

Recent Advances in Furthering Food Sovereignty



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In November 2021, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced the formation of an Indigenous Food Sovereignty Initiative under the leadership and guidance of the USDA's Food and Nutrition Services. As defined during a 2007 global forum,

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations.

(Declaration of Nyéléni, Sélingué, Mali, February 27, 2007). Efforts to further food sovereignty focus not just on ensuring that people and communities have sufficient food to meet their physical needs, but also on strengthening the communities' rights to maintain control over the gathering, production, and distribution of their foods. Such efforts also help to further continued sharing of local knowledge and skills passed down within indigenous cultures

for sustainable production of food that promotes health and well-being.

As part of the USDA's Initiative, the Department's Office of Tribal Relations has partnered with several organizations to work with American Indian tribes in developing projects that raise awareness of Indigenous perspectives about food and agriculture, which will inform future programs and policies. Several individual projects are currently underway including the creation of two regional Indigenous seed processing centers, development of a video series on wild food foraging and sustainable gathering practices, publication of a manual to help interested Native producers transition from cattle to bison, and increased staffing to expand domestic marketing opportunities for Native producers.

Indigenous food sovereignty recently gained greater popular attention on March 2, 2022, when Stephanie "Pyet" Despain, a Native American and Mexican American chef, won FOX News' Next Level Chef cooking competition hosted by celebrity chefs Gordon Ramsay, Nyesha Arrington, and Richard Blais. Chef Despain is a member of the Prairie Band Potawatomi Nation and spent part of her childhood on the Osage Indian Reservation in Oklahoma where she first learned Native foodways from her grandmother. She also has a small e-commerce business through which she sells some of her culinary products, including Wojapi sauce, a traditional, braised berry sauce that she used in the winning dish in the Next Level Chef's burger challenge. In an interview following her win, Chef Despain talked about her desire to use her success as an opportunity to reconnect with the Prairie Band Potawatomi community and Native food to learn more about food sovereignty so that she can educate others through the use of Native ingredients and methods in her cooking and help incorporate Indigenous food into the conversation in the broader culinary world. Chef Despain will have the chance to further her efforts as one of four Indigenous chefs who have been selected to prepare food for the American Indigenous College Fund's Epicurean Award to Support Scholars fundraising event in New York City on May 17. Indigenous peoples are among the historical creators of knowledge about food and agriculture, and such efforts offer the hope and power to preserve, recover, and build on their knowledge and capacity.

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