandmother taught me. When I was a little girl, I asked my Grandmother why the cones were all pointed downward. 'Because,' she told me, 'when the winter snows begin to melt, and water drips into the cache, it will run downward off the cones and not wreck the nutmeats inside them.' I asked, 'How do the little squirrels know to do that?' Granny said, 'They learn like we do, and then they pass their knowledge onto us.'" (para. 6)

This beautifully illustrates the crucial importance of the connection to the land and the flow of knowledge in order for the Indigenous people to have health and to know, as the squirrel does, how to live off the land in a harmonious way. It is not surprising then, that much work is needed in decolonization in order for this connection to the land, and food source to be restored.

Let me take you back to the First Nations House where we ate our warm Three Sisters Soup and passed around a plate of fresh Bannock, each breaking off a piece. We talked about the social and spiritual importance of eating together in a group and how food is connected to memory. As I bit into the bannock I was flooded with a memory of my childhood. My great-grandmother was maškēkowak (Swampy Cree) and left The Pas and her Norway House Nation Family and relocated to British Columbia with her children, including my grandfather, who was just five, in order to protect them from the fate of residential school. With conditions of poverty, and the ever-growing impacts of coloniza-



tion, The Pas was no longer a safe place for her and her family. While she may have succeeded in protecting my grandfather from the direct harm of residential school, she ultimately indirectly fed into the government's objective of cultural assimilation of Indigenous people. Elder Andrew Wesley, a residential school survivor, speaks about what the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People, published in 1996, discovered:

"The purpose of the schools was to...*'kill the Indian in the child'*. This idea of *'killing the Indian'* meant *'killing'* the children's Aboriginal languages, cultural beliefs, and identity by teaching them that they were sinful, dirty, and wrong (Wesley, 2010)".



*My grandfather, Jack Taylor (left) with his grandmother, Frances Paquette (née Beacham) in northern Manitoba*

The result of her being forced off the land of her nation was the inter-generational disruption discussed earlier that led to loss of culture and the resulting suffering. My grandfather, mother as well as my siblings and I, all experience the direct effect of this, growing up detached from our Indigenous roots, and at least for my grandfather and my mother, with an inherent and nagging sense of shame about who they are at their core.

I was always proud of my heritage, and aimed to discover it along-

side my grandfather, as his time with his community was a distant memory. We would search the beaches along the shores of Shuswap Lake for artefacts: arrowheads, spearheads, scrapers, knives, ceremonial pieces, and other stone tools that had been turned up by the waves. We would carve sticks together trying to figure out how the tools were used. One summer night, my younger brother and I begged to have a fire, and my grandpa said we could have an “Indian Fire”. He told us this meant it had to be small so that the smoke could not be spotted from a distance and our position could remain concealed (he explained how the Indigenous people of that area were nomadic and they did not always want their whereabouts to be known). In the kitchen, he made us a batch of bannock dough. We built an “Indian Fire” around a flat rock. We cooked the bannock on the flame-heated rock and ate it, fresh, as soon as it was ready. As a child of about eight, this was a magical memory that felt so important and continues to feel that way to this day.

In the First Nations House, I shared this memory with the circle of people as we passed the bannock around for a second helping. The food we were eating connected me to where I came from, both to my childhood but also to my grandfather, great-grandmother and ancestors beyond. This illustrates the power of food and how it goes beyond its role as sustenance and connects us to Mother Earth and who we are on Turtle Island.

Like many elements of Indigenous culture, recipes are part of an oral tradition passed from generation-to-generation through the act of making food together. As colonialism and the movement of Indigenous people to cities interrupted the transmission of traditions, it is important that these recipes are kept alive (Native Women’s Association of Canada, 2012). By cooking with a group of young people, sharing stories and memories, Chef Croutch was able to pass his knowledge to another generation and keep the knowledge and traditions alive. By discussing food sovereignty, Robert Sleeper was able to raise awareness of this issue and how pressing it is for many of the Indigenous people of Canada, and further spread this knowledge as it flows through the avenues that the event inspired, such as me through this research paper. “Community Kitchen: Food, Medicine and Memories” was especially meaningful for me, partially due to my Indigenous ancestry, but also just as a human being. As food often does, it brought together an amazing, loving group of people who were open to learning and sharing experiences. It inspired me to learn more about food sovereignty for Indigenous people in Canada and, overall, brought me one step closer to our land, where I come from, and therefore, to health.





*Sitting in a circle, eating Three Sisters Soup and Bannock at First Nation's House during the Community Kitchen: Food, Medicine and Memories event.*

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