



Native American Chef Jessica Pamonicutt is filmed making bannock, a flat bread, for ABC-TV in Chicago.

## Preserving and Promoting Native American Culinary Traditions

CHICAGO HAS the third largest urban population of American Indians with more than 65,000 people representing about 175 tribes. Today, Chicago area chefs and gardeners are gaining ground in bringing awareness about Native American plants, foods, and flavors to others.

“The history of the plants is inextricably tied up with the history of the people, with the forces of destruction and creation,” wrote Dr. Robin Wall Kimmerer in her book “Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants.” As a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation and an American Distinguished Teaching Professor of Environmental and Forest Biology, Kimmerer notes, “losing a plant can threaten a culture in much the same way as

losing a language.”

Even though the Chicago region no longer possesses the pervasive aroma of wild onions or ramps from which its name was derived, the importance of native plants and traditional Indigenous crops is becoming increasingly recognized and embraced. Native plants have provided food and medicine, along with materials for ceremonies and practical needs for generations. “It is likely seasonal camps shifted across the landscape focusing on the timed harvest of bulbs, nuts, berries, seeds, and animals,” Lake County Forest Preserves Restoration Ecologist Ken Klick said. “It is unknown how these sought-after species’ populations responded to harvesting over time and throughout the millions of acres of prairie habitat, yet the plants’ vital dietary roles had to be recognized.”

### Native American Chef Jessica Pamonicutt

Jessica Pamonicutt, an enrolled member of the Menominee Indian Tribe of Wisconsin and Executive Chef and Owner of Ketapanen Kitchen, describes food as “the centerpiece of life.” Learning from her mother Linda to use her senses to cook rather than conventional measuring tools, Pamonicutt said she “puts prayers, good thoughts, and good feelings into each dish to create food that is healthy and true to our roots.” She runs the only Native American catering business in Illinois.

Striving to support Native or tribal-owned businesses, Pamonicutt connects with reservations in Minnesota and Wisconsin to acquire wild rice, maple syrup, wild blueberries, and wild turkey. Chi Nations Youth Council, an Indigenous community garden based in the Albany Park





Wild rice is the nutritious grain of a water-based grass. Here it is served with fruits and nuts.



Native American Chef Jessica Pamonicutt prays before a restaurant launch event for her Ketapanen Kitchen at the Trickster Cultural Center in Schaumburg.

Neighborhood, donated an 80-pound Gete Okosomin (a hybrid Miami squash originating 5,000 years ago) for Pamonicutt to prepare a tasting menu this past fall.

#### An Indigenous Food Sovereignty Initiative

This past November, United States Department of Agriculture announced the formation of the USDA Indigenous Food Sovereignty Initiative “to promote traditional food ways, Indian Country food and agricultural markets, and Indigenous health through foods tailored to American Indian/Alaska Native dietary needs.”

“Historically many USDA programs were not initially designed to support Indigenous foods or Indigenous ecological and agricultural knowledge,” said Heather Dawn Thompson, Director of USDA’s Office of Tribal Relations. “The Indigenous Food Sovereignty Initiative is a response to tribal nation priorities and an opportunity to reimagine federal food and agriculture programs from an Indigenous perspective.” Resources will include a video series on sustainable gathering practices and recipes for wild and Indigenous foods, along with information and staff to empower Indigenous and Native food producers.

#### Gina Roxas on Native Foods

Gina Roxas, an enrolled member of the Prairie Band of the Potawatomi Nation, who creates infused vinegars and honey incorporating native flavors, provides some products used in Chef Jessica Pamonicutt’s recipes.

Learning traditional methods of caring for

a getegan (large swath of cropland) from her grandmother and parents, Roxas shares her wisdom with volunteers at the Trickster Cultural Center (TCC) Medicinal Garden and the traditional crop gardens at Oakton Community College. Volunteers learn how to plant, care for, identify, and sustainably harvest plants and seeds. Comparing traditional ways of growing with modern permaculture, Roxas reflected that companion planting with the “three sisters” (corn, beans, and squash), no-till farming (by creating mounds instead of disturbing soil) and sharing space with wildlife is nothing new to Indigenous growers. Roxas estimates one-third of everything she plants will feed other species and includes extra plants to address this need. Garden “weeds” such as purslane are harvested to add to salad or make pesto, because each plant has a purpose to fulfill and a lesson to teach.

“Everything we do is intentional,” Roxas said. To maintain the integrity of the four different types of corn she raises, Roxas carefully times planting to avoid cross-pollination. Last year, Roxas’ traditional garden included her grandmother’s red dent corn, Oaxacan green corn, Navajo robin egg blue corn, popcorn, pinto beans, black beans, Great Lakes green beans, Potawatomi lima beans, and a massive ancient squash from the Pokagon Band of the Potawatomi Nation. A few years ago, seeds for a traditional tobacco plant that had been cultivated in Mexico for 300 years were donated for Roxas and her team to grow for gratitude offerings and ceremonial use.

Native and traditional plants have adapted to the climate over thousands of years, but extreme weather events are having an impact. At the Menominee Reservation in Wisconsin where Pamonicutt grew up, wild rice beds shrunk so much this past year that there was only enough wild rice to supply the tribe. Pamonicutt had to contact Indigenous growers in Minnesota, and even their harvests suffered from drought conditions. Renewing America’s Food Traditions (RAFT) has noted of 267 species of place-based heritage foods (over one-third of America’s wild foods considered to be “at risk”) are on the way to recovery.

Food indigenous to the Americas makes up roughly 70% of the food consumed around the world.

“As a Native woman and Chef, I felt like it was my obligation and responsibility to bring Indigenous cuisine to the forefront of Chicago’s culinary scene,” Jessica Pamonicutt said.


From corn, beans, and squash to chocolate, tomatoes, and melons, Native food sovereignty isn’t just for the First People, it’s relevant to all of us. 



PHOTO: THOMAS BALSAMO

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