

Celebrating Native American Food
Posted On: December 31, 1969

Laina Farhat-Holzman
Pajaronian
November 26, 2016

I have never seen a restaurant discussed and condemned on the front page of a newspaper before Saturday, November 4. On that day, Francis Ford Coppola, famous as the movie producer of The Godfather series and a posh winery he opened in Napa, was condemned for daring to open a restaurant featuring Native American foods. How terrible, said the critics, that someone dare to serve ethnic foods without growing up with it. (San Francisco Chronicle.)

Poor Coppola could have saved himself from this attack if he had just said he was honoring the ingredients native to the New World before the arrival of Columbus. I do that every year for my Thanksgiving Dinner, producing a delicious and historically accurate meal based on the agricultural genius of the Native Americans.

But to say that one is cooking Native American foods, what on earth would that mean? The natives of North America were essentially tribal people who had a rather simple diet of locally available foodstuffs: corn, beans, game animals, fish, and birds, local berries (blueberries), wild rice, and nuts (pecans and hazelnuts). There was no universal Native American cuisine, except for tobacco, which they grew and smoked. This product was unknown to the world until the Europeans adopted it and made it global.

Mexico, however, did have a real cuisine, a court cuisine enjoyed by its royals and nobles, based on an extraordinary agriculture that produced corn, beans, squash, from which they developed tamales and tortillas, still honored by Mexicans and many Americans even today. They also developed chocolate and vanilla, avocados, tomatoes, peppers of all sorts (sweet to hot), papayas and pineapples, and alcoholic beverages made from agaves. They also gave us rubber, quinine, and aspirin.

The Incas in South America cultivated a huge variety of potatoes and a system for freeze-drying them for storage. They also cultivated grains, quinoa and amaranth, both higher in protein than wheat, which they didn't have.

The natives of the northwest developed techniques for smoke-drying salmon. The Inuits of Alaska were experts at using and storing whale meat and blubber, a technology with appeal only to Japan.

But back to the unhappy Native American critics of Mr. Coppola's restaurant. They obviously do not recognize that food choices are not frozen in time. When new food elements arrive, women invariably learn to use them. Navajos consider "fry bread" a native dish. It is not. Their ancestors did not have cooking oil or fats derived from pigs until Europeans brought the pig and the sheep. Thai people never had any spice hotter than black pepper until the Spanish and Portuguese brought chili peppers.

Europeans who ate a polenta made from chestnuts replaced that ingredient with cornmeal, which quickly became a peasant mainstay.

The Irish made one variety of Inca potato their staple food, and when the crop failed, they starved.

One of the most interesting food exchanges occurred when the Spanish introduced European almonds, raisins, and aromatic spices to the Mexican natives and then introduced the hot peppers, tomatoes, and potatoes to India. The resulting exchange gave birth to mole sauce in Mexico and curry in India, both of them new.

I salute Mr. Coppola for honoring the agricultural genius of the Native tribesmen of North America. I think it is lovely for him to serve buffalo burgers on buns made from acorn flour (something never eaten by an Indian). I would happily eat that and salute the Native Americans for their skill in making acorn flour and the Great Plains Natives for their use of buffalo meat. And I will always thank them when I eat a tamale cooked by our Hispanic friends at Christmas.

It enriches us to know that today's global diet is the result of trade, the skill and ingenuity of women feeding their families in alien lands, and the festivals that

celebrate this trade. The initial food exchange was between China and Persia, by way of the silk route. These two great agricultural cultures fed us well. The foods of the New World made it global.

Try eating history. Our family does, and we love the results.

682 words

Laina Farhat-Holzman is a historian, lecturer, and author of God's Law or Man's Law. You may contact her at Lfarhat1