

Native American Food and Culture Fact Sheet

There is no single “American Indian” or “Native American” culture. Historically, tribes had different religions, languages, gender roles, housing, clothing and lifestyles based on where they lived and how they later reacted to the arrival of the colonists.¹

Traditional foods and dishes

Historically, traditional foods of Native Americans included a variety of foods such as wild game, nuts, fruits and berries.² Foods eaten were based on what was in season.³ Many were hunters and gatherers and they lived off the plants and animals they found nearby.⁴

Plant-Based Foods

Native Americans ate many foods that were native to the area where they lived, such as:

- Potatoes, tomatoes and peppers.⁴
- Three sisters (squash, corn and beans) was a common combination of plants grown together. These were grown together because the corn stalks provided a pole for beans to climb and the shade from the corn benefited squash that grew under the leaves.⁴
- Baked beans made of beans, maple syrup, onion, venison and salt.⁴
- Acorns used in bread and dumplings.⁴
- A variety of berries such as blueberries, elderberries, chokeberries, black raspberries, blackberries, serviceberries, buffalo berries and cranberries.⁴

Meat, Fish and Poultry

Most Native American tribes ate a lot of meat. Almost any animal native to their region was eaten as food at times, even porcupines, monkeys or snakes.⁵ Many tribes had strong beliefs against wasting food, so if they killed an animal for any reason, they would often try to eat it.⁵

- Meat
 - Buffalo, elk, caribou, deer, rabbit, small game, turtles.^{4,5}
 - Bison, especially for the tribes living in the western Great Plains⁴
- Seafood- Most villages were located close to rivers, streams or oceans where they could get food,⁴ like:
 - Salmon and other fish, clams and other shellfish and marine mammals like seals or whales.⁵
- Poultry
 - Turkeys and grouse⁴

Fry Bread

Fry bread is made from flour, salt, baking powder and water fried in lard or oil.³ It became popular because it was made of ingredients they received in commodity food distribution.

- It is a symbol of Native Americans’ ability to survive under the terrible conditions when they were forced to move from their homes to live in new areas where they were unfamiliar with the local foods.^{3,4}



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Traditional Eating Patterns

There is no single traditional Native American diet because the diets of different tribes depended on what food was available in their region.⁴ There are currently 567 officially recognized tribes in the USA and each had their own language and food preferences.⁴

Cooking Methods

- Open fire cooking was used for baking, frying, deep frying boiling and roasting.⁴
- Fish were often cooked by cleaning the fish, salting the fillets and letting them stand overnight; the next day they would be strung on a stick and roasted over a fire with frequent turning, which would give them a smoky flavor from the fire.⁴
- Fish, birds and meats could be cooked as soups, stews and stir-fry with vegetables.⁴
- Bean bread was made different ways according to what was available as long as the basic cornmeal and some kinds of beans are available. It could be baked, pan fried or deep fried.⁴
- Corn could be cooked as a porridge known as “sofkee” by the Seminole tribes in Florida and it could be eaten as a soup or drunk as a hot beverage.⁴
- Corn bread could be mixed with beans and chestnuts. It could be made thin and flat like tortillas or thick like modern cornbread or pancakes made from corn.⁴

Example Meals

- “Succotash” could be an entire meal and is made from boiled sweet corn and beans.⁴
- Fish was often cooked as a soup and served with corn mush and was especially fed to sick people as a nutritious and easy to digest meal.⁴

Traditional Health Beliefs

Native American healers believed a person is healthy when he or she is in harmony with the environment.⁶ For many Native Americans, traditional food was a source of health, often referred to as medicine.³ Health and wellness values were viewed as holistic.³ Illness was thought to be a result of past or future occurrences.³ Living a traditional lifestyle based on reciprocity, respect, sharing and maintaining harmony with the human, natural, and spiritual realm was very important and associated with better well-being.³ Group storytelling and talking circles led by community elders were and still are a way to share health education within Native communities.⁶

Current Food Practices

Today, few if any of the descendants of the early Native American tribes eat like their ancestors did.⁴ When Native Americans were forcibly relocated to reservations, it changed the way they related to the land.⁶ They were no longer able to use traditional harvest practices, hunt like they had or have access to traditional foods.⁶ This eventually led them to use more canned meats, sugary snacks, fast foods and led to less active lifestyles.⁷ Over the past 200 years, federal policy has reduced their control of land, disrupted traditional agricultural practices, changed diets and ultimately led to widespread food insecurity.⁶ Instead of being able to effectively operate local food systems, these isolated Native communities often need to rely on federal food programs to not go hungry.⁶

References:

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