

SEAN SHERMAN

THE PIONEER



MINNESOTA-BASED CHEF SEAN SHERMAN PAYS HOMAGE TO HIS NATIVE AMERICAN HERITAGE BY CREATING EXPERIMENTAL DISHES USING ONLY THE INDIGENOUS INGREDIENTS KNOWN TO HIS ANCESTORS. WORDS: DELLE CHAN. PHOTOGRAPHS: ISABEL SUBTIL

Flour, sugar and butter are all staple ingredients in the US, popping up in everything from pies to pancakes. Yet, they don't figure in traditional Native American cuisine, the oldest — and perhaps also the most underrepresented and misunderstood — food culture in the country. Granted, it isn't easy to describe Native American cooking in a nutshell — after all, there are over 500 federally recognised Native American tribes, from the Cherokee of the south east to the Navajo Nation of the south west, meaning regional nuances abound. Fundamentally, however, the cuisine is underpinned by a close relationship with the land, characterised by the use of fresh, foraged, indigenous ingredients such as corn, beans, sunflowers, tomatoes, squash and pumpkins.

The fact so little is known about Native American cuisine today is something Sean Sherman is determined to change. For the past seven years, the Minneapolis-based Sioux chef has worked to preserve and promote the food traditions of his ancestors by revitalising age-old recipes, cooking methods and food-preservation techniques. As he explains, many of these culinary practices were lost over the years as a result of discriminatory government policies. In the early 19th century, Indigenous tribes were forcibly relocated to reservations, effectively cutting them off not just from their ancestral lands but from the cultural and culinary practices tied to those areas.

“A lot of Indigenous food has been stripped from us over the past couple of centuries, and there's still so much social and nutritional segregation today because of the reservation system,” Sherman says.

As a member of the Oglala Lakota tribe — a subculture of the Sioux — Sherman is no stranger to the detrimental consequences of this enforced segregation. Born on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, he grew up eating dishes derived not from fresh indigenous ingredients, but from government-issued commodity foods such as cereal, canned meat and shortening. These included frybread, a calorie-rich dough bread, deep-fried in oil or lard, which health experts suggest is partly responsible for the obesity epidemic in many Native American communities today.

Despite the subpar diet of his early years, Sherman showed a natural flair in the kitchen. He started cooking professionally when he was just 13, at a South Dakota steakhouse. After college, he moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota, working his way up to executive chef at La Bodega Tapas Bar. One day, Sherman realised that while he was proficient in a number of cuisines, including Italian and Spanish, he knew little about his own culinary heritage.

“I could easily name over 100 European recipes off the top of my head, but I could count fewer than 10 Lakota recipes,” Sherman says. “I realised there was a complete absence of



Bison and hominy bowl

Previous, from left: corn and wild rice sandwich with smoked duck and fiddleheads; Sean Sherman at the Indigenous Food Lab

Indigenous cuisine in the culinary world, and this prompted me to try to better understand the food of my own ancestors.”

To this end, Sherman began researching Native American food, history and ethnobotany, travelling to Indian reservations across the US, Mexico and Canada to speak with community elders. “I learned a lot about the stories, foods and environments of all these different regions, and this gave me a broader picture of the immense diversity of Indigenous peoples,” he says.

With this newfound knowledge, Sherman and his partner, Dana Thompson, founded *The Sioux Chef* in 2014, a catering and educational enterprise promoting Native American cuisine via dining pop-ups in the Twin Cities (Minneapolis and Saint Paul). Three years later came *The Sioux Chef's Indigenous Kitchen*, a book of recipes for healthy, Indigenous dishes such as cedar-braised bison and griddled wild rice cakes. It won the James Beard Foundation Leadership Award in 2019, with judges lauding his mission to ‘re-identify true cuisines of the Americas’. The following year, he and Thompson opened the Indigenous Food Lab, a not-for-profit restaurant, education and training centre focused on Indigenous agriculture, ethnobotany, wild foods and farming.

A standalone restaurant was the natural next step, and Sherman is preparing for the imminent launch of Owamni, on the Minneapolis riverfront. “Today, Indigenous-led restaurants are very few and far between. With Owamni, we hope to open up more knowledge of Indigenous foods to the general public,” he says.

The restaurant will be located near the waterfall from which it takes its name: Saint Anthony Falls (known as Owámmiyomni, meaning ‘place of the swirling waters’, in the Dakota language), one of the largest in the Upper Mississippi River. According to Sherman,

the falls and surrounding area are sacred to the Dakota people, making this the ideal location.

Owamni will champion pre-colonial foods (those made with ingredients consumed by Native Americans before European crops were introduced). “For us, this means no dairy, wheat flour, cane sugar — and not even beef, pork or chicken,” says Sherman. Instead, the focus will be on indigenous produce such as corn, beans and squash — known as the ‘three sisters’ of Native American cuisine, as they were traditionally grown together to reap the benefits of ‘companion planting’.

Despite these strict parameters, there will still be room for experimentation at Owamni. “We’re not trying to cook like it’s 1491,” laughs Sherman. “Rather, we want to share a lot of different recipes and be really creative with modern Indigenous cuisine.” This culinary ethos translates into inventive dishes such as sage-smoked turkey, wild rice pilaf and blue corn pudding, with ingredients sourced from local and Indigenous producers where possible.

For Sherman, Owamni is just the beginning of what he hopes will be a network of Indigenous food businesses across the US. “When you drive across America today, you often get the exact same hamburger and the exact same soda. It’s so homogenous,” he says. “We see this future where we can travel across the country and visit different Indigenous restaurants along the way, experiencing the immense cultural and regional diversity that we should really be seeing.”

It’s a lofty ambition, but Sherman is optimistic. “It’s taken us Native Americans so long to deal with the trauma that’s been dealt to us, but we’re now in an era of reconciliation and reclamation,” he reflects. “Today, there’s a generation of highly educated Indigenous people who are really pushing to help rebuild Indigenous culture, and food is such a great way to start.” ●

Bison & hominy bowl with blueberry wojapi

This dish features hominy (corn kernels without the hull and germ). You can buy it tinned, but it’s no match for fresh hominy, in terms of texture and flavour.

SERVES: 4 TAKES: 45-55 MINS

INGREDIENTS

150g Jerusalem artichokes, sliced
 150g purple potatoes, cut into wedges
 50g fresh mushrooms (such as cremini mushrooms), halved or quartered
 60g leeks, sliced
 2 tbsps sunflower oil
 450g ground bison (available from specialist butchers and online)
 2 tsp dried sage
 ½ tsp sumac
 20ml apple cider vinegar
 450g fresh hominy (or tinned)
 30g sunflower seeds, toasted
 30g pumpkin seeds, toasted
 25g dandelion greens, trimmed (or any wild, edible greens such as fiddleheads; try watercress for a shop-bought alternative)

FOR THE BLUEBERRY WOJAPI

170g fresh blueberries
 30g maple sugar (or maple syrup)

METHOD

- Heat oven to 180C, 160C fan, gas 4. To make the blueberry wojapi, add the blueberries, maple sugar and 250ml water to a medium saucepan. Simmer over a medium heat until the berries begin to break down, then keep on the heat and mash with a whisk or potato masher. Continue to reduce until the sauce thickens, then set aside.
- Toss the Jerusalem artichoke, purple potatoes, mushrooms and leeks in the oil, then lay them on a baking tray and roast until brown and tender, around 15 mins.
- Meanwhile, put the bison in a saucepan or skillet set over a medium heat and cook, without touching, for 4-5 mins to create some caramelisation. Break up with a spatula and cook for another 4 mins until no pink remains.
- Season the bison with the sage, sumac, vinegar and a pinch of salt, then add 250ml water. Cook for 4-5 mins until the water is absorbed. Add the hominy to heat it through.
- Divide between four bowls and add the roast veg. Drizzle over the wojapi; top with seeds and greens.