

Good Enough to Eat: Cooking up native traditions

By CHRIS SMITH
SPECIAL TO THE P-I

In his best-selling book, "The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals," author Michael Pollan argues that America doesn't have a strong culinary tradition. We tend to make our food choices more on the bases of weight consciousness, perceived health benefits and convenience than on a historical sense of what's good to eat. Ironically, many of us are overweight, unhealthy and ultimately inconvenienced by our diets.

If we go back several hundred years, though, we'll find culinary tradition. Native people in North, South and Central America based their diets on locally available fish and game and plants they either gathered or grew. Theirs was a sophisticated food tradition; they didn't simply wander around chewing on jerky.

Depending on what part of the Americas they hailed from, Native Americans might have enjoyed such cultivated crops as beans, corn, peppers, potatoes, squash and tomatoes. Combined with fish and game and supplemented by food that could be gathered -- including avocados, berries, chocolate, mushrooms, nuts, roots, vanilla and wild rice -- these foods formed the bases of cuisines. Like the French, the Italians and the Thais, American Indians had a well developed sense of what was good to eat.

Though modern American foods have found their way into the larder all over the world, it's been hard to find a comprehensive cookbook based on our native food traditions. That changed three years ago with the publication of "Foods of the Americas: Native Recipes and Traditions" by Fernando and Marlene Divina and the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian (Ten Speed Press, 224 pages, \$39.95).

The Divinas are eminently qualified to write this book. Fernando is a highly regarded chef who has featured Native American ingredients prominently in his cooking.

Currently, he's the executive chef at Tendrils, the restaurant of the Cave B Inn at SageCliffe in the Columbia Gorge and the head of the Center for American Food & Wine, at the same location.

Marlene Divina, of Chippewa, Cree and Assiniboine heritage, is a writer and partner with Fernando in Divina Restaurant Concepts, a firm that specializes in restaurant planning services and menu development. Among the couple's accomplishments is the design and menu for the cafe at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian.

Their book works on several levels. It's such a handsome work that it can sit on a coffee table and entice visitors into perusing its contents. The food pictures make your mouth water. And there are pictures of bags, baskets, bowls, leggings, pots and utensils that look like art of the highest order. Finally, there are black-and-white photos from earlier times, courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution archives.

On a practical level, "Foods of the Americas" is a cookbook with 140 easy-to-follow recipes. Most of these recipes don't try to be authentically tribal. Rather, they try to catch the spirit of native cookery by using American ingredients and in some cases, traditional combinations.

Thus, a salad recipe features the South and Central American grain quinoa, along with other American foods such as corn, peppers and tomatoes. But it also calls for non-American ingredients such as sherry vinegar and black pepper. That approach works for modern American palates, while a fussier insistence on the purity of recipes probably wouldn't.

In the short time since we've owned the book, Ann and I have cooked four recipes, ranging from a complex Oaxacan Black Mole to simpler dishes such as Quinoa Salad, Wild Rice and Corn Fritters, and Dungeness Crab and Scallop Chowder. Without exception, these dishes have been excellent. We look forward to trying the remaining 136.

"Foods of the Americas" also manages to work as a window to native attitudes about food. Interspersed with the recipes and photographs are essays by nine native writers. These contributions are short, often humorous recollections that personalize the book in a way a mere compendium of recipes couldn't.

Any book so knowledgeably and lovingly put together was bound to win an award, and "Foods of the Americas" did -- the James Beard/KitchenAid Book Award. This book belongs on the shelf with your finest and most frequently used cookbooks.

Let me leave you with a recipe used with permission from the author.

QUINOA SALAD

SERVES 6 TO 8

- 2 cups quinoa, rinsed and drained
- 1 large tomato, finely chopped
- 1 small red bell pepper, minced
- 1/2 cup fresh corn kernels or canned white hominy, drained and rinsed
- 1/2 cup coarsely chopped cilantro
- 1/4 cup minced fresh mint
- 1 teaspoon minced garlic
- 3 tablespoons corn oil
- 3 tablespoons sherry vinegar
- Juice of 1 lime
- 1/4 teaspoon sea or kosher salt
- 1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

Bring a large saucepan of water to a boil over high heat and add the quinoa. Return to a boil, then decrease the heat to medium and simmer for about 10 minutes. The quinoa is cooked when all the grains appear translucent.

Drain the quinoa through a fine-mesh strainer, transfer to a baking sheet and spread out with a fork. Allow to cool completely.

Transfer the quinoa to a bowl and add the tomato, bell pepper, corn, cilantro, mint, garlic, oil, vinegar, lime juice, salt and pepper. Toss well and serve immediately.

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