

Reclaiming Culture Feeds into a Healthy Life

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He remembers being a kid, growing up on the Oneida Indian reservation in Wisconsin. He remembers helping open the commodity boxes sent by the government. They were filled with canned meats, canned vegetables, powdered milk, bottles of corn syrup and big blocks of cheese.

Now, nearly a half century later, Frank Haney understands that most of those things were not very healthy. “None of it had much nutritional value,” he said. “But sometimes, that’s all we had to eat.”

It wasn’t always that way. In pre-colonial times, Native Americans ate healthy foods they could hunt and gather, foods that nature and the seasons provided. Before Europeans arrived in North America, indigenous tribes grew, harvested and ate corn, wild rice, squash and beans. For protein, they had wild game such as bison, venison or rabbit. This lifestyle is uncommon now, almost nonexistent in the United States, where most food is bought at a grocery or convenience store.

The Sioux Chef, a Twin Cities-based catering company, is not following the fast-food trend. Instead, it’s going back to the basics, reclaiming the diet of native ancestors. Founded in 2014 by Shaun Sherman, The Sioux Chef goes beyond dining services. It is a business run by Native American people to help the indigenous community improve their health and connect to their history.

Haney has been working with Sherman since 2012 and now works as the executive chef at the catering company.

It’s not just about the food, Haney said. “There’s all kinds of ceremonies, and dances and prayers that go along with planting, growing and harvesting it, as well as preserving, cooking and eating it. So, food is connected to every other aspect of the culture.”

Reclaiming that culture is part of the challenge, since the indigenous community has had its traditions buried in years of systemic oppression. Forced onto reservations, Native Americans were separated from the land that had sustained them, and instead were given boxes filled with anything but nourishment.

What most people consider to be Native American food “is a byproduct of the food that was provided when they were forced to live on reservations,” Haney said. “The commodities consisted of white flour, lard, sugar and salt. These are the ingredients for fry bread.” While some embrace



Frank Haney (left) and staff prepare indigenous meal for catering event.

the unhealthy meal as a native food, Haney knows that “before the European influence, we never ate fry bread. None of us.”

This kind of misconception is what The Sioux Chef aims to correct. And by reclaiming a piece of Native American history and culture, The Sioux Chef is also restoring health in the indigenous community. In a study in 2015, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention identified American Indian adults as having the highest obesity rate in Minnesota. The lack of accessibility and high cost of healthy foods are major obstacles for the native community, but The Sioux Chef makes a point of sourcing all its ingredients locally – fresh, organic and from native-owned sources.

“America is a capitalistic society, so making money is a big deal, and in the process of that, they’ve taken the healthiest foods and made them inaccessible to people of low income,” Haney said. “And that’s another part of our mission; we want to make sure everyone can get healthy food.”

Partnering with the Minnesota Parks Foundation’s Water Works project, The Sioux Chef will open a restaurant near the Mississippi River in the next year.

“It’s not going to be a real big restaurant, but it will be a presence right on the Mississippi, a place that Lakota people refer to as ‘o’mini’wanmi,’ which translates to ‘the place of many whirlpools.’ It’s been a very sacred place for those people for centuries,” Haney said.

The Sioux Chef is also seeking to open an indigenous food lab to invite educational groups – native or not – and teach them the value and health benefits of using indigenous food.

“We’re not trying to bring back the past, because that’s impossible,” Haney said. “But what we’re trying to do is take the indigenous foods that we know of, and create meals with them. And a really good side effect is that these foods are way healthier than anything you can get in a grocery store or at most restaurants.”