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Indigenous Health Initiatives, Frybread, and the Marketing of Nontraditional “Traditional” American Indian Foods

Frybread, the staple of our Native Culture. Yep it just wouldn't be a perfect meal without it!

—ANONYMOUS COMMENT ON NAVAJOFRYBREAD.COM, SEPTEMBER 24, 2012

I am so glad to shout from the rooftops that “Frybread” is not “our” Indigenous food and I hate that we have allowed it a place of reverence in our communities.

—JOELY PROUDFIT, PECHANGA BAND OF LUISEÑO INDIANS,
PERSONAL COMMUNICATION

FRYBREAD VARIES FROM TRIBE TO TRIBE in diameter, thickness, and shape, but is most commonly a plate-sized disk of flour, shortening, and salt that is fried in grease or oil. “Indian tacos” (or, as they are called in the Southwest, “Navajo tacos” and “Hopi tacos”) are frybreads topped with ground meat, beans, cheese, lettuce, and sour cream. Dessert frybreads might be crowned with butter, powdered sugar, chocolate, honey, or syrup. Frybread makes its appearance at fairs, tribal commemorative marches, festivals, powwows, and restaurants. Girls running for the titles of “Tribal Princess” prepare frybread as their talent component. T-shirts are decorated with the slogans “Frybread: Breakfast of Champions,” “Powered by Frybread,” and “Frybread Power.” Frybread enthusiasts are not deterred by *Health* magazine ranking frybread as one of the fifty fattiest foods in the country.¹

Many Indigenous food and health enthusiasts argue that eschewing refined wheat flour, along with other unhealthy foods, in favor of traditional tribal foods is the key to eradicating the obesity and diabetes epidemic among tribal communities. Food activism, however, is not without challenges. In 2003 I wrote for the academic journal *American Indian Quarterly* about the repercussions of losing traditional foodways knowledge and opined against the overconsumption of frybread.² My bumper sticker, wall clock, buttons, and T-shirt that feature the word “FRYBREAD” with a red line through it appeared for sale on the website CafePress in 2004. As a result, I was assailed by frybread fans as “anti-Indian” and “not really Indian.”

FIGURE 1. The anti-frybread bumper sticker from the author's "decolonizenow" shop at CafePress.com.



A year later the director of the Morning Star Institute, Suzan Shown Harjo, reiterated my notions about frybread in the popular online publication *Indian Country Today*.³ Frybread fans reacted angrily and the controversy spread across Indian country. Despite Harjo's incorrect reconstruction of frybread's history, her essay has been mentioned in almost every newspaper article about frybread since 2005. That same year, determined Native frybread defenders pressured the South Dakota Legislature into designating frybread the "Official State Bread."⁴ Elsewhere, Kiowa elder Carol Bronaugh stated that "an Indian person always gets hungry for frybread. Cutting frybread out of an Indian meal would be like cutting out the main ingredient of the entire meal."⁵ Gayle Weigle, webmaster of Frybreadlove.com, stated, "It's like giving up turkey at Thanksgiving. It is a tradition."⁶ Recent frybread drama occurred when fitness advocate and star of the weight-loss reality show *The Biggest Loser* star Jillian Michaels attempted to educate Yavapai Apaches about the dangers of fried flour at a 2010 tribal gathering. She dropped a plate of fried bread in the trash and called it "poison"; in return, a tribal member called her an "idiot" and threw a pile of bread at her. Afterward, she received a poor turnout for her diabetes discussion.⁷

Spokane writer Sherman Alexie has been called a "frybread expert," and he states that "frybread is the story of our survival."⁸ But whose survival? Most frybread-focused stories and "traditional Native American recipes" sites proclaim frybread the creation of desperate Diné (Navajos) at Bosque Redondo in New Mexico, also known as Hwéeldi ("Place of suffering"), where the U.S. government confined Navajos from 1864 to 1868. This entrenched legend tells us that Navajo women fried their flour rations in lard and thus supplied their people with enough calories and nutrients to survive the ordeal. However, there are no government reports of Navajos at Bosque Redondo frying flour. Testimonies of Navajos whose ancestors who survived the Long Walk and lived at Bosque Redondo make no mention of frying flour either.⁹

The late George P. Horse Capture, member of the A'aninin tribe and one-time deputy assistant director for cultural resources at the National Museum of the American Indian, stated about the relation between the Creator and food: "In exchange for all the difficulties we endure, He gave us frybread and June berries." Considering the array of flora and fauna that sustained Natives for millennia prior to contact with Europeans, Horse Capture's reference to the unhealthy frybread as a gift from the Creator to distressed Natives is curious and merits a closer look.¹⁰

The Frybread Legend: Bosque Redondo

By 1846 Navajos lived in modern-day Arizona and western New Mexico and successfully raised horses, sheep, mules, goats, and cattle, all brought by the Spanish in the 1500s. Navajos also hunted deer, rabbits, and antelope and cultivated beans, chilies, corn, melons, squash, cactus fruits, piñon nuts, mesquite beans, and peaches they received from Hopis (who were introduced to the trees by the Spanish). Americans had moved into the Southwest by the 1860s and Navajos effectively pillaged their settlements. To stop the raiding, government officials planned to settle tribespeople onto Bosque Redondo and transform them into complacent farmers. They charged Kit Carson with gathering the Navajos and forcing them to the reservation. After an arduous and violent effort that involved much human death and destruction of tribal property, thousands of Navajos surrendered in 1866 and were forced to walk four hundred miles from Fort Defiance to Bosque Redondo. Ultimately, about 8,500 Navajos were confined along with 500 disgruntled Mescalero Apaches. While they experienced some agricultural successes during their incarceration, there were more failures and difficulties, including drought, floods, seed failure, a plague of worms, inadequate and spoiled rations, the Mescaleros' animosity, and Comanches' raiding.¹¹

At various times Navajos were presented with small portions of salt, cornmeal, mutton, beef, pork, offal, wheat flour (which they did not know how to prepare), and coffee beans (which they tried to cook as they would common beans). Chiefs occasionally received sugar.¹² Despite claims to the contrary in *Smithsonian Magazine* they received no canned goods.¹³ Navajos resorted to digging through horse and mule dung for undigested corn to grind into meal, and periodically they were allowed to hunt rabbits and gophers.¹⁴ Government buyers contended with open-market prices, and many sacks of spoiled flour contained inedible objects that increased the bags' weight and cost.¹⁵ This was not unusual. At the same time, in South Dakota at the Yankton Indian and Crow Creek Agencies, confined Natives also suffered to the point of dying of malnourishment from flour deemed "very poor," "very coarse," "sticky," and black. Those people ate wolves that had been poisoned, or sick mules, cows, and horses, as well as hooves and entrails.¹⁶ Tough, stringy, and spoiled meat sporadically arrived at Bosque Redondo. On one occasion Navajos received a few head of cattle and they used every part of the animal, including blood they mixed with cornmeal to make what the Indian agent optimistically called "nourishing pasta."¹⁷ They were in a dire situation and any rendered animal fat would have been quickly consumed, not saved to fry flour.

Army records mention flour being dropped in ashes to cook, mixed with water and drunk, and eaten "raw." One officer commented that a few Navajos

cooked “tortilla-like substances.” There were no reports of metal pots and pans and, therefore, no frying. During the same period, Civil War soldiers and tribes in the Dakota Territory received “hard tack,” an undesirable rock-hard “cracker” mix of flour, water, and salt.¹⁸ Soldiers crushed the hard bread, moistened it with water, and dropped the wad into ashes to create a softer mouthful. This would have been a logical way for Navajos to make use of the unfamiliar flour.

All the army and Navajo reports that mention flour at Bosque Redondo are bleak, conjuring reminders of sickness and death—not of survival. Indian agents wrote that flour was “unwholesome.” Navajos became ill from “eating too heartedly of half-cooked bread, made of our flour, to which they were not accustomed.”¹⁹ Several Navajos testified in 1975 that their ancestors told them that many died from consuming flour.²⁰ It is possible that they perished from dysentery after ingesting Pecos River water that they mixed with uncooked flour and coffee beans.²¹ Their symptoms of intestinal distress are similar to those of gluten sensitivity, but there is no way of knowing for sure. No nineteenth-century Indian agent report of celiac disease exists because the connection between a body’s inability to digest gluten and the ingestion of wheat was not recognized until 1952.

In 1868, Navajos signed a treaty allowing them to return to their Four Corners homeland, and eventually the reservation expanded to over twenty-seven thousand square miles. Trading posts increased on Navajo lands after 1870 and reached their peak of business between 1900 and 1930. Posts stocked their shelves with household goods, coffee, sugar, flour, baking powder, ginger snaps, oysters, deviled ham, candy, tobacco, popcorn, and canned fruit, tomatoes, and milk. Their animal herds grew exponentially, but in the 1880s Navajos in New Mexico suffered crop failures; one man stated that “we lived on [goat] milk.”²² In the late 1890s they suffered another failure, and some resorted to eating their animals and cheap flour acquired from trading posts.²³ Robb Redsteer, founder of Naataanii Alliance for Peace, says that was his great-grandparents’ time and that frybread was “very rarely made.”²⁴ Photographs of the 1913 and 1914 Shiprock Fair (“the Oldest and Most Traditional of the Navajo Fairs” that have featured frybread competitions for decades)²⁵ reveal impressive mounds of produce, rugs, and livestock, but no frybread. At the 1920 fair, Navajos competed in baking contests, presenting to judges loaves of wheat bread, layer cakes, biscuits, and doughnuts, and still no frybread.²⁶ Navajos again faced economic hardships in the 1940s. The tribe’s animal herds decreased markedly and the people subsisted on “bread and coffee.”²⁷ A 1940 photograph of a Navajo woman and a basket of frybread appears in the Sharlot Hall Museum, perhaps indicating that frybread had become a Navajo food item.²⁸ By mid-century the tribe economically recovered

and consumed mutton, corn, beef, pork, beans, pumpkins, melons, and store-bought goods. They also made baked bread and fried “tortillas” but were not in starvation mode.²⁹ Throughout the 1950s Navajos ate less garden produce and more canned goods, candy, and coffee. According to Redsteer, in the 1960s frybread was more of a luxury food item. Navajos moved residences with the seasons on account of their livestock, and the heavy containers of lard and bags of flour were too cumbersome to haul.³⁰

The Americanized trading post diet had consequences. By 1968 many Navajos were deficient in iron, protein, and vitamin C, and by 1981 nutritional support programs had been established to address the growing cases of deficiencies. A decade later, widespread consumption of pizza, cheeseburgers, bacon and mutton fat, sausage, canned meats, mutton sandwiches, sodas, desserts, and fried flour resulted in an obesity explosion.³¹ The greasy and delicious frybread had become an everyday food. Somewhere on the vast reservation the Bosque Redondo frybread legend was created—and then spread across the country—to rationalize its mass consumption. The desire for junk food and frybread has not abated. There are only ten grocery stores on the Navajo reservation for three hundred thousand Navajos, in addition to a few gas stations and trading posts, which means residents must plan ahead and buy groceries that will last for weeks. The Diné Community Advocacy Alliance states that 80 percent of those foods are “junk.” As a result, one in three Navajos is prediabetic or diabetic.³²

There are a few deviations from the Bosque Redondo story. Some writers assert that Spanish women taught Navajo women how to make frybread in the square shape of *sopaipillas* and that Navajo women instead made their bread round to fit their frying pans.³³ Because the Spanish and Navajos were not friendly and the latter rigorously resisted Spanish attempts to acculturate them, it is doubtful that the few Spanish women in the Southwest and Navajo women cooked together. Moreover, one could fry square bread in a round pan. More likely is that Pueblos who lived in the vicinity of Albuquerque observed Spanish cooks making *sopaipillas* from flour and grease and eventually shared that knowledge with other tribes. Most Pueblos, however, baked bread in adobe ovens, and the thin Hopi blue corn *piki* bread is baked on hot stones.³⁴

Some tribes might have learned how to use flour from French traders. By 1789 the Northwest Company traders occasionally used flour to make what they called *galettes* (French for flat crusty cakes or pancakes, although *galettes* are usually made with buckwheat) or to thicken stews. In the 1840s Frenchman Tixier traveled with Osages on the southern plains and he mentions meals that included beef fat-fried cornmeal that traders referred to as “fritters” and “beigne.” French beignets, however, are square-shaped,

deep-fried pastries sometimes topped with powdered sugar or filled with fruit.³⁵ In the Northwest and Canada frybread is sometimes referred to as “bannock.” Traditional bannock is dense bread made of oatmeal, barley, or other grain cooked on a griddle (or, in early days, a heated stone) and has been made in Ireland, northern England, and Scotland for centuries. Bannock can be made less dense with baking soda, and this form of bread is sometimes made by Natives, but fried bannock takes the form of a modern “Indian taco.” Eighteenth-century traders and tribes rendered fat to make pemmican and normally baked breads in ovens or on hot stones, although traders sometimes mixed small amounts of flour with water and fried it in buffalo grease. Their tribal trading partners probably noted that “bannocks” were easy to prepare.³⁶

Which Tribes Made Frybread?

Most tribes have always coped with poor government food commodities, including white flour. There are, however, few mentions of tribes frying flour in nineteenth-century government reports. In 1891 the physician at the Cheyenne River Agency in South Dakota wrote about the dire health issues of the tribespeople, reporting that “their bread is hardly worth the name.”³⁷ At the Ponca Agency in 1893, the agent observed Poncas suffering from stomach ailments because of the way they prepared their bread: “Flour, water and baking powder, mixing it all together into a stiff dough; they roll it out and fry it in hot lard, making it all a very indigestible mass.”³⁸ Another agent observed “fried bread” at a “Siwash” (probably Chinook) potlatch at Puget Sound; however, the tribespeople did not appear to be starving because they also gave away at their potlatch clams, salmon, venison, potatoes, huckleberries, and apples.³⁹ One agent wrote in 1892 of “several large fried cakes, made from wheat flour” among Cheyennes and Arapahos north of the South Canadian River.⁴⁰ In 1898 the Sac and Fox agent wrote that “nearly everything they eat is cooked in lard.” They preferred hot fried cakes, pork, coffee, chicken, turkey, dog, and “relish skunk as a negro does opossum.”⁴¹ Francis E. Leupp, commissioner of Indian Affairs from 1904 to 1909, recounted in 1911 that Comanche Quannah Parker told him that Quahadis did not like flour because, “in our effort to get enough to extract some tastes from it, we filled our mouths, we nearly choked, and then found our teeth and tongues gummed up with a thick paste.” So they dumped out the flour and used the bags for leggings.⁴²

Some tribespeople did not use wheat flour at all. According to Anishinaabe Ojibway Martin Reinhardt, director of the Decolonizing Diet Project, Ojibways carried “cakes” made of rice, berries, corn, pumpkin, acorns, or meat that were cooked on heated stones.⁴³ Similarly, after the removal from

the Southeast to Indian Territory in the 1830s, the Five Tribes (Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, Muscogees, and Seminoles) found eastern Indian Territory (now Oklahoma) crossed with waterways, rolling hills lush with nut trees and wild fruits, and populated by turkeys, deer, squirrels, waterfowl, and fish. Much of the soil was conducive to successful large-scale farming and family gardens. Tribespeople used corn, peanuts, chestnuts, acorns, and bamboo vines to make what English speakers call “breads,” but these unleavened grains, nuts, and tuberous rhizomes were boiled or baked. Before long the steady stream of exploitative intruders into Indian Territory caused environmental damage and created an economic class system, resulting in many tribespeople unable to purchase food or to grow enough to sustain their families. While many members of the Five Tribes could afford to buy food, economic disparities caused some poor tribal members to suffer from a variety of ailments brought on from unsanitary conditions and lack of medical care, in addition to depression and frustration. Impoverished tribespeople received little assistance from the government and relied on cornmeal, not wheat flour, and the corn mono-diet caused malnutrition. Prior to their removal in the early 1830s, acculturated Cherokees used wheat flour to make pancakes, biscuits, gravy, piecrusts, and cookies, but not frybread.⁴⁴

The *Indian and Pioneer Histories* consist of eighty thousand interviews of residents of Oklahoma conducted by Works Progress Administration workers in the 1930s. Many of the elderly Native and non-Native interviewees grew up in Indian Territory during the mid-nineteenth century. Only four entries mention “frybread” or “fried bread.” Two are about placing biscuits in hot coals; in another, a white man observed Sac and Fox women wrapping “frybread” around raw meat and chewing until blood oozed out of their mouths;⁴⁵ and the other noticed that in Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Kiowa camps there was more “fried bread” than any other food.⁴⁶ None of the Native interviewees mentioned frying flour or bread, although some did tell of mixing purchased wheat flour with beans. Choctaws stated they did not like wheat flour and preferred cornmeal. If they did use wheat flour they did not fry it, and some used flour only to make Sunday biscuits.⁴⁷ The Cherokee Female Seminary, established in 1852 in Park Hill and rebuilt in Tahlequah after the destructive fire in 1889, served dishes with wheat flour to students every day. Cooks did not prepare frybread; however, there is plenty of documentation of physical distress from the girls’ diet of excess flour, fat, sugar, and salt. Like Navajos at Bosque Redondo who had not previously consumed flour and coffee, for the Cherokee children who normally consumed garden produce and wild game at home the heavy Seminary diet of biscuits, gravy, pancakes, cakes, milk, butter, cream, and sugar resulted in a variety of digestive disorders such as “piles,” “sour stomach,” indigestion, “wind on the stomach,” and diarrhea.

Lactose intolerance, as well as the aforementioned gluten sensitivity, were not recognized maladies. An indication of the cooks' favorite ingredient was the order placed in 1893: sixteen thousand pounds of white wheat flour for less than three hundred students.⁴⁸ Their health issues continued unabated.

Who Wants "Traditional" Food?

In the 2011 documentary *Good Meat*, Oglala Lakota Beau LaBeau is thwarted in his quest to lose weight with a traditional diet because his family prefers beef over bison, as well as processed foods procured from Wal-Mart. Whereas it was once common practice to consume squirrels, venison, and offal, now some tribal elders refuse to eat even the muscle portions of traditional meats such as elk, deer, moose, and antelope. After I spoke at Illinois State University several years ago, a Muscogee told me that his "traditional meal delivery" for elders project was not successful because his fellow tribespeople associate such fauna with being impoverished and "second class." They prefer fast foods because these are the favored fare of mainstream America.⁴⁹ Every time I teach the courses "Foodways of Latin America" and "Foodways of Native North America," Native students remark about their dislike of traditional foods such as squash, beans, bison, salmon, and venison. At Indigenous studies potlatches when I have brought elk stew, those dishes go half eaten while cheesy casseroles and desserts are immediately consumed. The answer to why processed foods are more desirable to some Natives is more complicated than frybread tasting better than pokeweed.

The topics of traditionalism, cultural change, and "food sovereignty" are beyond the scope of this article, but a cursory overview can help explain why some Natives eschew traditional foods in favor of less healthy fare. There is no monolithic "American Indian" or "Native American" culture. Tribes differed in their religions, languages, gender roles, physiologies, housing, clothing, and subsistence strategies depending on environment and their reactions to colonists. One commonality is that tribes verbally passed sociocultural information from one generation to the next. Youngsters had the responsibility of listening to their elders and retaining the cosmological and cultural stories that instruct how to behave as a tribal member, how to interact with the natural world, and how to survive. Stories and cultural histories also situate individuals' identities within their cultural group and the larger world. This time-tested tribal knowledge, garnered through trial and error, is inexorably tied to tribal lands where ceremonies are performed, where the dead are interred, and where many tribes believed they emerged.⁵⁰ Deborah Lupton's statement that "food is instrumental in marking differences between cultures, serving to strengthen group identity," is appropriate in this context

because medicinal and edible flora and fauna were, with some exceptions, particular to the tribes' homelands.⁵¹

Tribal foods possessed myriad symbolic connotations, including prosperity, status, wealth, luck, fertility, evil, and poverty. Tribespeople recognized the connection between sustenance and cosmological deities, often female, who presented the people with specific foods. For example, not all tribes grew maize, but among those who did, from the Aztecs in Mexico to the Choctaws and Cherokees in the Southeast to Iroquois tribes in the Northeast, corn was seen as a symbol of sustenance and fertility. Tribes followed calendars based on weather or harvests. The northern Anishinaabe divided their year into thirteen moons that match the number of sections on a turtle's shell. Their July is *Miin giizis* (berry moon). Tlingits of the northwest coast started their thirteen-month calendar in July, *Xaat disi* (salmon month), when the salmon returned. Choctaws also had a thirteen-month cycle, in which July and early August is *Hvsh luak mosholi* (month of the fires all out), and Muscogees (Creeks) referred to July as *Hiyucee* (little harvest). The same period is known among Navajos as *Bii'int'aachili*. Ceremony accompanied the stages of food acquisition. Late summer for many tribes signified that corn had reached its roasting stage and many danced (and still do) the Green Corn Dance, a thanksgiving festival that might last several weeks. Senecas, among others, recognized the importance of certain foods, evidenced, for example, by the Strawberry and Blackberry Dances. Navajos performed the Seeds Blessing and Rain Ceremonies as well as corn songs and numerous hunting rituals.⁵²

Today, the definition of the tricky and debatable term "traditional" varies from person to person. How people define "traditional" depends on the extent of connection to their tribe, and how that tribe and their family confronted colonialism and its myriad socioeconomic forces such as forced education, relocations, Christian influences, economic pressures, and intermarriage with non-Indians. All tribes have been forced to change, and tribal traditions are continually invented in order to satisfy the needs of the current generation.⁵³ In the process of creating Navajo cultural stability after their Bosque Redondo experience, the Navajo meaning of "traditional" changed every few years to incorporate accouterments and philosophies of non-Navajo societies. They adopted more Euro-American animals and foods, learned silver and blanket making from Pueblos, embraced the peyote religion (i.e., the Native American Church) from Mexican tribes, integrated powwow regalia, drumming, and singing from Plains cultures, learned to carve and sell Hopi Kachinas, and some participate in the northern Plains tribes' Sundance. This is not unusual; most tribes adopted cultural mores from other tribes and other societies. Natives of all tribes use cell phones, wear jeans, live in homes like other non-Indians, eat fast food, and watch television; however, because they

speak their language, practice religious ceremonies, appear phenotypically “Indian,” and perhaps live on a reservation, they might refer to themselves as “traditional.” For some Natives, “tradition” means familiarity. For example, David Fazzino conducted a study of Tohono O’odham foodways in 2003. He discovered that some tribal members considered a food “traditional” because they recalled eating it as a child. Others defined “traditional food” as their grandparents’ food. Still others defined it as a food that is personally important to them. Reflecting all three criteria, young adults referred to frybread as “traditional” 37 percent more often than the middle-aged.⁵⁴ By asserting that frybread is part of their cultural heritage and therefore “traditional,” some Natives simultaneously reaffirm their “Indian identity” and feel justified eating the dish.

Some Natives retain cultural knowledge while others have little or no connection to their tribal culture. More Natives live off reservations than on, and many only occasionally participate in tribal activities (such as food sovereignty initiatives) or not at all. Indigenous peoples’ dietary choices, therefore, are influenced by multiple and complex factors: finances, availability, politics, religion, educational background, residence, condition of the product (polluted, GMO, farmed vs. wild), physiology of the eater (allergies, diseases, weight issues), ease of acquisition and preparation of the food, historical connection, taste preferences, advertising influences, smell, appearance, and familial and cultural pressures and expectations. Attention is paid to the way food is procured (who buys, grows, hunts, or prepares it), how it is served (who eats first, who is the server, who sits where), and what foods are labeled as taboo. Combine all these elements with how individuals view the world through the lens of their identities (gender, sexuality, cultural, religious, economic class) and it is not surprising that one Native might declare that frybread is sickening and is not a traditional food, while another cannot name a single food their tribe ate historically, and still another asserts, “I’m Navajo: frybread and mutton are my specialty.”⁵⁵

The Persistence of Fried Bread

In 2012 the Diné Policy Institute surveyed Navajo tribespeople; of 230 respondents from across the Navajo Nation, 90 percent answered yes to the question, “Would you be interested in information about traditional foods if it were available?”⁵⁶ Across Indian Country, backyard gardens of heirloom corn, squash, beans, and peppers have sprung up, as have Indigenous food sovereignty projects. Many Anishinaabe Ojibways in Minnesota and Wisconsin have attempted to remain true to their foodways traditions even after the government assigned them to reservations and took away their lands

along with their essential *manoomin* (rice) stands. The tribe strategized to use sharing, reciprocity, and communal hunting to harvest wild rice, berries, and maple syrup and to hunt and catch fish. The historian Thomas Vennum observed about their wild rice that it “continues to symbolize old Ojibwe culture: it is part of the Indian world, distinct from the white.”⁵⁷ Ojibway Martin Reinhardt makes it clear that frybread is not part of his “Indian world”: “Our traditional Anishinaabe diet never included white flour, white sugar, and Crisco shortening.”⁵⁸

In contrast to the Ojibways’ cultivation of *manoomin* is the irony of frybread. Despite tribes’ lack of connection to frybread precontact and their dependency on American food manufacturers to provide the ingredients, many frybread advocates associate not eating frybread with not being Indian. Or, as one online commenter on the 2008 *Smithsonian Magazine* frybread article asserts, “Your not a real Native if u don’t no how to make or eat frybread.”⁵⁹ While some Natives eat frybread as a way of signifying cultural identity, others connect frybread to the inadequate foods given to tribes by the U.S. government and believe it a symbol of colonization. Indeed, none of the ingredients of frybread are indigenous to this hemisphere. Frybread creation requires no cultivating, harvesting, hunting, or gathering. Attention neither to the seasons nor to ceremony in procuring the ingredients is required. There is no oral tradition lesson to be taught about frybread, not even about it as a survival food. One can make frybread during any season with goods purchased from Dollar General. For some frybread advocates it could be that the making, selling, and consuming of frybread under the auspices of it as a “cultural food” is an act of defiance, acknowledging that the ingredients originally belonged to the Other (the colonizer), but that item made from the Others’ components now belongs to them. Regardless, the lack of nutrients and the high fat and caloric content of frybread render it dangerous and undesirable except for the taste, low cost, and ease of preparation.

While some Navajos revere frybread as a symbol of their survival at Bosque Redondo, Natives a thousand miles away with their own traditional foods specific to their geographic locales consume frybread with reverence, as if the frybread story is also theirs. This is not too surprising. They want to eat it. Fat, sugar, carbohydrates, and salt can be addicting, and frybread advocates are determined to not give up such fare.⁶⁰ Historical trauma also accounts for dietary choices. Racism, stereotyping, poverty, and depression are ongoing manifestations of colonization. There is no such thing as “postcolonial” for tribespeople. The tribes’ historical traumas may have taken place at different time periods and in different locales, but Natives often put all offenses against tribes into the same category. Their grief is unresolved because they feel the effects of their ancestors’ sufferings. Some express their

frustrations by abusing drugs, drink, or food.⁶¹ The psychologist Billi Gordon explains that “when people are continually battered and abused, they find comfort and shelter where they can; eating satisfies the ancient brain.”⁶² Many Americans grew up depending on comfort food such as mashed potatoes and gravy, Cheetos, and ice cream. A lot of Natives have as well, and this includes the easily accessible frybread. Feelings of guilt and depression about having diabetes and other health problems associated with an unhealthy diet can lead people to consume the very foods that are killing them. Indigenous Arizona students in my Northern Arizona University classroom talked about “when” they develop type 2 diabetes, not “if,” because every person in their family has the disease. They expect no other outcome than to become sick.

The Yavapai Apaches publish a monthly newspaper that informs tribal members about “Healthy Cooking on a Budget” courses—and, as with other tribespeople with access to wellness programs, many Yavapai Apaches choose not to take advantage of such offerings. Jillian Michaels suggests that tribal members might be apathetic, and she has a valid point. Teachers at government-run boarding schools disallowed Native children from speaking their languages, from participating in ceremonies, and from communicating with tribal elders who could teach them cultural mores, including foodway traditions. As a result they lost awareness about how to save seeds, cultivate plants, and hunt game. Every lesson ingrained in them their inferiority to whites, and this “boarding school syndrome” affected not only the children who attended the schools but also subsequent generations who learned from boarding school survivors.⁶³ Many Natives continue to act on their insecurities by making bad dietary and lifestyle choices. Conversely, Indigenous food activists are hopeful that a return to eating precontact foods will provide Native peoples empowering links to their tribal past. Reconnecting with their traditional Indigenous knowledges could assist them in finding historical solutions to modern health problems.

Frybread Is Here to Stay.

Game meats and organic produce are costly. Frybread ingredients are cheap. Frybread is fairly easy, albeit potentially messy, to make at home: all one needs are the ingredients, basic implements, and an electrical outlet, generator, or campfire. Cooks from Arizona to Alaska receive national attention from newspapers that feature their versions of the origin and meaning of frybread, and demonstrating one’s ability to make good frybread can also bring status, as seen in various Miss (insert tribe) Princess contests, Pawhuska’s annual National Indian Taco Championship, and American Indian Expositions in Anadarko (and as mocked in the wry 2010 film *More Than Frybread*). Another

use of frybread is that some Natives who do not eat frybread at home will eat it among other Natives for social acceptance. “Wannabes” (non-Indians who cannot prove blood or community connection to any tribe) seeking legitimacy might eat it with Natives in an attempt to prove their connection to tribal culture, even if that identity is vague and “pan-Indian.”

Frybread tastes good to most people. Because it is also popular among non-Natives there is a profit motive to sell it. Dwayne Lewis, the owner of the now-defunct Arizona Native Frybread in Mesa, Arizona, sold frybread because “everybody wants it.”⁶⁴ Indian tacos are marketable to crowds looking to connect with Indian cultures, and frybread hawkers cater to Americans’ tastes for greasy, salty, and fatty foods. The annual Haskell Indian Art Market in Lawrence, Kansas, for instance, offers frybread from numerous vendors, all of whom serve perpetually long lines of customers. At my university down the road from Haskell, the instructor of the Indigenous studies “Grant Writing” graduate course eschewed lessons in actual grant writing and focused on how to organize Indian taco sales. Representatives from the (not federally recognized) Houma Nation sell frybread to non-Indians at the New Orleans Jazz Fest every year, using 150 pounds of flour, 12 gallons of milk, and 12 dozen eggs per day. Cook Noreen Dardar claims that making frybread is her “tradition,” but frybread was not a food among Southeastern tribes.⁶⁵ The company “Navajo Frybread” is owned by non-Indians and produces six hundred thousand twenty-five-pound bags of Blue Bird flour each year. Owner Trent Tanner states that “we wouldn’t be in business without the Navajo people. It’s our philosophy that it’s their flour and we make it for them. Sales go up especially in the summer when kids get home from boarding school.”⁶⁶ Indeed, it is not uncommon to see Native shoppers fill their carts at Flagstaff, Arizona, Safeway markets with bags of the refined flour. Some cooks rely on the mystical element to attract buyers. Although some frybread makers advise poking a hole in the dough so the edges will fry evenly, one cook clearly caters to non-Indians looking for an “authentic Native American” dish. Clark “Little Bear” Oxendine of the Lumbee Tribe cooks frybread at powwows and tells customers (and reporters) the cryptic yet unsubstantiated tribal custom that making a hole in the bread will “let the evil spirits out of it, so it’ll taste good.”⁶⁷

What Is “Native American Food”?

If one searches for truly traditional Native American recipes on the web or published materials, the results are hit and miss. Marketing and selling of so-called traditional recipes takes advantage of the reality that most people know little about tribal foodways. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger define “tradition invention” as a “set of practices . . . which seek to inculcate certain

values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past,” and some of these “traditions” are “established with great rapidity.”⁶⁸ Many “traditional” recipes contain more non-Indigenous ingredients than anything else; however, because Natives have been using these recipes (such as grape dumplings) for decades, producers deem them “traditional” and market them as such. The regular “Native Recipes” column in *Indian Country Today* illustrates the misrepresentation of non-Indigenous recipes as “traditional.”⁶⁹

With the popularity of chef’s memoirs and foodie TV shows, the media has fervently jumped on the fryer bandwagon. Reporters romanticize frybread as an “American Indian” culinary delicacy and apply enthusiastic imagery to its preparation: “The sound of fresh dough being tossed and flattened melds with the sharp sizzle as it hits hot oil to create a pleasing culinary rhythm”;⁷⁰ “Hot canola oil pangs off a stainless steel tub under the watch of a local frybread master”;⁷¹ “In this comforting Father’s Day dish, homemade frybread gives the stacked entrée an indulgent foundation from which to grow”;⁷² and so forth. The publicity given to the stories told by frybread makers has contributed to the dish’s reputation as a bona fide “Native American” food.

Natives also take advantage of the burgeoning interest in Native foods. It is obvious what is the featured item of the Frybread House in Phoenix, a restaurant owned by Tohono O’odhams who advertise their establishment as serving “Native American Food,” but the other menu choices are nontraditional: fried potatoes, refried beans, beef and burro plates, along with butter, powdered sugar, and honey to adorn the frybread. The James Beard Foundation honored the Frybread House as “beloved for quality food that reflects the character of the community.”⁷³ And that is the problem. At least half of all Tohono O’odham adults have diabetes, and it is not because they are consuming their historical diets of corn, squashes, beans, and cactus fruit.⁷⁴ The Frybread House is owned by tribal members who aim to make money. On the other hand, the opposing goals of the tribe’s “Healthy O’odham People Promotion” and “Tohono O’odham Community Action” are to encourage physical activity and the consumption of traditional foods.⁷⁵

One of the first Natives to market “Indian foods,” Osage Raymond Red Corn, started HA-PAH-SHU-TSE (Red Corn) Indian Foods in Oklahoma in 1975 because, according to Raymond in 1981, “young people don’t know our cooking anymore.” Osages traditionally hunted, gathered, and cultivated gardens, but like every other tribe they did not traditionally use wheat, beef, or dairy products. Originally, the Red Corns served food at their establishment, including beef chuck meat pies and “Osage purple dumplings” made of flour, baking powder, shortening, butter, sugar, and Welch’s grape juice.⁷⁶ Now the company is called Red Corn Native Foods and sells only frybread mix. Selling

frybread has also spread to Alaska, where Indigenous peoples have never grown wheat. The Native-owned Garfield's Famous Frybread does a brisk business selling frybread to Tlingit tribal members, to the tune of 175 pounds of dough a day, along with toppings of margarine, powdered sugar, and Hershey's chocolate syrup.⁷⁷

In 1987 WoodenKnife Co. of Interior, South Dakota, began selling a pre-made frybread mix, marketed as "the original Sioux recipe," although what the latter might be is unclear. According to government reports, tribes in the Dakotas received the same goods as did Navajos. There are no reports of them frying flour and, despite claims to the contrary on the WoodenKnife site, there are no entries in the journals of Lewis and Clark stating that tribes fried *timpsala* (prairie turnip) flour. When WoodenKnife's owners started making frybread, they added ground *timpsala* as flavoring, but they no longer do because of environmental stress to prairie plants. Today, the company markets the ordinary frybread mix in "a version of the Native American pouch bag" because "this option gives a small look into the Sioux Indian culture."⁷⁸ This is an odd keepsake; Sioux tribes did not use wheat flour while they "migrated with the buffalo"—that is, as they followed one of their main foodstuffs.

In 2010 *The Atlantic* featured the "American Indian Eatery" Tocabe. The owners of the restaurant state, "Our mission is to become the Industry Standard of American Indian cuisine," and "We need to help push it."⁷⁹ The only Indigenous ingredients offered on the Tocabe menu, however, are bison, tomatoes, beans, and possibly *wojape* (depending on how it is made; real *wojape* is fruit only, no sugar). Tocabe's menu prominently features non-Indigenous nachos and frybread with toppings of beef, chicken, cheese, sour cream, powdered sugar, as well as chips and sodas. The *Kekuli* Café in Merritt and Westbank, British Columbia, was inspired by owner's "First Nations roots." The establishment's slogan is "Don't panic . . . we have bannock!" with one "bannock taco" dish described as "piled teepee high."⁸⁰ Besides bannock, frybread, and local Saskatoon berries featured as "Indian food," the offerings are purely North Americana.

Like Tocabe, the Mitsitam Native Foods Café at the National Museum of the American Indian features an even longer list of non-Indigenous ingredients, some of which are the focal point of the pricey dishes. The restaurant claims that "each menu reflects the food and cooking techniques from the region featured." However, the Mitsitam menu features foods that were not traditionally used by tribes: crab apple, carrots, chicken, apple cider, beets, cabbage, bacon, cheese, almonds, Spanish olives, macaroons, Brussels sprouts, celery, cherries, wheat flour tortillas, sour cream, wheat rolls, leeks, saffron, cauliflower, goat, fennel, oxtail, okra, cilantro, cookies, and tarts. The adjoining Mitsitam Espresso Coffee Bar serves Tribal Grounds Coffee, a

product that is grown by unidentified “Indigenous farmers.”⁸¹ Coffee plants are not indigenous to this hemisphere. The problem with Mitsitam is that it misrepresents a foundational feature of tribal cultures—food—while housed in a world-famous museum that is supposed to educate visitors about Indigenous peoples.

Cookbook authors aim their coffee table publications at those who can afford to purchase them, and those buyers usually are not tribespeople. Recipes in *Foods of the Americas* (published by Ten Speed Press in 2004) include such non-Indigenous items as flour, butter, milk, ice cream, beef, cilantro, plantain, chicken, and pork. The same can be said of *Spirit of the Harvest: North American Indian Cooking* (published by Stewart, Tabori, and Chang in 1991), which renders some “Native recipes” unrecognizable because of myriad of non-Indigenous items. *Foods of the Southwest Indian Nations* (also published by Ten Speed Press, in 2002) alternates between traditional and thoroughly non-Indigenous dishes. By including ingredients such as heavy cream, milk, butter, flour, peaches, cinnamon, chicken, and many other European-introduced items, authors miss opportunities to showcase truly traditional tribal cooking. Instead, many “Native” cookbooks present dishes made of mainly European-introduced ingredients mixed with a few native to North America.

Granted, frybread is only one cause of poor health. I know healthy and active Natives who will eat small amounts of frybread at tribal events, not out of respect to a “cultural food” but because it tastes good, as does cheesecake. The occasional indulgences in an otherwise-conscientious diet do them no harm. Some Natives, however, eat frybread and other processed foods multiple times a day, even during foodways ceremonies such as the Green Corn Dance. At the Choctaw Nation’s festivals the always-crowded midway features donuts, butter-slathered corn, corn chip pie, funnel cakes, fried Twinkies, and fried bread. Next to this array of junk food stands the extensive “Healthy Living Expo” ready to assist Choctaws with their diabetes, obesity, and high blood pressure. Some festival organizers obviously can identify traditional foods such as *banaha* and *tamfula*. Still, despite my suggestion that they move *banaha* and *tamfula* to the main midway, these dishes are relegated to the “cultural demonstration” area with *ishtaboli* (stickball) games and bow and blowgun making.

Tribal Food, Tribal Health

So what is the harm of the “tradition invention” of dishes that only contain a few Indigenous items, or sometimes none at all, and marketing them as “Native American” foods? Those who profit will argue there is nothing wrong with it. For others, promoting traditional foodways is integral to becoming

aware of their tribes' history, learning their language, and becoming politically active, all of which will contribute toward building pride and shaping their identity as Indigenous people. And while many activists urge youngsters to engage their elders, not all elder Natives are aware of their foodways. Fazzino comments that it is not constructive to expect tribal elders to know how to identify, cultivate, and prepare traditional foods. Many Natives have adapted to what has been available to them. The expectations of a know-it-all elder could be detrimental to modern food security because the assumptions "obliterate the processes of adaptation to and learning from one's elders and environment through rituals, experiences and just plain work under the desert sun."⁸² Indigenous food activists would agree. Besides the issue of many Natives' inability to distinguish between traditional and nontraditional foods, Indigenous food activists have no quarrel with the adoption of nourishing, non-Indigenous plants and animals into tribal foodways, nor with new techniques for food sustainability, such as the Choctaw Smallwood brothers' aquaponic farming system.⁸³ After all, broccoli (indigenous to the Mediterranean and Asia Minor) is more nutritious than frybread. Rather, the concern is with the overall deteriorating health of tribal peoples, their dependency on non-tribal entities to supply their foods, and the lack of interest many have for community-based food sovereignty and health endeavors.

Many Natives are attempting to revitalize their cultural foodways and have altered their diets to focus on tribal foods. Navajo Robb Redsteer, for example, says, "I personally experienced all the illnesses but overcame them with a good diet and exercise. Frybread has to be eliminated"; now he grows traditional plants inside the Navajo BioEnergy Dome. Martin Reinhardt agrees: "Indian communities are in a state of emergency regarding obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and high blood pressure. Frybread has no place as part a healthy daily diet in Indian Country."⁸⁴

The burgeoning "food sovereignty" movement is not the focus of this article, but it should be mentioned that tribal foodways initiatives are underway. To name a few: Diné Inc. is a Navajo Nation community nonprofit working to preserve Navajo cultural identity through food and to improve "the wellness" of the Navajo Nation.⁸⁵ The educational group Native Child's new site, Navajo Recipes, posts about traditional Navajo foods.⁸⁶ The American Indian Health and Diet Project at the University of Kansas offers tribal recipes with only ingredients from the Western Hemisphere, as does the Facebook page "Indigenous Eating."⁸⁷ The Decolonizing Diet Project is an ongoing study of the relationship between people and Indigenous foods of the Great Lakes Region. In 2012, participants in the DDP embarked on the yearlong challenge of eating only Anishinaabe foods and foods of the Great Lakes watershed.⁸⁸ The Minnesota-based Native Harvest, a company under the White Earth Land

Recovery Project, strives “to continue, revive, and protect our native seeds, heritage crops, naturally grown fruits, animals, wild plants, traditions and knowledge of our indigenous and land-based communities,” and offers *ma-noomin*, maple syrup, teas, and bead work items. The odd item out is frybread mix.⁸⁹ The WELRP also hosts the annual Great Lakes Indigenous Farming Conference. Native Seeds/SEARCH in Tucson is a nonprofit seed conservation organization that promotes the use of non-GMO, open pollinated seeds from the Southwest.⁹⁰ The Palouse–Clearwater Environmental Institute works with the Nez Perce tribe to restore the *qe’mes* (camas), a foundational food plant, in the Plateau region of Washington and Idaho.⁹¹ The Cultural Conservancy is a multifaceted organization that oversees the Native Circle of Food program area and the Renewing American Indian Nutrition, Food, and Ecological Diversity (RAIN FED) projects.⁹² Numerous tribes in the Northwest, such as the Makah, Nisqually, Suquamish, and Loomis, have established community food, ethnobotanical, and medicinal gardens to educate tribal peoples about their traditional ways of eating.⁹³ The First Nations Development Institute provides Native communities and tribes with training information, financial support, and assessment tools in their efforts to build food security and to improve health.⁹⁴ Elizabeth Hoover’s project, “From Garden Warriors to Good Seeds: Indigenizing the Local Food Movement,” is an exploration of an array of farming, gardening, and food sovereignty initiatives across the country.⁹⁵

Initiatives such as the Intertribal Agricultural Council are less concerned with growing exclusively traditional foods and more with making certain that tribes can produce their own food on tribal lands. The IAC was founded “to pursue and promote the conservation, development and use of our agricultural resources for the betterment of our people.” The American Indian Foods organization, under the umbrella of the IAC, is a group of tribal organizations offering Indigenous foods such as wild rice, bison, chilies, and salmon, but also non-Indigenous foods such as beef, pork, poultry, lamb, alfalfa, wheat, barley, oats, chocolate, wine, apples, cherries, pears, peaches, and asparagus. The only “Native” commonality among the AIF groups is that Natives produce the foods.⁹⁶ Strategizing to grow enough food to sustain a tribe is not a bad thing; however, these efforts might be more effective if there is differentiation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous foods so that eaters can connect what they consume to their culture. More worrisome is that these initiatives could be compromised if the crops contain genetically modified organisms and if the animals raised are abused and treated with hormones. For example, Jim McAdory, the Mississippi State University Tribal Extension agent who advises the Mississippi Band of Choctaw farmers, supports the use of Monsanto’s Roundup, Bt corn, and GMO seeds.⁹⁷

Despite healthy lifestyle efforts, Natives will continue to eat junk food,

and some will celebrate frybread as a symbol of “survival” and cultural identity. Indigenous health activists are just as determined to revitalize tribal food traditions as they are to campaign against unhealthy foods, especially frybread, the food they believe to be a representation of oppression and colonization. School and backyard garden projects are important, but they cannot provide all the food needed to nourish students and families for a significant period of time. And poor diet is only part of the escalating health problem. Children spend less time exploring and playing outdoors, and adults are increasingly isolated from the land, resulting in a diminishing interest in the natural world. Food sovereignty and healthy eating initiatives are effective only if Native peoples do not supplement their plates of garden produce with milkshakes, sugar drinks, fried chicken, gravy, and frybread. Natives must be willing to put in the effort to make healthy choices. No one else will do it for us.

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Notes

Thanks to Joely Proudfit, Robb Redsteer, Martin Reinhardt, and Elizabeth Hoover. It is preferable to refer to Indigenous people by their specific tribal names. For generalities I normally use the term “Indigenous” or “Natives,” but in this article I also use the more recognizable “Indian.” “Native Americans” signifies anyone born in the United States.

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