

Traditional Foods as Medicine: Exploring the Possibilities



Companion to the Traditional Foods as Medicine Webinar
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Native Connections Program | SAMHSA

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Introduction

This booklet is a companion piece to the SAMHSA Native Connections webinar, “[Traditional Foods as Medicine](#),” and through it we hope to provide more information and ideas to try and explore with the youth in your program.

Webinar presenter Dana Thompson, Co-owner and Executive Director of [North American Traditional Indigenous Food Systems](#) (NATIFS) is a descendant of Wahpeton-Sisseton and Mdewakanton Dakota tribes and a Minnesota native. Thompson works within the food sovereignty movement and has traveled to tribal communities engaging in ways to improve food access. NATIFS was featured on [MPR News](#) and [USDA](#) regarding the USDA Office of Tribal Relations Indigenous Food Sovereignty Project. She joined with her partner Chef Sean Sherman, author of *The Sioux Chef*, to open the indigenous-based, Minneapolis-located restaurant [Owamni](#), *place of the swirling waters*. The name captures the spirit of their partnership and the land where the restaurant sits.



Thompson and Sherman’s mutual interests led to a journey to discover how trauma has manifested within their Native families and communities. “Heartache impacts our endocrine system, which impacts our hormones and our mood and when we are around a toxic person, when we’re in an unhealthy environment, when we’re around chemicals and unhealthy foods, that’s going to create a negative impact,” says Thompson.

Food influences the natural occurring chemicals and hormones in our bodies, such as serotonin, dopamine, oxytocin, and cortisol. Cortisol is released when we are confronted with a crisis that requires us to fight or run; it’s natural. But long-term exposure to traumatic or stressful events causes your body to release a steady drip of cortisol, over taxing your natural fight or flight adrenaline response and lowering your ability to make rational decisions. This provides fertile ground for disease and bad choices.

Restricted access to nature, due to tribal peoples’ removal to reservations, compounded with exposure to commodity foods has contributed to an increase in tooth decay, tissue inflammation, diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, chemical dependency, and poor mental health. “I started learning about the science of epigenetics and what this means. Epigenetics can be used to describe anything other than a DNA sequence that influences how we develop as an organism,” says Thompson. Scientists, she added, have proven that trauma can be passed through to at least three generations. One way to block the transfer of trauma from one generation to the other is to get culturally relevant foods into the mouths of pregnant women.

Science and Food Highlights

With epigenetics in mind, the team pursues the study of traditional foods, farming, foraging, hunting, fishing, drying, and exploring how regular access to nature—and natural foods—heal. They have partnered with an urban reservation to open a food truck business to serve indigenous tacos. The business's success revealed a viable community interest in indigenous foods. In 2016, they partnered with The City of Minneapolis to open *Owamni*. In connection to the park-based restaurant, a walking path was added with indigenous plants and plant identification.

Thompson and Sherman's long-term goal is to open indigenous food labs all over North America. "We're continuing to build our relationships with different types of indigenous food producers so that we can drive that wealth back into tribal communities and raise awareness," says Thompson.

Other webinar highlights of note include the following:

- ✦ Wisdom is in our guts--where our food is digested.
- ✦ Sharing, growing, and cooking food creates a connection.
- ✦ Whether honoring agriculture, foraging, food processing, hunting, or fishing, make it a community event.
- ✦ Getting food locally is empowering because it encourages people to get outside and understand the origin of their food.
- ✦ Controlling some of the local food source is a step toward food sovereignty.
- ✦ Know how to keep seeds, control soil health, maintain water health, and foster opportunities for people to engage with their environment.
- ✦ Digging your hands into the soil, foraging, getting outside, is therapeutic and helps heal trauma.
- ✦ Being in nature, around trees, healthy soil, and our plant relatives and spending time with our community is a way for us to heal.
- ✦ Birch water is a way to calm stress because it is packed with calcium, potassium, and magnesium which are good for relaxing muscles.
- ✦ Fiddlehead ferns are packed with protein and vitamin C and K.

Now, let's take a closer look at examples of traditional foods and ways to bring them to your table with a few easy recipes. When reviewing recipes, consider creative substitutions, or adaptations. Your family may have been cooking a version of these recipes for centuries. Maybe there are good stories to revisit with elders and youth?

Examples—Fruits



Blueberries have a universal appeal and grow in Alaska and down through North America. Tart and sweet, big, and small, this berry is delicate in flavor, but packed with nutrients. Usually available in late Spring and early Summer, blueberries are commonly used in pies, muffins, pancakes, ice cream, and other sweets. Some use them in salads, or rice dishes.



Chokeberry (Aroniaberry), a tart berry with five small seeds inside, is often confused with Chokecherry which has one large seed. Learn more about the differences [here](#). Common in many regions across North America and ripening in early Fall, chokeberry is a vitamin-rich fruit for pies, jam, muffins, smoothies, juice, sauce, and marinade.



Strawberries ripen from mid-May to around the full moon in June—the Strawberry Moon. Mostly eaten alone as jam or a bowl of fruit, strawberries can be mixed into oatmeal, pancake batter, or ice cream, added to salads, or made into a savory salsa. Strawberries are rich in vitamin C, fiber, and antioxidants. Find out more about how tribes cultivate strawberries [here](#).



Pawpaws are native to North America and ripen in early Fall, turning from green to yellow. The fruit skin gives way to a lightly sweet, lemon-banana flavor interior that lends itself to mashing up, rather than dicing. Pawpaws are a good substitute for bananas in recipes, adding an exotic but mild flavor to ice cream, pudding, and quick bread. Inside are large black seeds that can be removed before eating or cooking. Add a splash of lemon to slow oxidization.

Examples—Vegetables

Fiddlehead Ferns are young fern sprouts usually harvested in spring. They provide significant amounts of vitamin C as well as beta-carotene, iron, and zinc. Before cooking, snap off the stem and boil the curly frond in salted water for 10 minutes. Steaming for 10 minutes is one way to finish cooking fiddleheads, but many people like to sauté them in butter, garlic, lemon juice, and salt and pepper.



Peppers and Tomatoes – Peppers come in dozens of varieties and are used as food and for seasoning. Some Native tribes also used them for treating colds, colic, and as a poultice to treat fever. Tomatoes come from South America. They are a nutritious fruit, considered by many to be a vegetable. Tomatoes were revered by the Aztecs.



Wild rice is an aquatic grass that grows in slow moving rivers and marshes. It is traditionally harvested in late summer and early fall with the use of a small canoe and sticks. As the canoe moves through the rice plants, sticks are used to knock the ripe seeds into the boat. Seeds ripen in the sun at different rates, so multiple trips for harvesting are made.



Corn, Squash and Beans, also known as The Three Sisters, thrive when planted together. Planted upon a mound of earth, the corn stalks grow tall and provide leverage to support the beans' growth. Beans add nitrogen to the soil which help sustain the growth of all three. Leaves from the squash protect the sisters, provide shade, repel pests, and keep the soil moist.



Examples—Herbs, Spice & Sap



Ramps are a great source of vitamins A and C, selenium, and chromium. From bulb to leaf, every part of the plant is edible. They are like scallions and leeks, but not as potent as an onion. Add them to soups, salads, sauté with butter, or add them to a pasta dish. Wash and store them in the refrigerator crisper. Get them fresh in spring.



Juniper berries are a great source of vitamin C and found most of the year on the evergreen juniper tree. Commonly used as a dry spice, it is usually crushed or ground up and tastes like fresh, aromatic pepper! Whole, dried berries can be crushed and used to rub on fish or game, dropped into soups, or added to a vegetable dish or casserole.



Birch tapping season is just before the tree buds—around mid-April. Birch water can be enjoyed raw, and the sap is a lighter sweet than maple sap. Some consider it spicy and savory. It is full of nutrients like vitamins B and C, minerals, antioxidants, and amino acids. Learn how to tap a birch tree [here](#).



Staghorn sumac has deep red plumes that have a citrus, tangy, salty-sour flavor. The red velvet on the berries is the source of its distinct flavor. Tea can be made with the berries, and it is a wonderful spice widely used in salads, rice dishes, rub on meats, and marinade. The spice can be found in bags within some grocery or health food stores. Learn how to tell staghorn sumac from poison sumac [here](#).

Examples—Meats

Buffalo is lower in cholesterol, higher in minerals, and has less than half the fat of lean beef. Additionally, buffalo meat is high in protein. The flavor is so like beef that you might mistake a buffalo burger for a less greasy, flavorful hamburger.



Clams are a seafood that does contain some cholesterol, but it also provides protein, iron, zinc, selenium, and flavor. This magical mollusk can be steamed with butter, garlic, herbs, lemon juice, or a combination of all of these. Whole clams in hot water will open. If some do not, toss them out. Do not overcook or they will become rubbery.



Salmon is available in rivers and grocery stores. This fish is juicy, high in protein, and provides many nutrients to support healthy joints and tissues: B3, B5, B6, B12, vitamins D and E, selenium, and potassium.



Venison is low in calories and high in protein. It is rich in linoleic acid which supports heart muscle tissue and nervous system function. Deer meat has no carbohydrates and lends itself well to casseroles, meat pies, steak, and tasty jerky.



Easy Recipes

Sunny Butter

4 cups unsalted toasted flower seeds
2 teaspoons smoked or coarse salt to taste
2 cups honey or maple syrup

Working in batches, put 1 cup of sunflower seeds into a food processor and grind. Add $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt and $\frac{1}{2}$ cup honey or maple syrup and process until a ball forms. Remove ball and repeat.

Chef Sean Sherman says, “We use this delicious spread in our cookies and granola, and as the base for several spreads. Store mixture in a covered container in the refrigerator up to a month.” You adapt this process to make walnut, hazelnut, and other nutritious butters. How else would you adapt this recipe?

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Sunflower Cookies (Wahcazi Thanka Su Aguyabskuyela)

Preheat oven to 350 degrees F | Makes about 1 dozen cookies

1 cup Sunny Butter (see above)
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup honey or maple syrup to taste
Pinch of salt
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of cornmeal

In a small bowl, stir together the Sunny Butter, maple syrup and salt, adding a little warm water if the dough is too stiff. Using a tablespoon, scoop up balls of the mixture and roll in the cornmeal. Place on a cookie sheet and flatten slightly with your hand. Bake the cookies until just firm, about 8-10 minutes. Remove and set on rack to cool.

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Easy Recipes

Strawberry Bread

Preheat oven to 375 degrees F | Grease bread pan or use parchment paper

1 cup flour (additional ¼ cup, lay aside to coat strawberries)
1 cup almond flour
1 cup strawberries (chopped & cooled overnight in fridge, and drained before using)
¾ cup milk
½ cup honey
1 large egg
2 tablespoons of oil (vegetable, sunflower, olive, whatever is available)
1 teaspoon baking soda
1 teaspoon salt

Pull out three bowls: one for dry ingredients, one for wet, and one for the strawberries. Place ¼ cup of flour in bowl, drop in strawberries, and coat to soak up juice; set aside. Mix dry ingredients together then in separate bowl mix wet ingredients together. Combine wet and dry mixtures, stirring by hand for 2-to-3 minutes. Mix strawberries gently into combined mixture, place in bread pan, and bake for 35 minutes.

From Sarah S. Pearson.



Harvest Succotash

If fresh vegetables are unavailable, use frozen ones | Serves 4-to-6

1 cup of water
1 cup of finely chopped green pepper
2 cups of lima beans
2 cups of corn
1 finely chopped onion
2 rounded tablespoons of Sunny Butter (see recipe on next page)
12 cherry tomatoes sliced in half
1 tablespoon Staghorn sumac, and salt & pepper to taste

Add all vegetables (except tomatoes) together in a skillet, add water, and simmer for 20 minutes. Pull skillet off heat and mix in Sunny Butter, Staghorn sumac, salt & pepper, and tomatoes. Serve it up!

From Sarah S. Pearson.



Easy Recipes

Wild Rice, Nuts and Berries

Serves 8 adults

5 cups of water, *or Birch water*
2 cups of wild rice, rinsed in cold water
2 small-to-medium onions chopped
1 cup dried blue berries
1/2 cup of dried cranberries
1/2 cup chopped pecans
1/2 cup chopped walnuts
3 tablespoons real Maple syrup
1 teaspoon salt



Place water, rice, and onions in large pot. Bring to a rolling boil, then drop down to a simmer for 40- to 45 minutes (most of the water should be absorbed). Turn to low heat and mix in salt, nuts, maple syrup, and berries. Let this sit on stove to steam for 20 minutes and serve.

Adapted from Native Harvests: Recipes and Botanicals of the American Indian, 1977.

Pinole

Makes 2 servings

1 cup boiling water, *or hot milk, or almond milk*
1/2 cup of cornmeal
2 tablespoons honey
1/2 teaspoon cinnamon, *or cloves*

Heat up frying pan to medium heat and sprinkle in cornmeal to dry roast it. As the cornmeal turns golden brown (8-10 minutes), remove from heat, and scrape into a bowl. Stir in honey and cinnamon and add hot water. Let sit for 10 minutes to thicken up. Pour into mugs and enjoy.



Adapted from multiple traditional recipes.

Easy Recipes

Pemmican

Makes 12 patties

2 cups shredded buffalo jerky
1 cup dried chokeberries, *or dried tart cherries*
1 cup chopped nuts—your choice
½ cup honey
½ cup cornmeal
8 tablespoons butter

Combine all ingredients and form into ¼ cup-sized patties. Store in refrigerator. Note: Take a healthy risk and add additional ingredients like crushed juniper berries, dried apples, or real maple syrup.

Adapted from Barrie Kavasch's Native Harvests: Recipes and Botanicals of the American Indian, 1977 and Beverly Cox and Martin Jacob's Spirit of the Harvest, 1991.



Smoked Salmon Chowder

Serves 6 adults

4 cups vegetable broth
2 cups cream
½ pound smoked salmon cut into bite-size pieces
1 cup fresh spinach chopped
4 green onion stalks chopped
3 tablespoons butter
Salt and pepper to taste

In large pot, combine all ingredients, except spinach and green onions, and cook on medium. Stir as you bring the chowder to a very light boil and quickly turn down to a simmer for 20 minutes. Add in spinach and green onions and stir. Let this simmer for another 5 minutes. Serve.

Adapted from Barrie Kavasch's Native Harvests: Recipes and Botanicals of the American Indian, 1977 and Beverly Cox and Martin Jacob's Spirit of the Harvest, 1991.



Have You Tried...?

- ✦ Making lasagna with buffalo meat and wild rice
- ✦ Going a day without sugar, hidden sugars, or artificial sweeteners
- ✦ Researching how to [gather and process wild rice](#)
- ✦ Planting and maintaining a garden that produces a meal you can share with others
- ✦ Learning how to [cook dried beans](#), or peas
- ✦ Sautéing a pan of [fiddlehead ferns](#) in early Spring
- ✦ Experimenting with [almond flour](#) and other grain flours
- ✦ Using [honey or real maple syrup instead of white sugar](#) in recipes
- ✦ Eating a [wild pawpaw](#) (green skin, tastes like banana) in late-Summer
- ✦ Putting [fruits, ground nuts, and maple syrup in your oatmeal](#)
- ✦ Eating fish—many kinds—every night for a week
- ✦ Substituting beef with elk or buffalo meat for your burgers and burritos
- ✦ Placing sprigs of rosemary or mint—hit with a wooden spoon—in a pitcher of water
- ✦ Going on a [“weed” walk with a guide](#) or guidebook to identify locally available greens
- ✦ Becoming knowledgeable of the [times of the year local fruits and vegetables are at peak](#)
- ✦ Baking a homemade cherry pie with locally harvested cherries
- ✦ Substituting Staghorn sumac for salt and pepper
- ✦ Adding juniper berries for a spicier dish
- ✦ Preparing your own nut butter
- ✦ [Cleaning and cooking a fish](#) you caught
- ✦ Making [smoked salmon candy](#)
- ✦ Cooking [sweet potato pancakes](#)



Resources

Publications

Cox, Beverly & Jacobs, Martin. *Spirit of the Harvest: North American Indian Cooking*. New York, NY: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1991.

Densmore, Frances. *How Indians Use Wild Plants for Food, Medicine & Crafts*. New York, NY: Dover publications, Inc., 2019.

Kavasch, Barrie. *Native Harvests: Recipes and Botanicals of the American Indian*. New York, NY: Random House, Inc., 1979.

Sherman, Sean & Dooley, Beth. *The Sioux Chef's Indigenous Kitchen*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017.

Wilson, Gilbert L. *Buffalo Bird Woman's Garden*. St. Paul, MN: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1987.

Online Resources

Sean Sherman's 10 Essential Native American Recipes

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/04/dining/native-american-recipes-sioux-chef.html>.

History of Traditional Tribal Foods

<https://aihd.ku.edu/foods/history.html>

Native American Cuisine Returns to its Roots

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/food/the-plate/2016/11/native-american-cuisine-returns-to-its-roots/>

Native American Foods History, Culture, and Influence on Modern Diets

[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/306095864 Native American Foods History Culture and Influence on Modern Diets](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/306095864_Native_American_Foods_History_Culture_and_Influence_on_Modern_Diets)

Native American Food: The three staples of Native American food are corn, squash, and beans

<http://indians.org/articles/native-american-food.html>

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