

Introduction

Poor health resulting from lifestyle choice is a serious problem for many Americans, including Indigenous peoples. Heart disease, obesity, diabetes, cancer, high blood pressure, and alcoholism rage across tribal nations and have struck both the young and old. Fatty, greasy, salty, and sugary foods pervade our marketplaces, schools, and homes. Restaurants serve portions of processed foods that are more than an adult should eat at one sitting, while television and video games have replaced sports and other outdoor activities. Deceptive and manipulative commercials paid for by the food industry have brainwashed consumers into thinking that processed foods are nutritious and, as a result, we flock to fast-food restaurants, buy unhealthy products, and are now facing the consequences. All Americans face the potential for developing bad lifestyle habits, but it is particularly distressing to see that Natives across the Americas have lost touch with their healthy, traditional methods of cultivating, preparing, and preserving foods, in addition to the consistent activity that kept them physically and mentally fit.

Despite all the publicity and discussions about diets, many Indigenous people (like many other Americans) have not been particularly interested in improving their diets and activity levels. Even though we are pelted with information that tells us about the dangers of processed, salty, and fatty foods, many Americans continue to eat badly even though they are becoming ill from their unhealthy lifestyles. Sadly, it usually is not until a person is diagnosed with diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, or lung cancer that he or she begins to consider what they are eating, drinking, and smoking, and how much they sit around.

There is hope. By educating ourselves about nutrition and making informed decisions, most health problems can be prevented. As *Time Magazine*, October 20, 2003, reports: “90% of diabetes and 80% of heart

2 *Introduction*

disease cases can be directly attributed to unhealthy eating and lifestyle habits.”¹ Many of us are paying attention.

Not all Indigenous people fall prey to the seductive ads of McDonald’s playgrounds that lure children—and therefore their parents—into the store. Many of us ignore the television ads showing how cool one can look while eating chocolate shaped like potato chips or the ads telling us that we too can ride skateboards like maniacs while drinking sugar and caffeine-laden soft drinks. We immediately recycle the newspaper coupons for macaroni and cheese and rich desserts. We drive past Long John Silver’s, Burger King, Wendy’s, and Del Taco without a glance—even if our children whine and demand that we stop. We exercise daily or as close to it as we can get. If we do falter in our quest to eat healthy, unprocessed foods, it is in small amounts and not very often.

Right now, Indigenous people are planting, cultivating, and preserving foods. Many Natives are involved with the Native Seeds/SEARCH project, a nonprofit organization dedicated to finding and preserving seeds used for food, dyes, and fiber. The Center for Sustainable Environments at Northern Arizona University (led by Gary Paul Nabhan, noted environmentalist-conservationist who started the Ironwood Alliance and initiated the Traditional Native American Farmers’ Association) is involved in a number of projects and collaborative initiatives that focus on increasing food security and agricultural sustainability on the Colorado Plateau.² In Chinle, Navajo youth who are members of the Damon-Bahe Boxing Club box at a gym built by the Cal Bahe family in an effort to help young people avoid drinking, smoking, and gangs and to gain self-respect.³ The Nez Perce, Umatilla, Warm Springs, and Yakima tribes are attempting to rebuild salmon, lamprey, and sturgeon populations above Bonneville Dam through the Columbia River Anadromous Fish Restoration Plan. The Nez Perce are restoring camas bulbs.⁴ Through the Inter-Tribal Basin Cooperative, dozens of tribes have purchased and raised thousands of bison. Winona LaDuke founded the White Earth Land Recovery Project with healthy food initiatives such as Native Harvest and Mino-Miijim.⁵ Dream of Wild Health, in Farmington, Minnesota, is a garden cultivated with recovered seeds traditionally used by Native Americans in order to educate and inspire

Natives about nutrition, pollination, and traditional gardening methods. The Penobscot Indian Nation, along with the State of Maine and the U.S. Department of the Interior are attempting to restore Native sea-run fish (Atlantic salmon, sturgeon, shad, bass, herring, etc). Mike and Karen Guilfoyle, a Montana couple, gather mushrooms, can vegetables, and cultivate their gardens in Idaho and Montana. Waziyatawin Angela Wilson retains her grandmother's corn and cooks exceptional wild rice that is harvested by her tribe in Minnesota. The list of examples of Indigenous people across the Americas continuing to cultivate traditional, unprocessed foods, attempting to restore the ones that have fallen from use or have disappeared, and who take small steps to eat and exercise as their ancestors did, is extensive.

Although a Cherokee friend joked about this project that, "As an Indian I do my duty and eat as much chocolate as I can" (because cacao is indigenous to the New World), this is not exactly the kind of helpful advice that we should emulate. Nevertheless, all this productive activity begs the question: If so many people are trying to eat traditionally, then how is it that, according to the Native American Diabetes Initiative (at <http://www.nativeheritage.net/>), in some tribes, Type II diabetes has stricken half the tribal members? Why are so many Natives obese and suffering from heart disease, high blood pressure, and other serious health problems directly related to an unhealthy lifestyle? How can we become healthy and take back our pride and self-esteem? This book attempts to answer those questions.

Chapter 1, "The State of Indigenous Health," is a discussion of the distressing problems we have created for ourselves by eating an abundance of fat, salt, grease, and sugar (and too much of everything else bad for us) and traces what happened after Natives adopted processed foods. While initial contact benefited many Natives (notably from the addition of cattle, sheep, goats, chickens, peaches, and other fruits and vegetables), it did not take long before we began to overeat and to prepare food with too much grease, salt, and sugar. Wheat may have added a new form of bread to the table, but many Natives overindulge in that "empty" food, fried bread, and others suffer from celiac disease, a serious problem stemming from the inability to digest gluten or wheat. Until Europeans brought cattle and goats from the Old World, Natives did not drink milk.

4 *Introduction*

Many Natives are lactose intolerant (unable to process milk products) and yet they are falsely told by the dairy industry that the only way to acquire calcium is to ingest milk products. And as we have seen from statistics about diabetes, they eat too much sugar.

Chapters 2 and 3, “Traditional Diets” and “Traditional Activity,” are brief overviews of traditional diets and activities, including what some tribes ate, how they prepared their food, and how their lives revolved around hunting, gathering, cultivating, and preserving. Chapter 4, “How Did We Arrive at This Unhealthy Situation?” explores evidence that shows us our ancestors were physically strong, and while some did suffer from diseases, these diseases were not self-induced, that is, they did not die from gluttony, arteriosclerosis, or other problems associated with overindulgence. This chapter also discusses the findings of Weston A. Price, a dentist who traveled the world in the 1930s studying cultures that ate no processed foods, and remained physically fit and cavity-free until the “nonprimitive” diet of the outside world worsened their health. The chapter then traces what happened through the centuries to make Natives so sick and explores the main factors—both realities and excuses—that keep Natives from regaining their health.

Chapter 5, “What Are We Ingesting?” serves as a wake-up call for those who have not paid attention to their diets. Using a sample diet chart as an example, readers can track their own diets for one week in order to assess how many nutrients they consume and to understand what they are lacking. Chapter 6, “How Many Calories Do We Need?” allows readers to calculate how many calories they actually must have to function in comparison to how many they are taking in. In order to lose weight, we must burn more calories than we take in. In order to maintain weight, the amount of calories we take in and burn up must be the same. What we must keep in mind, however, is that all the food we eat must be nutritious, not just “low calorie.”

Chapter 7, “Changing What We Eat,” offers suggestions for changing our diets so that we consume nutritious foods only in the amounts we need. All the suggestions revolve around this ideology: Unprocessed foods, that is, fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean meats, and low-fat dairy products, provide the foundation for a healthy body. It may not be possible to give up all the tasty, processed foods that surround us,

but if we primarily eat vitamin-, mineral-, and fiber-rich foods, then a few processed “treats” every now and then will not do as much damage as if we consume fatty, sweet, and salty foods and drinks every day.

Chapter 8, “Recovering Our Fitness,” offers ideas for changing a sedentary lifestyle, ranging from a simple walking program to lifting weights to physical programs such as hiking and exploring the natural world around us while we exercise. Chapter 9, “Planting Gardens,” offers step-by-step instructions for planting either large gardens in our yards or as part of a neighborhood project; and for those who have limited or poor land to garden, there are also suggestions for container gardens.

Chapter 10, “Become a Fitness Activist,” is a call for action so that our families, communities, and tribes can stay healthy and fit. There are many things we consumers can do to ensure that we get quality foods, from protesting misleading and deceptive ads to campaigning for nutrition education in our schools. We can demand nutritious meals for our children who eat at school cafeterias, educate others about diet and exercise, and become environmental activists to make certain our water, air, and soil are clean and free of pollutants. We can also become aggressive in our efforts to eat right and to exercise; in so doing, we become role models for others. None of these suggestions is bizarre or difficult. They are common-sense ideas that are intended to inspire readers to consider new ways of doing things. A complete return to hunting, gathering, and cultivating in the same ways our ancestors did is not usually practical, but all of us can manage to do some of it. Cooking just one traditional dish regularly, sowing a garden, and beginning an exercise program are greatly empowering.

The second part of this book, “Indigenous Recipes,” is a compilation of dishes from my family and from many of my colleagues that initially featured only New World foods; but I also realized that some of my favorites (namely garlic, beets, asparagus, Brussels sprouts, broccoli, okra, carrots, and sweet peas) are Old World foods. In addition, some of my taste require these European, Asian, and African spices and foods in modern recipes, so I have included recipes that feature Old World foods and spices, but these ingredients are optional and are marked with an asterisk (*). The “cookbook” section of this book is brief, mainly because there already are countless cookbooks on the shelves, dealing

6 *Introduction*

with specific places (Italian, Mediterranean, Santa Fe, Chinese), specific types of foods (breads, salads, garlic, vegetables, meats), and types of cooking (barbecue, electric slow cooker, bread maker, wok). Readers have literally thousands of books, Web sites, and magazine articles from which to choose. The recipes included here are “basic,” that is, they are simple and can be enhanced according to readers’ tastes. With so many fruits, vegetables, and meats to choose from, the possibilities for delicious and nutritious meals are almost endless. Beware of Web surfing for “traditional Native foods,” however, because there are numerous Web sites with hundreds of recipes that feature butter, lard, sugar, and processed foods—the very ingredients we should avoid.

All tribes face a similar dilemma: Once our people were strong and physically healthy. Now, we are facing a health crisis of epidemic proportions. The ailments discussed here should be enough incentive to convince Natives to reconsider a traditional diet, or at least to incorporate parts of a traditional lifestyle into their current, unhealthy one. If we have knowledge about how we got into this situation, and we want to improve ourselves, then what shall we do about it? There are a few things to keep in mind:

Fresh, unprocessed foods are healthier than fried, processed ones. Homegrown foods can help develop pride and healthy bodies. Natives gathered, hunted, and cultivated foods that kept them healthy. Foods eaten at fast-food joints are the opposite.

Food we prepare in our kitchens give us control over what we and our families eat. When we buy food at fast-food restaurants, we are giving others control over what we consume.

Preparing food in our kitchens gives us pleasure and peace of mind. It can be relaxing and gives us time to think. Cultivating and preparing our foods slows us down and puts us in a calm state. We can escape from the stress of our jobs and fast-paced lives. Read Carl Honore’s *In Praise of Slowness: How a Worldwide Movement Is Challenging the Cult of Speed* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004) for suggestions on how to escape the general rush of today’s society and how to slow down and savor the time you have allotted to you. Pulling weeds, fertil-

izing, picking fruits and vegetables, peeling potatoes, shucking and grinding corn, and making meals are among the best ways to relax and think. And, when you are in the kitchen preparing meals, people tend not to bother you.

A little bit of exercise, every day, adds up in the long run.

No one can force you to eat unhealthily, to smoke, or to be sedentary.

Educate yourself about nutrition and fitness and you can change your life.

Working on one's diet and activity level is only part of what we should be doing. We also need to investigate what our tribes ate, how they cultivated crops, what and how they hunted and fished, and how they prepared foods and saved seeds for the future. How can we participate in the preservation of agricultural techniques? What are our tribes' ceremonies associated with food? What are the names of our foods and animals in our tribes' languages?

Making choices about the foods we eat can be greatly empowering, not only for our bodies but also for our minds. The traumatic effects of colonization continue to be devastating, wreaking havoc on our emotions and thoughts. Feelings of insecurity, identity confusion, anger, frustration, and despair are common among Natives. Looking to alcohol and drugs, or physically abusing others, are not rational ways to find relief. We must deal with our emotional and psychological issues holistically. We must engage our elders. We must recover our traditional indigenous knowledge to discover how our ancestors solved their problems. We must care for our families and communities so that we become part of the circle of people who support each other in times of grief and pain. We must become educated about our tribes' rich histories and cultures to develop pride in ourselves. We must become politically active and pressure our tribal councils to make certain that they deal fairly and impartially with the myriad issues that tribal people face (educational systems; policy and laws, including juvenile justice; treaty rights; economic development; environmental protection and management; health care; housing maintenance; language programs, and so on).

But our tribal leaders cannot change everything for us, and many

8 *Introduction*

Natives live in urban environments far from their tribal communities. What we can do for ourselves is to change our diets and activity levels and thus change our health. By eating well, we are less likely to crave dangerous substances, to lash out at others, and we are more likely to become happy, contributing members to our families, communities, and tribes. Working to eradicate racism, stereotyping, and discrimination, as well as striving to improve school curricula, social services, and the environment, gives us strength and provides hope for others. Becoming aware of our tribes' history, learning our language, engaging our elders, and becoming politically active all contribute toward decolonization, building pride, and shaping our identity as Indigenous people. Improving diets and lifestyles is all a part of the larger picture of empowering our tribes, our communities, our families, and ourselves. In other words, as we heal ourselves, we can assist in healing others.

It is also not my intention to create another “diet” book. Books discussing the latest fads such as Atkins, South Beach, Dr. Phil, the Zone, Suzanne Somers, and so on, have proliferated to the point where many are available at truck stops and gas stations. Indeed, the number of diets on the market at any given time is staggering. All these recent diets, in addition to the old ones (i.e., the grapefruit, cabbage, peanut butter, candy bar diets) all promise the same thing: quick weight loss with minimal effort. Books and discussion about the low-carbohydrate craze, for example, have infiltrated every aisle of the grocery store and seemingly every commercial on television. The irony of all this focus on losing weight is that diets such as the “low-carb” do not work. They do not work because once a person goes off the diet they regress back to their old eating habits, and whatever ailment they had to begin with returns. As Chris Carmichael, bicycling champion Lance Armstrong's coach, says about the low-carb craze: “To think carbs make you fat is wrong. You're fat because you're not exercising. . . . You can't just cut carbs—or cut protein or fat, for that matter—like every trendy diet has for the past twenty years. That's dysfunctional. You need them all. To simply blame a food type for us being fat is bulls—.”⁶

There is one reason for all these diet books: Millions of people desire to be thin and they will try almost anything to reach that goal. Many of these people are gullible and will fall for just about any strange

diet suggestion. For example, I find the taboo against our Native staple foods—bananas, potatoes, and corn—on the South Beach Diet to be bizarre and impossible for me to obey, and the emphasis on fatty meat in the Atkins Diet to be equally so. However, for some people who have never watched their diets or have never exercised, curbing certain foods can help them to lose weight and to maintain motivation. Keep in mind, however, that a “successful diet” (you lose weight) could just as easily be one such as the Chocolate Diet, because not only will one get tired (and literally sick) of eating chocolate and won’t eat so much after a few days, but other foods will be eliminated or reduced as well and therefore calories. You may lose weight eating only chocolate, grapefruit, or whatever, but how will your health be affected? There is such an obsession with thinness in this country that many people have forgotten that it is more important to be fit and healthy.

We need lifestyle changes, to make us physically and mentally strong, and a permanent alteration of our detrimental eating and activity habits. This does not mean you can never again eat your favorite foods. It is also true that to deny yourself chocolate or a French fry “from now on” is to set yourself up for failure. A dozen M&M’s can satisfy that urge for chocolate without indulging in a piece of sugary and caloric chocolate cake and is much less damaging. Having a few French fries is better than eating a whole, fried apple pie. One day off from exercise is better than an entire week. But we shouldn’t have to constantly battle our own will power. If we primarily eat the same foods that our ancestors consumed, we can once again become strong. After a few weeks of “traditional” eating, we will prefer strawberries and plums over chocolate. We will crave skinless, grilled turkey breast and sautéed squash instead of a greasy fast-food hamburger. Corn bread and beans will taste better than the caloric, nutritionally void fried bread. As Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice commented to me not long ago:

I was amazed to discover how much better I felt when I started increasing the Indigenous content of my diet. It’s been a slow process, but thoughtfully substituting turkey for beef, cornmeal for white flour, and adding more beans, squash, fresh corn, fruits, and nuts to my diet while cutting back on beef, chicken, wheat, sugar,

and milk products has made me not only more energetic, it's made me more mindful about my body and its needs. It is a gradual process—moderation in all things—but I've been surprised at how well it's worked.

I am not arguing that we should return to eating only foods indigenous to this hemisphere. Some purists might argue that we must stay truly “traditional,” but it is my feeling that there are too many nutritious foods from the Old World that complement this hemisphere's offerings and we must take advantage of them. Many of my favorite foods are from the Old World and I cannot imagine grilling squash without sprinkling garlic on it or making *banaha* without adding sweet peas. The point is that “eating simply,” that is, consuming fruits, vegetables, lean meats, and low-fat milk products can make a tremendous difference in our physical and mental health.

What I am trying to accomplish here, then, is to give a brief overview of what our ancestors' diets and health were like, how it is that we deviated from that healthy path and how we—and non-Natives striving to find a way to become healthy—can regain our fitness. Anyone wanting more information about traditional agriculture or the debates about “Indians as ecologists” would do well to consider the variety of books that make environmental management, agricultural techniques, and pharmacology their focal points. I am attempting to document the variety of Indigenous foods and to suggest how anyone can be creative in the kitchen. It does not take extraordinary effort, but it does require thought and determination.

Neither the recipe contributors nor I are nutritionists, but consider that the majority of physicians we go to see about our various ailments and concerns have little or no training in nutrition. Physicians attempt to fix physical problems, but usually they do not know how to prevent them.⁷ If some Natives can step forward with healthy, personalized suggestions that have worked for them, then perhaps others can benefit. After decades of reading about nutrition and exercise, I have a fairly good grasp of what my body needs to stay healthy. At 48 years of age and with only 16% body fat (at 5 feet 10 inches and 138 pounds), plus no physical problems (except job-related stress headaches), and because of a

lifetime of eating right and exercising, I and others who follow this same lifestyle may be on to something right. My diet has always consisted of fruits, vegetables, lean meats, and whole grains. This strong nutritional foundation allows me to indulge in occasional non-nutritious additions (wintergreen Lifesavers, gum, and tortilla chips, pizza, and dinner wine are my “vices”). I have been interested in nutrition most of my life, beginning in junior high when I began to play competitive sports. I realized that paying closer attention to what I ate and drank would enhance my abilities in the sports I played. I continue to make it a point to know how many nutrients that my family and I consume.

While those of us who pay attention to the quality of food we eat generally have lower body fat and better health than those who do not, we can attest to the reality that it is not always easy to stay disciplined. We know that eating an apple is better than mindlessly munching a handful of potato chips, and that a spinach salad is more nutritious than greasy fish and fatty hamburgers from a fast-food restaurant. But the stark reality is that chips and oily fish are made by their manufacturers to be cheap, flavorful, and readily available. If we decide to go against our better judgment and indulge, we often tell ourselves that just a few will not hurt. The problem begins when we continue with that line of thought.

It does take self-control and will power to eat healthily and to exercise on a daily basis. I can attest that it is possible to talk yourself out of liking cookies and salty, greasy snack foods. It is up to us to make ourselves physically and mentally strong again so that we may take care of our families and our nations. We can only do so much to combat racism and prejudice, but we can control what we put in our mouths and how much we move around. We must take responsibility for our health and for the well-being of our children. In so doing, we pass on a legacy of self-respect and tribal strength to future generations.

Nothing comes easy, especially after a lifetime of bad eating habits and no exercise, but it is not that difficult, either, to become healthy. We can take small steps. We can try healthy foods we usually ignore when we shop. We can discover ways to cook that leave our meals less fatty, sugary, and salty. We can walk instead of driving. We can park farther away from stores in the parking lots. We can take stairs. We can start a

walking or biking regimen with family and friends. We can learn to play stickball, to shoot hoops, and to swim.

We all make decisions throughout our days and many of those choices revolve around food and activity. Do we pick a fatty cheeseburger, milkshake and super-sized fries, or a chicken salad, tea with honey, and cup of berries? Greasy and salty kung pao chicken or sautéed vegetables? A large sugary soda or cold water with a squeeze of lime? Watch four hours of television or ride bikes through the neighborhood with our families and play Frisbee in the park?

It is very easy to make the wrong choices about food, drink, and exercise; but it is just as easy to make the healthy ones.