Canada's Growing Interest in First Nation Cuisines

CANADA AND THE ARCTIC

WRITTEN BY ANDREA COOPER

The kids gather around the silver pot. A few look engaged yet matter-of-fact, as if a *Top Chef Canada* finalist visits their elementary school in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan regularly. One girl cringes just slightly in a visual version of *ewww*. Another opens her mouth in pure wonder. They all gaze at what their guest teacher, Chef Rich Francis, holds above the pot: a moose nose for moose nose tacos.

Like these children, the rest of Canada is starting to discover some of the sights and tastes of true Aboriginal cuisines. First Nation chefs are using their traditional cookery as a base for inventive, contemporary fare at more than a dozen restaurants and projects from Toronto to Whistler. "It's a really exciting time for indigenous cooking," says Francis, the son of a Gwich'in father and Haudenosaunee mother.

If there's a leader in this ascent, it's Francis, whose catering and pop-up dinners of pre-colonization foods have earned him acclaim. He plans to be all over Canada in the coming year. *Red Chef Revival* (https://www.instagram.com/p/BYOGtqllM61/?taken-by=7thfire), his new travel and food series, is on track to air next spring, incorporating visits with First Nation elders to reveal and preserve their history and cooking traditions. Francis expects to complete his first cookbook around the same time, a narrative with recipes that explores food as a means for truth and reconciliation. He also hopes to open a restaurant on the Six Nations reserve in Ontario. There, he says, he can serve what he wants free of Canadian government regulations to hinder his vision.

Some of his food could be considered controversial, including species that environmentalists have sought to protect. "Before colonialism and the residential school system, we depended on a lot of our traditional foods, like the hunting and harvesting of whale. I would never be able to do that in Toronto or Vancouver. I'd be shut down in a heartbeat [for serving hunted whale]. But I'd be able to bring that into my restaurant on the reserve to fully express myself on the plate."

Other game meats he'd like to feature include moose, elk, deer, beaver and seal, along with dishes focused on indigenous plants. Francis creates with more common components, too. His Instagram photos include a gorgeous grilled chicken, maple lime glazed heirloom carrots, and pomegranate salsa.

Salmon from Salmon n' Bannock Bistro in Vancouver.

Photo Credit: AboriginalBC.com.

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First Nation cuisines employed local ingredients long before restaurants around the globe used them to demonstrate their cool factor. On the coast that means fish, the inspiration for Inez Cook's Salmon n' Bannock Bistro (http://www.salmonandbannock.net/) in Vancouver. Salmon here might be topped with a birch glaze similar to maple syrup and served over a pilaf accented with sea asparagus, a sea vegetable with a citrus crunch. The menu reaches beyond the ocean with specials including slow-braised elk shank with marrow to spread on your bannock.

A fried or baked bread, bannock is associated with indigenous peoples across Canada but has its critics, who link its popularity to growing concerns about diabetes and other health ailments. It also has a fraught history. The Scots brought their version made with wheat flour to Canada; bannock later became a food of survival because indigenous people could prepare it with rations after the Canadian government removed them from their land.

Cook, a member of the Nuxalk nation, is philosophical about its evolution since then. "If you go to First Nation communities and ask them what their traditional bread is, they'll all say bannock. Every place will make it a little bit differently. There are grandmothers who have their recipes. The product has become ours." Among other variations, she serves it as a medicine wheel flatbread with roasted peppers, sauteed mushrooms, spaghetti squash, and parsnips on sunflower and herb pesto.

She emphasizes that Salmon n' Bannock isn't a political place; diners who come for duck prosciutto with cedar jelly are looking for a delicious meal and hospitality, not a debate. But simply claiming your own food as valuable can be a quietly political act. In Cook's case, it was also a conduit for

healing.

Cook was removed from her home as a child and adopted by a non-native family in what became known as the Sixties Scoop (https://beta.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/the-punishing-sixties-scoop/article34051) of Aboriginal children. She later traveled worldwide as a flight attendant, but when she opened her restaurant, the flavors sang from the place where her journey began. Nuxalk nation members steadily checked out the new eatery. Once they confirmed Cook's identity, her long-lost relatives started arriving, including an uncle who had searched for her for years. The restaurant helped give Cook her first family and community back.

Christa Bruneau-Guenther of Feast Cafe Bistro.

Smoked white fish with braised heirloom carrots, herbed yogurt, and cloudberry vinaigrette from Seventh Fire.

Chef Rich Francis of Seventh Fire. Photo Credit: Tenille Campbell.

Manitoba bison stew with traditional herbs in a roasted acorn squash from Feast Cafe Bistro.

Wild blueberry Manitoba bison ribs, local wild rice blend, corn, traditional frybread Bannock from Feast Cafe Bistro.

The dining room at Feast Cafe Bistro.

Caring for others was the career catalyst for Christa Bruneau-Guenther, owner of Feast Cafe Bistro (http://www.feastcafebistro.com/) in Winnipeg, but not as you might imagine. Bruneau-Guenther initially opened a day care center for children with fetal alcohol syndrome, ADHD, and other conditions. She served them simple, healthy meals and researched her traditional cuisine for what it might provide them. When she had the chance to purchase a 100-year-old building near the day care, Feast was born.

Feast's menu reflects Bruneau-Guenther's natural talents at cooking and Peguis First Nation origins. The three sisters of Aboriginal cooking – beans, corn, and squash – are center plate in such dishes as roasted butternut squash bannock pizza. Manitoba bison ribs with a berry BBQ sauce, at $13.95, is the most expensive item on the menu. That's by design. Offering venison steak or other luxuries of fine dining would go against her intentions: "I would price myself out of the community I'm in, and I don't want to target only people with money. I want a single First Nation mother to try bison for the first time in her life, or have pickerel, which can very expensive." At Feast, it's served in sliders.

The restaurant provides job opportunities to people with special needs and others lacking job experience. Bruneau-Guenther mentors them through a side-by-side training program. The practice fits her mission of helping all people connect with this cuisine.

In a country where more than 1.8 million people claim Aboriginal ancestors, First Nations restaurants have increased but still aren't numerous. "We're such a foodie city in Vancouver. You can eat Afghani food, Ethiopian food, Tunisian food, but we're the only First Nations restaurant,"

Cook says. “It should be everyplace in Canada.” The reasons it isn’t are complex, including tribal members who might succeed in the business but don’t want to leave their rural communities for larger cities.

Francis, for one, imagines his Six Nations restaurant will be his first of several in Canada, and his vision doesn’t stop at the Canadian border. He’d like to work with indigenous communities as far away as New Zealand, exploring gastronomy that is both new and very old. “It’s about finding our culinary identity in this industry,” he says, “beyond what colonialism has put in place for us.”

Header Image courtesy of AboriginalBC.com.

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Andrea Cooper enjoys writing almost as much as eating, especially food and travel stories that reveal unexpected joys of a culture. Her credits in print and online include AFAR, National Geographic Traveler, Town & Country, Saveur, Vogue and many others. Cooper lives in North Carolina, but still knows brisket is better than barbecue.

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