



LOCAL TRADITIONS: THE SPIRIT PLATE

Written by Bill Kent | Photos by Callie Broaddus

Just before everyone sits down at the table, Chris “Comes with Clouds” White takes a large dinner plate and fills it with small portions of venison leg, fire-roasted oysters, tallow-fried quail, pemmican soup, three sisters stew, a dollop of pawpaw ice cream, and all of the other dishes guests bring to the November Frost Moon feast. But instead of digging in, he takes it outside.

“This is to welcome our ancestors,” explains White, a Cherokee senior elder and medicine man who lives in Bluemont, Virginia, with his wife René Locklear White, a member of the Lumbee tribe and a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel. “We want them to know we are grateful for the life they have given us and all the good things they have done for us.”

Exactly where he will put the plate on his 22 acres he won’t say. “The spirits would rather not be watched as they’re eating,” he explains.

What if birds, squirrels, or even a bear gets to the food first?

“The spirits can handle that,” he says. White adds that he has gratitude for all creatures. “We’re grateful every day for the Creator and what we’ve been given. Living creatures are part of that gift. Gratitude for this is one of the tenets of Native American people.”

What better way to celebrate than in a November ceremony that’s all about being grateful for the harvest? The autumnal chill makes the land and its inhabitants want to rest and relax, and friends, family, and community members come together to enjoy themselves in one big, bountiful feast.

However, this isn’t Thanksgiving.

The Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian is clear that some people with Indigenous ancestors find the holiday to be problematic. An educator’s guide on the museum’s website states that many Native Americans have difficulty with the holiday because “the Thanksgiving celebrated today is more a combination of Puritan religious practices and the European festival called Harvest Home, which then grew to encompass Native foods.” The holiday can also be a reminder for some Native Americans that whatever peace was shared during that famed Massachusetts gathering did not last.

Long before Europeans came to the American continent, Indigenous people held numerous celebrations that involved feasting.

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Chris White, René White, and Carrie Fox.

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“Different tribes do different things, but we all have ceremonies around the solstices and equinoxes,” White notes.

Thirteen times a year, Chris and René take turns hosting feasts in their extended community that follow full moons. This month they will celebrate the “Frost Moon,” which traditionally marks the end of the harvest, the gathering of seeds, the drying, smoking, and preserving of food, and the distribution of food, firewood, and



Chris and René take what they want, fill a new box or basket with pickings from their gardens, and then take it to the next neighbor in the community network.

René says she never sees bruised fruit or over-ripe tomatoes in the Harvest Bowl. “My sister Janice taught me you would never think of keeping the best for yourself. She and our mother taught us many ways to preserve foods. If the receiver



Carrie Fox, a member of the Lenni-Lenape, and her husband, Nathan, a carpenter, former Marine, and Cherokee, have a small farm in Berryville where they raise quail, ducks, chickens, honey bees, and seasonal vegetables. For them, the Feast of the Frost Moon is “one more way of reconnecting,” Fox says. “Growing up, we knew about our heritage but we were not immersed in practicing traditions. Chris and René have created a kind of intertribal space for us, and others who want to rediscover the natural world.”



other staples to those in need.

Preparations begin with harvesting. René says that “planting and harvesting food is part of our spiritual DNA. We only take what is in season, when it is at its peak.”

Her mother used to tell her that what isn’t in season is poison. René tries to follow that guidance because “food is so much healthier, tastier, and beautiful when it’s at the peak season. We try to grow, forage and harvest all we need right here, so you won’t see us in a supermarket that often.”

The best of their harvest goes into the Harvest Bowl: a box, basket, or easily handled container filled with items that neighbors want to share.

looks at the harvest as a gift, then they can’t help but honor that gift by using what they receive and sharing their gratitude with others.”

On the morning of the feast, Chris splashes cold water on his face. “Water is life, life is ceremony,” he says. Then he goes to his outdoor fire pit, places a bit of sweet grass on the wood, and lights it up.

Every guest invited to the feast must bring a dish that has special meaning to them. Some will also bring seeds for next year’s planting.

Fox finds that growing, celebrating, and eating food that is part of, or relates to, the world of her ancestors is the most direct and satisfying way to do that.

And she’s not alone. Among this year’s best-selling non-fiction books is “Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants,” by Robin Wall Kimmerer. A member of the Potawatomi Nation and an environmental science professor at the State University of New York in Syracuse, Kimmerer wrote the book for her academic peers. She never expected it to sell 1.4 million copies, or to be

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Left: René White. Middle: Chris White. Right: Carrie Fox.



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translated into 20 languages.

“If we use a plant respectfully, it will flourish,” Kimmerer writes. “If we ignore it, it will go away.”

Kimmerer told *The Washington Post* that she “was sensing, as an environmentalist, this great longing in the public, a longing to belong to a place. I think about how many people have no culture, have no ancestral home.... That sense of not belonging here contributes to the way we treat the land.”

Just last month, Kimmerer was among several artists, writers, scientists, and educators to get an \$800,000 grant from the MacArthur Foundation.

Chris and René call this newfound awareness of Indigenous knowledge a “New Tribe Rising.” Earlier this year, René received a fellowship from the Lumbee Tribal University at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke to map out America’s native food trail. In December, she will go to Minneapolis to meet Oglala Lakota Chef Sean Sherman, whose restaurant, *Owami*, was just named the best new restaurant in the United States by the James Beard Foundation.

Owami is one of a dozen or so American restaurants now serving what Sherman calls Indigenous cuisine. (Among the first is the Mitsitam Native Foods Café at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C.)

In his 2017 cookbook, “*The Sioux Chef’s Indigenous Kitchen*,” Sherman asks, “Why isn’t the Indigenous diet all the rage today? It’s hyperlocal, ultra seasonal, uber healthy.... This is a diet that connects us all to nature and to each other in the most direct and profound ways.”

In a recent *New Yorker Magazine* profile, Sherman spoke of the importance of seasonal feasts. “The best food just happens to us when we get together with friends and we just try things. As long as it’s fresh, grown by us, in season, or, if it comes from somewhere else, without any preservatives and processing — and we maintain our respect for the food as a gift we have been given — the results are almost always amazing for all of us. This isn’t about one of us being a great chef and the others sitting in awe of what that person makes. It’s about all of us sharing what we have, what we can do, what we can teach and enjoy.”

That’s why Clay Morris is invited so frequently to celebrational feasts. A restoration ecologist, ethnobiologist, and native wisdom keeper, he also teaches seasonal foraging courses at the Salamander Resort & Spa. Whenever a feast is scheduled, he takes his time to thoughtfully select a dish to make from over a hundred locally foraged Indigenous dishes that he knows.

How about an appetizer of pickled cattail shoots, pine cones, wild onion flowers, ramps and elderberry capers? Or smoked trout with mashed sunchokes, lamb’s quarters sauteed with wild onions, garlic mustard pesto, roasted burdock root, pashofa (pork with hominy), washed down with dandelion root tea and, for dessert, heirloom pears poached in elderberry syrup?

“All are made with ingredients that are right here in our backyards, prepared through the lens of traditional knowledge, and then brought to the level of fine, contemporary cuisine,” Morris says. Thinking it over, he decides he will bring the paw-paw ice cream. “Everybody loves it.”

Morris isn’t at work on a cookbook — yet.

Guests tend to arrive early to finish cooking their dishes or just sit around the fire and talk. “The fire is always a safe place of conversation,” White says. “It’s a time to catch up on how we’ve been, what new things are happening in our life and, as always, what we have to be grateful for.”

Any kind of complaining — about jobs, traffic, politics, social media, sports teams — is discouraged. A smudge bowl of burning sage and sweetgrass sits near the fire pit. The fragrant aroma helps guests cleanse themselves of negative feelings.

Children help with some of the cooking. “Kids will show an interest in everything and anything, if you will let them. It doesn’t matter if they grow up to be chefs. It’s important that they learn our ways so that they can feel a connection to the land and the Creator, and pass that on to their children,” White notes.

As the night darkens, guests sit around the fire in a circle. Each guest takes a turn talking about their dish and why they brought it.

Chris takes samples for the spirit plate. When he returns, there is a brief pause “in which we thank the Creator for the gift of life and everything else we have received.”

Then they dig in. **ML**

Top: René’s homemade soups. Middle: Makings for a harvest basket. Bottom: Honey made by Carrie Fox and seasonal gourds.