

Try the Frybread, It's to Die For!: Exploring Frybread's Precarious Position Within Native
American History, Cuisine, and Values

The New Mexican desert in all its barren glory is, to some, inhospitable. The sun in the summer scorches the plains, leaving the air dry and the heat unbearable. It was 2006 and my mother, father, three siblings, and I were packed in a space gray Dodge Caravan. We were struggling to find a sense of relief with the handheld misting fans we bought out of desperation at a gas station a few miles back. These were normal conditions for driving to and from Albuquerque, but this scene would be incomplete without an essential family comfort food, which is frybread. Sweating and irritable, we pulled over to a humble vendor stand off Route 66. Waiting patiently and kicking my feet in anticipation, I was handed a crispy, golden brown disk drizzled with warm honey and dusted with powdered sugar. A childlike enjoyment spread through all of us as we devoured piece after piece of frybread. Despite our miserable conditions, we were left satisfied, standing in the middle of nowhere with sticky fingers, blushed cheeks, and goofy smiles. This sweet treat was perfect for the four year-old version of myself, but I have since developed a deep longing for the frybread my Grandmother made in her humble adobe home. Her cooking was a treasure every time we visited. After our sincere attempts at shucking corn for dinner, my siblings and I were rewarded with my Grandmother's steaming hot frybread, which was topped with butter and accompanied by a heaping bowl of red chile stew. To a child, bread that isn't smothered in sugar and the labor that goes into preparing food are not the most exciting, but I remember gleefully observing my grandmother and my father working the stove, listening to their banter and watching their hands. These moments are my earliest memories understanding that nourishment comes from both the food we eat and the people we eat with.

Native American frybread is structurally simple and easily conjured up. As listed on a magnet gifted to me by my Grandmother, the ingredients for “Indian Fry Bread” include 2 cups of flour, 1 teaspoon of salt, 1 teaspoon of baking powder, and $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of warm water. All of the ingredients are mixed, left to rest for 20 minutes, rolled out into hand-sized disks, poked with something sharp and fried in oil until golden. Frybread is a versatile staple among many tribal communities and while the ingredients stay relatively the same, their shapes vary. For the Laguna Pueblo—my father’s tribe—the frybread resembles a thick, tortilla-like disk while for the Osage Nation—my mother’s tribe—the dough is cut into triangles and puffed up into little, fluffy pillows. The varying techniques make for comical banter between families as everyone who makes frybread believes there is a so-called “right” way to do it. Some add sugar to their recipes and some serve the bread topped with meat, cheese, and lettuce, creating what we call the Indian Taco or a Frybread Taco, for the conscious Natives. Regardless of the slight variations, frybread in most forms largely shares one common feature. Void of any substantial nutritional ingredients. Frybread remains one of the most unhealthy foods in the American Indian diet with hundreds of calories, fat, and carbohydrates. The sweetly sickening disks my family and I wolfed down on the side of the road were probably somewhere close to 800 calories each. Because its caloric count is so high, frybread poses a serious dilemma in regards to Native American health and community values. Though frybread is largely associated with our community and maintains sentimental value to many, its presence is threatening to Indigenous American health and culture.

In order to understand how frybread parallels the health issues within tribal communities, the shared history and the environment we have grown into today must be highlighted. Prior to colonial intervention, Indigenous people living in the Americas were fluent in the ways of cultivating prosperity through agriculture and hunting. I cannot generalize the intricate natural

and social science of all the different tribes that make up the Indigenous population. This includes the 547 federally recognized nations, 400 more unrecognized and the over 80 million ancestors that were killed in the first 200 hundred years of United States history. Still, traditional food practices performed by early nations scattered across the continent were largely beneficial to both the land and communal health. Maintaining crops and engaging in a reciprocal relationship with the land is greatly influential to our ways of living. In her book *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*, Anishinaabe ecologist Robin Wall Kimmerer refers to this “exchange of life” between Native people and their surroundings as the Honorable Harvest. The Honorable Harvest is organized into intricate steps that serve as a guide for caring for the Earth. The guide is traditionally passed down orally and through various agricultural and spiritual practices. The practices provide a communal- kin type relationship to the Earth and its elements. Through an Honorable Harvest, nourishment is sustained. Kimmerer reminds us, “Sustain the ones who sustain you and the earth will last forever” (Kimmerer 183). The principles, “Govern our taking, shape our relationships with the natural world, and rein in our tendency to consume—that the world might be as rich for the seventh generation as it is for our own” (Kimmerer 180). The driving point Kimmerer urges us to realize is ecological practices established by the First Nations and Peoples were created to foster life well beyond the present generation. Strangely, however, despite the fact that this mindset is embedded in many traditional Native teachings, the health statistics for Native Americans stand in direct opposition. As stated from the Indian Health Service—a division within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services—“American Indians and Alaska Natives continue to die at higher rates than other Americans in many categories, including chronic liver disease... diabetes... assault/homicide... self-harm/suicide, and chronic lower respiratory diseases,” not to

mention the insidious role played by smoking and alcoholism in these categories as well. This list of disparities sets apart Native Americans today not only from the rest of the nation's population, but also from the generations of Indigenous people that came before. Unencumbered by centuries worth of sustainable teachings designed to nurture our communities, Native Americans continue to fall drastically short of adequate health.

The origin of frybread lies in between these unfortunate health statistics and the once vibrant image of Native people thriving within their natural environment. Frybread was developed by the Diné people—commonly referred to as the Navajo Nation—out of pure necessity. Like many tribes in North America, the Diné were subject to displacement through forced relocation by the American government. Having been placed into designated areas known as reservations, the tribe was abruptly torn away from the sources of food derived from their profound connection with their homelands. In their journal article “‘I Don’t Remember Any of Us ... Having Diabetes Or Cancer’: How Historical Oppression Undermines Indigenous Foodways, Health, and Wellness,” authors Catherine E. McKinley and Valarie Blue Bird Jernigan explain how American Indian practices were inhibited by relocation as well as the grave impact of colonial influence on Native health. McKinley and Jernigan detail how “forced relocation and restriction of U.S. Indigenous peoples to reservations caused starvation ... and disrupted Indigenous peoples’ ability to hunt, fish, grow, and gather food” (49). As an attempt to bring resolution and adhere to the treaties they had agreed on, the government began to distribute packaged commodities to these communities, which included “culturally unfamiliar foods, including white flour, bacon, sugar, salt, and coffee” (McKinley & Jernigan 50). Deprived of their usually abundant diet of corn, beans, local meats, greens, nuts, and fruit while being threatened by the harsh reality of starvation, the Diné created a bread high in calories—a

necessity for a hunger-stricken community—with the few ingredients they were given. Because numerous tribes were subject to food disruption and commodity distributions, the recipe for frybread forcefully nestled itself into common Indigenous cuisine. Although its recipe originates from these dark and unfortunate circumstances, frybread has grown beloved among many tribal communities.

The admiration that frybread has acquired, however, is not shared by all. Criticisms of the food are usually made because of frybread's imperialistic history. Many of the objections to frybread come from within the Native collective, but this food may actually spark a sense of hostility within someone who is ignorant of frybread's beginnings. As witnessed in 2011 in the California State University, Long Beach newspaper, former student Noah Kelly describes their first experience at an American Indian powwow in their article, "Pow Wow Wow Yippee Yo Yippy Yay." Beyond describing the powwow as an "underwhelming affair" and stating that "the entire scene felt disingenuous and cheap," Kelly also gives us their take on frybread. According to Kelly, frybread "essentially is an overpriced fried dough platter with bargain brand food products splattered on top, like a Mexican pizza from Taco Bell, but shittier." Kelly's hostile criticisms cast a disheartening light on this Native American ceremony. Powwows—as Kelly succeeds in omitting—are brimming with life and vibrant culture. Rejoicing in the fact that these ceremonies are no longer criminalized in this country, Native people have the freedom to make their music, share their art, and dance in traditional regalia. The intricate pieces worn by the dancers are painstakingly handmade and acquired over the course of many years. The powwow ceremony finds its origins deep within this continent's history, but the practices involved can be reduced down to a set of insulting remarks—in this case, by a writer gravely disappointed by tribal customs. Yet, what is curious about Kelly's take is that to the average person in the United

States, frybread is not a foreign concept. Frybread should not come across as strange to anyone who has ever eaten a waffle or a donut. In an even closer comparison, frybread is to powwows as funnel cake is to county fairs. A serving of each is roughly the same in terms of calories and their presence at their respective events is a large part of their appeal. Assuming that Kelly had been introduced to or even indulged in a plate of funnel cake—fried batter also “splattered” with “bargain brand” toppings—their notes on frybread seem more so dependent on predetermined misunderstandings than a substantial comprehension of Native culture. Kelly’s unjust remarks reveal the danger of misinterpreting Native customs. Failure to understand traditional practices can lead to those outside of tribal communities significantly reducing the meaning, context, and severity of Native American health and cultural issues.

Kelly’s article models the individual misconceptions of American Indian culture, but also reflects on the ways in which these views are assigned to Native Nations on a systemic level. Courtney Lewis, a Professor of Anthropology at the University of South Carolina, explains how frybread finds itself intertwined with political and medical institutions in her journal article “Frybread Wars.” Lewis begins the piece detailing the 2012 “Great Frybread War” in which nutritionists at the American Indian Health and Family Services Center—in order to “address the disease of diabetes, which had reached epidemic proportions in Indian Country”—strongly suggested that frybread be banned and restricted from Native diets altogether (428). This suggestion did not resonate well within the community whatsoever and the dietitians involved were almost immediately fired (Lewis 428). Though it might be easy to establish a correlation between frybread and the dreadful state of Native American health—as the dietitians did—the connection here conceals the entirety of the situation. Frybread is by no means the sole perpetrator of Native health disparities, but as Lewis argues, “scrutiny of ‘micro’ issues—here a

ban on frybread—reveals... a site in which we can see settler-colonial [power]... exercised against Native bodies” (Lewis 428). Lewis brings to light how Native customs and practices are so frequently assigned blame in this discussion of poor health—often, by the institutions that made frybread a necessity for Natives in the first place. The scrutiny is aimed at Native culture rather than the myriad of ways in which health issues persist institutionally outside of Indigenous control. Framing frybread as the ultimate culprit in this dilemma is inherently incorrect and conceals the true nature of inequality among First Nation communities.

Still, frybread—despite government rationing not being as prominent as it was over 150 years ago—is prevalent in Native cooking. We ought to question why frybread persists in Native diets, especially during a time in which Native people are extremely susceptible to threats like diabetes and heart disease. Tribal members across the country are assigning themselves the agency that was stolen from their ancestors. Powwow ceremonies and their vibrant displays of Native culture are a glimmering and hopeful example of bringing tradition into the future. In regards to the Native American diet, it is much more difficult to fully revert back to ancestral traditions within the economic and cultural environment of the United States. According to the First Nations Development Institute, Native Americans “have the highest rate of poverty of any other racial group in the nation... [and] almost one out of four American Indians are food insecure” (1). What these observations mean for tribal communities—many of which still reside on their given reservation—is that they either do not have enough resources to obtain food, do not have enough food available to them, or the food available does not have sufficient nutritional value; areas with high food insecurity are frequently referred to as “food deserts.” Consequently, Native communities often resort to common American sources of sustenance, which unfortunately include fast-food chains and store-bought, processed commodities. Kimmerer,

along with her discussion of the Honorable Harvest, reflects on this concept of food insecurity and writes, “we have constructed an artifice...where we perpetrate the illusion that the things we consume have...not been ripped from the earth. The illusion enables us to imagine that the only choices we have are between brands” (199). What Kimmerer expertly illustrates is how Natives are beyond disconnected from the practices and beliefs of our ancestors who knew how to live in tandem with their environment. Many tribes forced to assimilate to the manufacturing nation decades ago are still stuck living in accordance to foreign customs. It is no surprise then that frybread has persisted this far. What more basic ingredients to buy in a barren, desolate grocery store than flour, baking powder, salt, and oil? Taking into account that frybread has been a direct result of food insecurity for decades, it is clear that frybread has never been the trigger for a decline in Native American prosperity, but consistently a byproduct of the lack thereof.

Considering that frybread is a result of a lack of true Indigenous resources, I asked my mother whether or not she considers frybread to be a traditional food. I was met with an immediate, “yes,” that was followed shortly after by a confusing glance. She ultimately admitted, “I guess not,” on the basis that the ingredients were not entirely familiar to Indigenous people prior to settler colonization. This brief interaction is demonstrative of the conflicting relationship many Native folks have with frybread and with connecting to their culture at large. Without giving its circumstances much thought, frybread appears simple both in composition and meaning. With a closer look, it becomes apparent that frybread carries a wide variety of associations and connotations within its humble crust. To many, frybread is a symbol of love, comfort, and community. Behind the golden, crispy disks are vivid memories of family values, togetherness, and the celebration of Native culture. Interestingly, though, writer Kate Nelson offers a different suggestion in her article, “For Many Native Americans, Fry Bread is Tasty,

Nostalgic—and Complicated.” What she refers to as “the most ubiquitous” Native food, is “at best...a complicated symbol of Indigenous resilience....At worst, it’s a relic of cultural genocide” (Nelson). Nelson further develops this distinction between symbolic meanings by exploring various Native academics and restaurateurs who have decided whether frybread is worthy of embracing or rejecting entirely. Some like Sherry Pocknett from the Wampanoag, Nephi Craig from the Diné, and Ben Jacobs from the Osage have all opted in (Nelson). Their renditions of frybread have a place on the menu alongside dishes containing traditional Indigenous ingredients such as bison, venison, and the infamous Three Sisters: corn, beans, and squash. Frybread, in these restaurants, represents the strength within Native communities and the ability to persevere through colonial intervention, which was disruptive, disempowering, and severely violent. On the other hand, activists like Suzan Shown Harjo from the Cheyenne assign only the feelings of immeasurable pain towards frybread (Nelson). Harjo does not discredit frybread’s ability to foster community and resiliency, but rather highlights the illness, oppression, and hostility that linger in frybread’s recipe and the bodies of those consuming it. Conversations about what frybread symbolizes to those in the Native community directly contrasts the discussions centered on frybread’s physically unhealthy contributions to Native culture. Given these interpretations of frybread’s presence within Indigenous spaces, it is clear that the conflict surrounding frybread is largely dependent on the value and meaning assigned to the food rather than entirely on Native health concerns.

It would be simple to evaluate frybread through the lens of either symbolism or the health risks the bread poses to the community. However, the various symbolic traits assigned to frybread and Native American health are not exactly at odds with each other. By understanding frybread and all the associations that follow, we can begin to evaluate frybread’s influence on

Indigenous people, given that its very existence is subject to a wide array of complications. With its strong ties to both the negative and positive sides of Indigenous Americans' history and present values, frybread reveals to us how difficult it can be to navigate certain aspects of Indigenous culture. Native practices and values, by means of government control, have historically been under threat of suppression and extinction through the laws and residential schools that were heavily imposed on previous generations of Indigenous people. For instance, both of my great grandfathers were sent off to attend the Carlisle Indian Boarding School—one of the most notorious residential schools in the late 1800's. The goal of the residential school was to eradicate the remaining Native peoples. These widespread institutions served to assimilate Indigenous people by separating them from any culturally significant practices and demanding complacency with white customs. An enormous number of Native people were brutally stripped of their language, traditional clothing, rituals, and their birth names. Traditional understanding and practices that date back before the birth of Christ, are lost forever with those that were forced and removed from their families and homeland. Because many of our ancestors were subject to assimilation, Natives today are tasked with the challenge of reconnecting to a culture that has been abjectly and violently disrupted. The conversation around frybread aligns itself with this dilemma in that reconnecting Natives are left to determine the most beneficial way to revitalize Native culture. A large part of this process is understanding what is best for the health and wellbeing of the community. Much like the proposition to ban frybread altogether, any objections made against frybread may inherently be “yet another [way of] chipping away at Native identity and Native symbols of strength” even if we Native people are looking to improve the overall health and wellness of the community (Lewis 428). Those who are quick to defend frybread's place in Native diets may not only be defending their personal connection to the food, but also

the fact that frybread is one of few traditions that the First Nations have had the ability to keep hold of despite the actions taken to absolutely obliterate Native customs. Although frybread is home to a sea of beliefs, opinions, health statistics, political tactics, and symbols, what it all boils down to is whether we Natives choose to suppress frybread's bittersweet contributions to Native culture or embrace what has now become a traditional piece of our communities in an attempt to preserve what settler colonialism has left us with.

In the midst of redefining what our relationship is with frybread on our quest to rebuild our tribal ties, Indigenous Americans ought to rethink what true health and wellness look like for our people. In their journal article "The Culture is Prevention Project," Paul Masotti and other contributing authors establish a different approach to understanding what we constitute as healthy in Native American circles. The authors propose that reclaiming, celebrating, and participating in Native culture is the key to physical and mental health and that the loss of culture elicits severe risks (Masotti, et al. 2). The authors' research further illustrates how "higher levels of cultural connectedness are linked to higher levels of hope and satisfaction with life...[and] lower levels of depression" (Masotti, et al. 8). As the authors highlight, connectivity to Native American culture—an intricate portrait of our history, art, stories, and symbols—is the most vital aspect of Native health. Though it might seem contradictory, frybread and its controversial presence within Native cuisine is actually necessary for the sake of connectivity. Frybread and the discussions that surround it keep our culture alive. The discussions ensure that we are constantly reminded of Indigenous presence and that—unlike common stereotypes—Indigenous people are not a monolith. Our distinct values and practices differ greatly from tribe to tribe, family to family, and generation to generation. Truly seeing the diversity within Native communities is drastically important, especially for the vast number of displaced Natives like

myself who are looking to reconnect with their tribes. Aside from my father and his side of the family, my close relatives do not live on or anywhere near our tribe's reservation, which means our connection to community practices is very limited. Living out in the city for the majority of our lives, we did not learn our Native language, and our cultural identity is a mere accumulation of all that we've managed to gather from our grandparents. In a deeply felt way, those earlier colonial attempts to erase Native customs were successful in wiping out my family's ability to engage with the sense of togetherness that is woven into traditional Indigenous culture. Even so, in spite of our unfortunate disconnection from our larger community, my family and I still have hope that it is not too late to revitalize our relationship with our tribe by embracing both the pain and the many elements of joy, that is our story. I can confidently say that being able to sit with my beloved relatives, holding a sweet, warm piece of frybread, is a very important cue not only for reflection and remembrance of all that the many have lost and endured, but also for all that our culture has given to the very many of us for over a millenia. Frybread, though imperfect in its ethicality, is certainly something I consider worthy of preservation and commemoration.

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