
EDUCATION NEWS

Where History is Shared and Stories Continue

Kunoopeam Netompaûog, Welcome Friends!

Hello Readers! This year we will issue a quarterly newsletter with a focus on Food Sovereignty. Each newsletter will share stories, recipes and information about the food ways practiced by a variety of individuals from different Tribal Nations with particular emphasis on our local region. I hope you enjoy reading, cooking, and learning from the voices represented in each issue.



“Food Sovereignty,” a term coined in 1996 at a world summit by La Via Campesino, an international peasants movement, who defined it as “... the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through sustainable methods and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.” Indigenous people all over the world have been deprived of this basic and essential human right in the ever continuous process of conquest and colonization. For the Narragansett and other Native peoples of this region, this deprivation started with the arrival of the European colonists. Colonial laws were established early on in places like Aquidneck (“Newport”) prohibiting use of the natural resources as the colonists began to privatize land ownership. One such law outlawed the stripping of bark from trees. Bark was not only the winter home covering for the Narragansett, but it also contains essential nutrients that was used as medicine. Such a law, and the many that followed, began the deliberate and constant destruction of food sovereignty some 300+ years before the term was coined and the movement recognized.

Prior to European arrival and for thousands of years, within the known boundaries of Narragansett Territory, food was abundant in its purest, most natural Elk, deer, beaver, rabbit, raccoon, porcupine, turkey, moose, and more were sourced from the forests. From clean salt and fresh waters came smelt, alewives, sturgeon, shad, shellfish of many varieties, lobsters, salmon, striped bass, blue fish, flounder and cod, just to name a few. Additionally, from the skies came fowl, like geese, brant, quail, ruffed grouse, and more. In the vast woodlands there was an abundance of edibles such as fresh greens, berries, and mushrooms all naturally occurring in their habitats. There were no restrictions, regulations, or limitations to access. Tediously cultivated gardens produced a harvest of corn, bean and squash, and other nutrient rich plants that would supply sustenance throughout the year. This was food sovereignty.

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Throughout the centuries, Native communities have been dispossessed of their traditional homelands via genocide, slavery, broken treaties, illegal land sales, boarding schools, foster care, and systemic policies of assimilation. For many communities, the result of these changes led to the replacement of nutritious organic diets with government issued commodities. Today much of our food is shipped in crates from thousands of miles by land and air from other countries compromising its quality and nutritional value. This reality has led to disproportionately high levels of heart disease, diabetes, high cholesterol and other health disparities among Native people living on and off reserved lands. In my humble opinion, it is the will not just to live, but to thrive that drives Indigenous peoples to fight back and resist. The Food Sovereignty movement is just one of the ways in which our communities are taking action in the present and for the next seven generations. Eating the foods that Creator provides from our earth mother is an inherent right. The manipulation and control of that right through capitalism is what should be outlawed.

In August 2018 an Intertribal Food Sovereignty Summit was held by the founders of the “Narragansett Food Sovereignty Initiative,” Cassius Spears Sr. and Dawn Spears, both enrolled citizens of the Narragansett Indian Tribal Nation, and co-hosted by the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation. “Food sovereignty is more than a movement; it is the core component of our tribal sovereignty. Our ancestors recognized this, they cultivated, harvested, and prepared food seasonally. To this day ‘usual and accustomed’ places are integral to us because that is where we cultivated and harvested our food,” said Cassius Spears Sr. of the purpose behind the Summit. “Food Sovereignty helps you and your community, together; tell your stories, share knowledge, and experiences about food and life around food. From past to present this includes so much... Planting, harvesting, ceremonies, food storage, food preserving, medicinal plants, wild edibles, hunting, lessons learned from successful and unsuccessful hunts, fishing, favorite spots, weather conditions, giving thanks, traditional practices, contemporary practices, ways of now, food policy, gender roles, economics, social structure, healthy diets, traditional foods, recipes, community, cultural arts, connection to your homeland, and much more...” The Summit featured food ways and success stories in Indigenous agriculture from the four directions, and offered a space for connecting and sharing. Participants learned how to honorably harvest and create traditional tools, and how to fine tune natural resource policies to protect them for future generations. Tours highlighted conservation and food production practices from the ocean, forest, and farm. Workshops covered how to access funding and technical assistance to improve the land being managed and how to access more value for your food products. To provide meals at the Summit, they collaborated with Indigenous chefs such as Sean Sherman, Crystal Wahpepah, Brian Yazzie, and Sherry Pocknett (local recipient of the James Beard Award). Cassius and Dawn, also owners and operators of Ashawaug Farm in Ashaway, RI, continue the work of food sovereignty by actively working to raise awareness about food sovereignty, Indigenous farming practices, and food security.



2018 Food Sovereignty Summit; Chefs Sherry Pocknett (L), Sean Sherman (C), Brian Yazzie (R) photo courtesy of Samantha Cullen-Fry

It is the winter season. A time when earth mother is at rest. So what is available? If you are a hunter, you may have stocked your freezer with fresh venison or perhaps small game such as rabbit or raccoon. Your cabinets may be stocked with dried nuts and berries from last season’s harvest. You may have some ground corn you purchased from a local

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mill. Perhaps you are planning to ice fish or brave the cold waters for oysters. Yummm. It all sounds delicious. Eating fresh and in season is always a good decision if you have the option. Find the balance between what is available and what is healthy. Here is a recipe provided by a Native woman named Tahoma in 1935 for a meat and kidney bean stew which uses ingredients available at that time.

MOTHER'S' CORNER

MEAT AND KIDNEY BEAN STEW

2 cups cooked kidney beans	1 cup tomatoes
3 raw carrots	½ lb. chopped meat
1 onion	1 tablespoon fat
4 potatoes	salt and pepper to taste

Brown the meat in the fat. Combine tomatoes, seasonings and cooked beans. Cut carrots, onion, and potatoes in small pieces and add to meat and cook until vegetables are soft, cover with water.

Narragansett Dawn, October 1935, Vol. 1, No. 6 p. 138; Tomaquag Archives

This same recipe may be prepared using all traditional foods. There were many varieties of pole beans cultivated by Native people in our region (see May 2023 Education News). There are native species of onion and garlic for flavor and root tubers from such as ground nut or sunchoke to replace the starchiness of potato. Add mushroom such as sulfur shelf or hen of the wood for bulk (these can be dehydrated or frozen when foraged for later use). Venison sautéed in duck fat makes a good stew meat for this recipe. For additional seasoning add sea salt and the seed of the spice bush berry to provide a peppery flavor. Our modern taste buds may need to adjust to the flavor of more traditional foods just as our ancestors had to adjust to the flavors of introduced foods in their time.



Mushroom and nut varieties

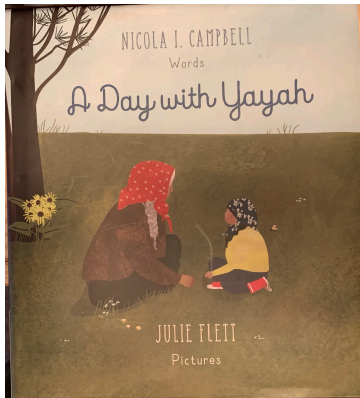
The benefits of eating traditionally can combat the harm caused by so many introduced foods and not just physically, but mentally and spiritually as well. The reconnection with our earth mother, the gratitude for her provision, and the labor of our bodies to hunt, forage, or cultivate are essential to our whole well being.

Aquéne kah wunnánmónat peace and blessings!

~Chrystal Mars Baker

CHILDREN'S NOOK:

Here's an important subject to learn about. Food Sovereignty. It is the right to decide for yourself what type of food you eat. A very long time ago, Indigenous people ate the foods that our earth mother provided. Along with farming, they hunted, fished, and foraged the natural environment for plants, mushrooms, nuts, and berries. These were the traditional foods that the everyday diet consisted of. However, at various points of history, other peoples came to these lands and changed the environment. Indigenous people had little to no access to their traditional foods due to the loss of land by the newcomers who also introduced new laws. For example, the land which surrounds traditional fishing or shellfishing waters are now private property and there are laws against trespassing. Another example is that fishing licenses are required because of the over fishing by the newcomers. There are laws against foraging on the many public nature trails that towns and cities have created. These changes have made it difficult for Indigenous communities to practice their traditional ways of living and eating, and over the years have led to many poor health conditions. That is why Indigenous people formed a movement called Food Sovereignty. They are fighting for the right to once again grow, forage, and eat their traditional foods.



It is winter now but spring will soon be upon us. Use this time to read [A Day with Yayah](#) written by Nicola I. Campbell and illustrated by Julie Flett. Nicola is a Nl̓eʔkepmx, Syilx, and Métis poet, author, and educator who lives in British Columbia. Julie is Cree-Métis and currently lives in Vancouver, British Columbia. This book takes you on a journey with two children who go foraging with their grandmother and learn about plants as edibles and medicinals that our earth mother provides. As you read, think about what may grow outside around you. Plan to take a hike through a nearby nature trail and try to identify a few native varieties of edibles. If you have a cell phone, download a plant identifying app such as “Seek” or “PictureThis.” The knowledge of what is edible and what is poisonous has been passed down from generation to generation among Native communities, but there are many introduced and invasive species that are new to our environment. Learning the difference is essential and takes careful study and time, but learning can and should be fun. So enjoy, and remember, never eat anything without your parents’ permission.

There are lots of books and videos online that provide ways to celebrate our earth mother and appreciate what she provides. You may do an internet search with words like “[Love the earth activities](#),” or “[how to care for the earth for kids](#),” and “[Earth care activities and crafts for kids](#).” Click on any of these highlighted links for ideas.

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Here's a recipe which uses all traditional, native ingredients for you to try.

Recipe ingredients and directions:

Flint corn meal (takes the place of oats)

Water (takes the place of milk)

Pure Maple Syrup (takes the place of sugar or corn syrup varieties)

Boil 2 cups of water

Add 3/4 cups corn meal and stir until thickened

Top with pure maple syrup for a bit of sweetness!

Additions: add fresh native fruit such as strawberries, blueberries or black raspberries on top or stir into the cornmeal while cooking if you prefer.



Blueberry nasaump; photo
courtesy of Silvermoon
LaRose

RESOURCES:

At Tomaquag we are continuously doing the work of educating new generations of children as well as the general public about the lives, traditions and life changes of the Indigenous peoples of Rhode Island and neighboring communities. Follow us on our website at tomaquagmuseum.org, [Youtube](#) and [Facebook](#). Check out these resources!

To hear a reading of A Day With Yayah, click [here](#) and here

To purchase the book and support Indigenous authors, click [here](#)

For a review of the book, click [here](#).