Our Corn Is Still Standing: Indigenous Foodways and Identity in New England

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In the late spring we plant the corn and beans and squash. They’re not just plants- we call them the three Sisters. We plant them together, three kinds of seed in one hill. They want to be together with each other, just as we Indians want to be together with each other. So long as the three sisters are with us, we know we will never starve. The creator sends them to us each year. We celebrate them now - Onondaga Chief Louis Farmer (LaDuke 2005:153).

In the very beginning of time, according to the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, Sky Woman came down from the heavens and carried with her the seeds of corn, beans, and squash, known as the Three Sisters (Mann 1997). As corn grows tall, it serves as a pole for the beans to climb. The beans fix nitrogen into the soil and the large squash leaves shade the ground. The Three Sisters represent cooperation, and each plant nourishes our bodies in different ways and nourishes the earth together.

Introduction

In this age of processed foods and processed cultures, how can we make food culturally empowering? Can the act of growing our own food and eating what our ancestors ate nourish us in ways we never thought possible? Food is literally what sustains us—how can we make it more sustainable? By going back to their ancestors’ traditional foods, Indigenous peoples today are rediscovering a healthier way of eating. Through tapping into how their ancestors grew specific foods and how they prepared them, old ceremonies return. Food sovereignty also equates to tribal self-sufficiency (Goad 2014). When Indigenous peoples grow their own food, they do not need to rely completely on outside sources for nourishment. This alone is empowering.

Through the exploration of food sovereignty and security, this research note
demonstrates how traditional foods and foodways are empowering to Indigenous peoples and their communities in northern New England. My perspective here is largely etic; I am originally from Los Angeles and I am not a member of an Indigenous New England Nation as the three individuals I interviewed are. My interest in the topic grew out of my graduate studies at Plymouth State University. I was working on my master’s in education in heritage studies where I took courses in foodways, ethnography and Indigenous Studies. Specifically, this research note is based on a paper I wrote for an independent study course in Indigenous New England Foodways. It also builds on work I did prior to this research when I interned at the Mt. Kearsarge Indian Museum in Warner, New Hampshire. That internship consisted of an oral history project—interviewing Indigenous veterans. The project posed the challenges of not only finding veterans who wished to talk to me, but also raising subject matter that was very difficult. When I began to embark on foodways, I discovered that discussing food opened the door to other issues. The question, “What do you eat?” led to talk of food sovereignty and how governments and corporations are poisoning us. Discussing food also prompted meaningful self-reflections such as “I was raised white,” “I let go of my Indianess years ago; it was too painful,” and the most common response, “Well, I know nothing about Native foods at all.”

Time and time again conversations about food triggered issues of identity.

This research note is based on three oral history interviews I conducted with individuals of the Abenaki Nation in northern New England who are active members of their communities and who have an intense interest in issues such as food sovereignty and traditional foods. In sharing their views on how food sovereignty, foodways, and food traditions affect the Indigenous communities of northern New England, the interviewees reveal how food connects to memory, culture and identity. Topics such as food sovereignty, childhood diet, and traditional foods bring up strong feelings, yet the individuals I interviewed all agree that eating a healthy diet of Indigenous food is vitally important.

**Indigenous Foodways in New England**

Although the Indigenous population in northern New England is relatively small, it represents an integral and important part of the region. According to the 2010 US Census, 10,524 people in the state of New Hampshire claim Indigenous ancestry (Norris, Vines, and Hoeffel 2012). While this is up 33.5% from the 2000 census (Norris, Vines, and Hoeffel 2012), Indigenous peoples still comprise only .3% of
the state’s population and there are no federally or state recognized Indigenous nations. The nation of Abenaki people residing in Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, and Quebec, Canada, are affiliated with the Wabanaki Confederacy (the other four nations include the Penobscot, the Micmac, the Passamaquoddy and the Maliseet peoples) (Toensing 2008). The Abenaki speak an Algonquin language and there are only a handful of speakers left (Bruchac n.d.). In Vermont, there are also no federally recognized Indigenous nations, but there are a few state recognized ones: the Nulhegan Band of the Coosuk Abenaki Nation, the Elnu Abenaki Tribe, the Traditional Koasek Abenaki Nation of the Koas, and the St. Francis/Sokoki band of the Abenaki Nation. The Sovereign Abenaki Nation of Missisquoi founded the Abenaki Self-Help Association, Inc. located in Swanson, Vermont, working towards improving the economic and educational lives of the Abenaki people (Abenaki Tribal Council n.d.). Finally, in northern Maine, there are four federally recognized Indigenous nations: the Aroostook Band of Micmacs, the Houlton Band of Maliseet Indians, the Passamaquoddy Tribe of Maine, and the Penobscot Indian Nation.

While it may first appear that Indigenous communities in northern New England are scattered and fractured, they come together in community powwows and other events. David M. Lacy and Donna Roberts Moody, an Abenaki elder and the Abenaki Repatriation Coordinator for the Abenaki Nation, discuss the sharing of Abenaki heritage through foodways:

Much of what we need to sustain our lives we find in the mountains. As children we learned how to hunt, gather medicines and foods, harvest trees and the bark, and tap the maples for syrup. We have ceremonies for all of these activities to honor what we take. And we have teachings in stewardship to ensure that there will be enough for the next seven generations (Lacy and Moody 2006:153).

These foodways traditions go back thousands of years. According to Julia Clark and George Neptune, since the Archaic Period (9,500-3,000 years ago) Indigenous peoples of New England have had a varied diet consisting of animals, seafood, plants, fruits and vegetables (Clark and Neptune 2014). They also utilized a seasonal cyclical format, migrating with the animals, thereby allowing them to harvest foods at their peak times (Clark and Neptune 2014). This rhythm also allowed them to be at the seacoast during peak fishing times and then migrate inland to hunt game (McBride and Prins 2009).
Between 1300 and 1400 CE, corn was integrated into the already complex diet of Indigenous peoples living in New England (Baker 2004). Planting and harvesting corn led to a more agricultural sedentary lifestyle (Baker 2004). Corn was also used in trade when the Europeans arrived in New England. Bruchac writes that “In one dramatic instance, in 1638, the Indians at Pocumtuck accepted payment of 300 fathoms (six-foot lengths) of wampum for 500 bushels of corn, and delivered it by canoe to supply the starving English settlements below Hartford” (2004:24).

Food Sovereignty and Security

Food sovereignty and security means that individuals have control over what they eat. According to the United States Food Sovereignty Alliance, food sovereignty is “the right of people to determine their own food and agriculture policies; the democratization of food and agriculture” (United States Food Sovereignty Alliance n.d.). Simply put, it is putting food sources back in the hands of the consumer instead of in the hands of big business. For Indigenous peoples, food sovereignty is sometimes achieved by going back to the basics of their ancestors through reclaiming traditional foods and gardening traditions.

Food insecurity is the lack of access to traditional and healthy foods; instead, people have to rely on fast food and other unhealthy foods (Lambden, Receveur, and Kuhnlein 2007). There are many factors that cause Indigenous peoples to experience food insecurity, such as no access to healthy foods on reservations (or any isolated area), the fact that healthy foods are often more expensive than processed foods, and the lack of knowledge of how to cultivate and/or hunt for one’s food. Additionally, according to Anthony Sutton, Micmac people in Maine suffer from food insecurity because they are located in a very isolated environment, and their collective unemployment rate is about 70% (Sutton 2012).

Food insecurity and poverty lead to diabetes, now rampant on many reservations. The culprit is primarily commodity foods that first began as rations to the Indigenous peoples during their forced removal and relocation to reservations. These foods consist mainly of white flour, salt, sugar, lard, highly processed cheese, and canned meat. Indigenous peoples were forced into eating these foods because nothing else was available (Echo Hawk Consulting 2015). Eventually these foods took their toll on the lives of the Indigenous peoples. In 1940, diabetes was virtually unknown in Indigenous populations but now “nearly every Native
American is involved either personally with diabetes, or with family and friends with diabetes. It has been called the new smallpox” (Echo Hawk Consulting 2015:31).

Indigenous Peoples’ Movements toward Food Sovereignty in Northern New England

The food sovereignty movement in northern New England is growing slowly but surely, and several Indigenous nations are making great strides. For instance, the Passamaquoddy people are taking action towards a healthier diet. Currently on the Passamaquoddy Pleasant Point Reservation on the Canadian border, an old dairy farm has been converted into a community garden growing Indigenous foods using traditional methods (Goad 2014). They are attempting to be completely self-sufficient within four years (Goad 2014). In Meredith Goad’s “Food Sovereignty Movement Grows Roots among Passamaquoddy” one Passamaquoddy woman stated succinctly, “It’s really brought everybody alive again” (Goad 2014).

Another organization striving to do more for Indigenous New England foodways is the Mt. Kearsarge Indian Museum, located in Warner, New Hampshire. It is a Pan-Indian museum and gathering place offering workshops and a yearly powwow (Mt Kearsarge Indian Museum 2015). As part of honoring the Abenaki culture, the museum will host a variety of upcoming foodways programs including a cooking class using traditional Indigenous New England ingredients (Charlebois 2015; Clark 2015) and a harvest festival where they will be harvesting the vegetables they grew and giving different food demonstrations (Mt Kearsarge Indian Museum 2015). They also have for sale in their gift shop a self-published cookbook, Favorite Native American Foods and Recipes.

Seed Saving and Sharing

Another way to preserve food sovereignty is to grow and harvest Indigenous foods, starting by planting heirloom seeds. Although not based in New England, for the past 25 years Seeds of Change, located in Rancho Dominguez, California, has been preserving and selling heirloom and traditional seeds (Seeds of Change n.d.). This organization also provides grants, one of which was to the Sioux YMCA Learning Garden serving the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation located in Eagle Butte, South Dakota. The grant helped them establish their “Onspewicakiyapi Wojapi (Learning Garden)” (Sioux YMCA n.d.) helping them offer cooking classes
and instruct Lakota youth in organic gardening methods (Seeds of Change 2015).

Vermont Abenaki scholar Dr. Fredrick Wiseman continued this idea with “Seeds of Renewal,” which locates Indigenous seeds and gives them to the corresponding nation. He does this through the Haven Project, which researches and celebrates Indigenous Vermont culture (Sched 2014). Wiseman and others have recovered over 25 varieties of seeds all over the United States. He emphasizes the importance of growing these seeds correctly and avoiding cross-pollination in order to keep the plant from being modified. One of the many advantages to growing these Indigenous plants is that they are far more adaptable to their environment, thereby needing less pesticides (Sched 2014). This is a very important point. These plants are not only better for the environment; they are healthier for the consumer. This holistic perspective of gardening not only helps heal the specific Indigenous nation and the individual, it helps heal the land as well.

In “The Seeds of Renewal Project: Renewing Abenaki Agriculture, One Seed at a Time,” Wiseman recalls growing up Abenaki in Vermont while pointing out the nutrition needs of the Abenaki people:

I remember Abenaki families, who were often very poor, living off the waters and lands by hunting and fishing. I remember children and adults gathering edible plants: marsh marigolds, wild onions, and fiddleheads in the spring, wild herbs, roots, and nuts in the summer and fall. Today I live in Swanton, and it’s clear that this rigorous but ultimately healthy outdoor lifestyle has largely been replaced by the intake of commodity food, which is heavily reliant on refined carbohydrates, fats, and processed items. This fundamental change from a land-based to an industrial food system is most certainly contributing to our region’s childhood obesity problem, and I have found that Vermont’s Indigenous Abenaki communities have been particularly hard hit by this cultural transformation (Wiseman 2015:12).

Wiseman also states that by preserving and growing traditional seeds, other aspects of culture, such as singing and dancing, can come into play: “In talking with tribal elders, I quickly came to the conclusion that an agricultural calendar integrating ritual with agricultural technology was the keystone to the whole program (2015:25).” Wiseman presented a holistic look at diet—food not only nourishes the body, it also nourishes the culture.
Liz Charlebois

I interviewed Missisquoi Abenaki Liz Charlebois, Chairperson for the New Hampshire Commission on Native American Affairs and the Educational Director at the Mt. Kearsarge Indian Museum, to learn about her foodways traditions and her thoughts on food sovereignty. The interview, recorded on July 4, 2015, took place during an event held by the Mt. Kearsarge Indian Museum. When it comes to Indigenous foodways, Charlebois sees herself as a beginner because she has been only studying Indigenous foodways for about two years. She explained just how important it was for Indigenous peoples to eat the Indigenous foods, as opposed to eating processed food: “. . . Native bodies are not meant to be processing the foods that are available to people” (Charlebois 2015; Clark 2015).

When I asked Charlebois about food sovereignty, she emphasized a non-purist approach. Instead of trying to recreate what their ancestors ate, Charlebois is more concerned about eating healthy food from this land and “focusing on the foods that we are supposed to be eating and having ownership . . . going out planting them, saving the seeds, keeping them pure” (Charlebois 2015; Clark 2015). The goal here is health and empowerment, not a stringent requirement of what their ancestors ate. On the topic of food sovereignty and seed saving, she stated, “I think it’s just a movement towards having tribes protecting those foods we have always been in charge of protecting” (Charlebois 2015; Clark 2015).

Because Charlebois is in New England where Indigenous nations and groups are spread out and isolated, she occasionally travels to other locations across the US to attend food sovereignty and seed saving conferences. These conferences are devoted to sharing ideas, seeds and gardening techniques. Charlebois discussed how much she enjoys “. . . traveling to different Indigenous food conferences, and Indigenous seed conferences to meet with other people who are really passionate about saving our seeds” (Charlebois 2015; Clark 2015). She also discussed how much she has learned from these conferences and how she is able to bring that knowledge back to the museum. For instance, she learned how to hand-pollinate from one of the conferences:

I went to a workshop at this conference at White Earth [White Earth Ojibwe tribe located in Minnesota] and somebody had been talking about it there, doing the Gete-oke-somin squash. . . . So they had talked about hand pollinating and I had come home
with some information and then I basically taught myself. So it’s really interesting. I joked around all summer that I was impregnating squash (Charlebois and Clark 2015).

Throughout the foodways interview, Charlebois expressed hope for a better diet. She talked about the importance of reclaiming the foods of your ancestors, saving seeds and growing and eating the food for a healthy diet. She described the museum’s seed library where members can check out seeds to plant. When it is time for harvest, the growers will harvest some of the seeds to give back to the museum. Charlebois explained that this project is in its beginning stages and that they are working the kinks out right now.

Charlebois’ belief that the personal is the political is evidenced in her efforts to provide Indigenous food when the Mt. Kearsarge Indian Museum had their yearly inter-tribal powwow featuring dancers from all over Indian Country on July 11, 2015. Despite the fact that Indigenous food movements such as food sovereignty appear to be gaining ground, vendors at the event offered what has become the typical powwow food—fast food such as burgers, hot dogs and so-called ‘Indian Tacos’: fry bread with ground beef and red beans. However, the museum also provided healthy, traditional cuisine as an alternative for the dancers and singers. The museum staff served the singers and dancers corn soup, “wild rice with butternut squash and cranberries, boiled cornbread, sunflower seed cakes, Wojapi (Indigenous thick berry sauce), green salad and fruit salad” (Charlebois, 2015b).

Dana Benner

Penobscot, Pequawket and Micmac professor Dana Benner lives in Manchester, New Hampshire. A former member of the Inter-Tribal Council of New Hampshire, Benner is an author, professor, and a lecturer on Indigenous ways of life of New England Indigenous People. I interviewed him on August 6, 2015; because he was incredibly busy, the interview was conducted via email.

In his email, Benner revealed how rituals and beliefs about Indigenous foodways can be deeply personal. As a man who literally practices what he preaches, he estimated that about 60% of the food he and his family consumes he has either shot, fished, or grown, and that includes traditional food, fruits and vegetables (Benner 2015). However, he declined to answer the question about ceremony, stating that the question was inappropriate when
interviewing Indigenous Peoples (Benner 2015). His point was well taken.

In reply to my last question, “Do you have any family stories concerning food?,” Benner simply stated, “Everything has a story attached to it in a Native family. Unless you hunted you could never understand” (Benner 2015). He emphasized that in order for me to understand Indigenous culture, I would have to live it. I would have to visit reservations and “. . . take in whatever is offered. The understanding doesn’t come in a book or from a professor” (Benner 2015). According to Benner’s worldview, obtaining food is deeply connected to culture—what we hunt, fish and grow reflects our beliefs and who we are as individuals.

Paul Pouliot

I interviewed Paul Pouliot, Chief of the Abenaki Cowasuck Band located in Alton, New Hampshire on August 16, 2015. He also runs the social and cultural services organization group, COWASS North America (Cowasuck Band of the Pennacook-Abenaki People n.d.). Pouliot is an Abenaki educator who lecturers extensively on Abenaki foodways throughout the region. He is dedicated to preserving traditional foodways, especially how his Abenaki people used to eat. He has given multiple lectures about this, in colleges as well as tourist attractions (such as Strawbery Banke, in Portsmouth, which interprets New Hampshire life from the late 1600s to the mid-1900s). His focus is learning about traditional foodways by studying the Abenaki language. He provided several instances where a word for a type of plant described the plant in a certain way, thereby giving us insight into its usages (Pouliot 2005).

Pouliot described another foodways tradition, fishing. He said the Abenaki fished a lot more than they hunted, emphasizing how fishing was (and is) incredibly important to their culture. Even after World War II when the Indigenous peoples were becoming more acculturated and losing their old ways, fishing remained strong in his family and that tradition was passed down to him. He discussed a wide variety of fishing traditions, including catching eels by trapping them and then immersing the herb jack-in-the-pulpit in the water, thus stunning them. Then they would kill the eels and sun-dry them to preserve them “like dried oysters” (Pouliot 2005). He then brought up beaching, which is driving the fish onto the shore. He also related that the Abenaki people used the swordfish bill to hunt swordfish. Pouliot’s main focus was that of opportunistic hunting and fishing in which the Abenaki people would migrate seasonally depending upon where the food was available.
Like Charlebois, Pouliot emphasized how it would be impossible to eat exactly what his ancestors ate no matter how hard he tried, just as it is for anyone to try to recreate aspects of the past. He mentions that some species that the earlier generations of Abenaki people ate are now extinct. “You can’t roll back your food sovereignty and say bring back the passenger pigeon” (Pouliot 2005). Pouliot’s emphasis appears to be historically based; what was eaten then as opposed to trying to recreate that diet today. When I broached the subject of seed saving and sharing, he pointed out how unscientific it is. In his opinion, a person could claim a variety of corn came from Greenland, but this would need to be proven. Corn, he asserts, cross-pollinates too easily.

For Pouliot, food is indeed a complex and emotional subject. Perhaps because he is a retired mechanical engineer, he views Indigenous foodways and related topics from a scientific viewpoint. Although he did say that ceremony was important, throughout our interview he emphasized the need to study the Abenaki traditional ways as scientifically as possible. How can we prove that earlier generations ate this particular plant? Pouliot also comes from the perspective of a linguist. We discussed the different Abenaki names for the Jerusalem artichoke, and what each name tells us about not only the plant, but about the Abenaki language. For Pouliot, traditional foodways is also a story of a language and of a people.

Wampanoag Foodways

On the southeastern coast of New England live the Wampanoag people, also known as the People of the First Light. They have communities in Mashpee on Cape Cod, and Nantucket, Massachusetts, and as far south as Bristol and Warren, Rhode Island. The Aquinnah (Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head) are in Martha’s Vineyard, Gay Head Cliffs, and Aquinnah, Massachusetts (Eldredge n.d.).

Like the Abenaki people, the Wampanoag suffered a loss of 90% of their population through disease by the time the Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth (Nanepashemet 1990). As explained by Nanepashemet, the late director of Plimoth Plantation’s Wampanoag Indian Programs, the psychology of the Indigenous People who survived this epidemic was to find support where they could—through the Pilgrims. He stated that in order to fight off their rivals, they aligned themselves with the English hoping for their support (Nanepashemet 1990). In addition, like the Abenaki, the Wampanoag enjoyed a wide variety of foods, including fish,
game and vegetables to eat, depending upon the season (Dempsey 2000).

A narrative told by Nanepashemet in the documentary Nani: A Native England Story illustrates how identity ties into feasting with the Wampanoag peoples. He discussed how a two-year war broke out simply because of what a tribe was fed during an intertribal feast. According to Nanepashemet, the Narragansett and the Nipmuc peoples had a feast, in which the Nipmuc fed the Narragansett people eels and fresh water fish, which was considered “too musky” for the Narragansett people who were used to ocean fish (Dempsey 2000). He pointed out how this food was considered an insult by the Narragansett people, so war broke out. Nanepashemet used this story to illustrate how these tribes were similar and yet at the same time, “uniquely different” (Dempsey 2000).

David Vanderhoop

In 2008, David Vanderhoop, an Aquinnah Wampanoag from Martha's Vineyard, was interviewed by the Cultural Conservancy for the “Traditional Foodways of Native America—Oral Histories of Native Food Revitalization.” Vanderhoop is director of the Wampanoag Aquinnah Shellfish Hatchery and in charge of the Menemsha Pond, which has provided oysters for his ancestors for thousands of years (Cultural Conservancy 2008). His focus is making sure that the pond is healthy and can sustain the Wampanoag people, both now and in the future. Vanderhoop said that his father was the last person who was able to maintain a living year-round solely from growing oysters in this pond. By having both such a personal connection to this pond via his father, as well as a cultural connection, Vanderhoop acts as a catalyst by bringing together both the Wampanoag harvesting oyster traditions and his family traditions into the 21st century.

Vanderhoop also discussed a time when it was a lean year for him and his family of five. He had a gun, but only two bullets, and needed to feed his family (Vanderhoop 2008). He spent several weeks out hunting for a deer. Finally, he shot one and brought it home. He gathered his family around and they gave thanks, made a fire and cooked the heart and the liver immediately. In a traditional and respectful fashion, they ate the heart and liver first. He explained how thankful he was, being able to provide food for his family, and how this deer was a gift in such a tough time (Vanderhoop 2008).
Like Pouliot, Vanderhoop discussed gathering whatever foods are available, such as fish, game, nuts, fruits and vegetables, plus the concept of eating the food you are meant to eat: “. . . and the Creator has basically sent to us and said, ‘Yes this is for you, you take this bounty and be thankful for it . . . .’ The food the Creator has actually given you from your area to keep you healthy” (Vanderhoop 2008).

Conclusion: Our Corn Is Still Standing

In her TED Talk about the importance of seed saving and maintaining Indigenous varieties of food, Ojibwa activist Winona LaDuke began by discussing how the Ojibwa people, their culture, and their identity, is inextricably linked to their sacred wild rice. She said that spiritually, we have a relationship with our food and that they are “our relatives” (LaDuke 2012). LaDuke emphasized a need for a wider variety of Indigenous foods to counter GMOs (genetically modified plants). Her example was a special variety of corn, the Bear Island Flint Corn, from the Red Lake Reservation in northern Minnesota. She compared this traditional corn to the Monsanto Roundup Ready Corn, demonstrating how important Indigenous foods are for all of us:

. . . and that corn in itself, it came from Bear Island in the middle of Leech Lake, I got about this much from a seed grower. [Note: shows hands together indicating a small amount.] He gave it to me and now we have fields of it. Grows about this tall [Note: indicating about five feet tall] has big ears, doesn’t require irrigation, frost resistant. And when a sear wind comes through, Monsanto’s Roundup Ready Corn tips over, but our corn is still standing (LaDuke 2012).

LaDuke and the Indigenous people in New England give us a unique perspective into Indigenous foodways and how they are linked to Indigenous identity. All three people I interviewed—Liz Charlebois, Dana Benner and Paul Pouliot—had several things in common: they are all Abenaki who literally walk their talk. Each lives what they can of an Abenaki lifestyle. Liz Charlebois is not only a student of Abenaki foodways; she also is a traditional dancer and basket maker. Dana Benner and Paul Pouliot both lecture about the Abenaki way of life, and live it as well. They are not simply academics who live in so-called “ivory towers” and who look at the Abenaki way of life as an intellectual oddity, these three people live it and share its heritage.

Equally important is how Indigenous foodways start from seed, be it the seed of knowledge or the seeds being passed down. Within Indigenous communities, there is a deep sense of commitment in improving their lives and the traditions
of their nations. Regardless of colonialism, capitalism, and the modern age filled with Monsanto GMO plants and pesticides, Indigenous peoples and many others are saying, “Enough!” Through going back to the roots of their ancestors, they are bringing to the rest of the world a new sense of hope that we can indeed nourish our bodies—and our culture—at the same time.

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