Handpicked: Stories from the Field

Season 3, Episode 2: Handpicked Presents – the Indigenous Health and Food Systems Podcast: "Environmental Dispossession, Land and the Environment"

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Produced in collaboration with: Dr. Sonia Wesche, Victoria Marchand, & Dr. Josh Steckley

Transcript

Speakers
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Laine Young: **LY**
Marylynn Steckley: **MS**
Kahente Horn-Miller: **KHM**
Brette Thomson: **BT**
Marc Miller: **MM**
Riley Yesno: **RY**

Students
Ida Harkness: **IH**
Emily Charman: **EC**
Chanel Best: **CB**
Brette Thomson: **BT**
Havailah Arnold: **HA**

{[Intro music]}

LY: Hello and welcome to another episode of *Handpicked: Stories from the Field,* a podcast from the Laurier Centre for Sustainable Food Systems.

I'm Laine Young ...

AD: And I'm Amanda Di Battista.

Today we have a really special treat for you all!

LY: Yes! We are sharing an episode of the Indigenous Health and Food Systems Podcast called "What are Indigenous Foods"?

This podcast is hosted by Dr. Marylynn Steckley, an Associate Professor at Carleton University in Global and International Studies. It was produced in collaboration with Dr. Sonia Wesche and Victoria Marchand at the University of Ottawa, and Dr. Josh Steckley, a Post-doctorate Fellow at the University of Toronto, Scarborough. The IHFS podcast was developed through a Shared

Online Projects Initiative Grant, a partnership between the University of Ottawa and Carleton University

LY: Indigenous Health & Food Systems is a podcast with the goal to elevate the voices of Indigenous scholars and is a part of a larger project with online teaching modules fused on Indigenous Health, food sovereignty, and social determinants of health.

AD: If you're looking for more details, please check out the show notes for a bibliography, teaching tools, and links to other relevant information that we used to produce this episode.

LY: This intro was produced on the lands of the Neutral, Anishaanabe and Haudenosaunee people. The original podcast was produced on the traditional, unceded territories of the Algonquin nation. We encourage you all to check the land acknowledgement link in the show notes to learn more.

AD: We are so excited to share this incredible episode with you all.

LY: We hope you enjoy it.

{[Musical Interlude]}

MS: When Brett was young, she loved bannock.

BT: That was a pretty big part of my childhood, actually. Like when we would go to the fair or something like that, or we'd go up to Saskatoon, like we would go get bannock burgers and things like that.

MS: Wait, bannock burger. Is this a thing?

BT: It's just like a burger, but you use bannock on either side and then you'd have some sort of meat in the middle. I mean, I would usually just have beef, but you can put elk, things like that.

MS: I hadn't heard of this. For me, a burger is sort of the epitome of the global industrial food system. Among pizza and fries, it is arguably the apex of fast food. But even the bannock--is bannock an Indigenous food? The flour and lard and salt and baking powder. These were all introduced during the colonial period. So, is a bannock burger an Indigenous food? Is bannock? This is the theme of our podcast episode: What are 'Indigenous Foods'?

KHM: [Introduction in Kanyen'kéha/Mohawk language] I am Kahente Horn-Miller: and I am announcing myself in my language, which is Kanyen'kehà. I am from the Bear Clan [translation in Kanyen'kéha. And I bring greetings, and I want to acknowledge, too, that I'm a guest here in unceded Algonquin territory.

MS: Kahente is an Associate Professor in the School of Indigenous and Canadian Studies and the assistant Vice President of Indigenous Initiatives at Carleton University, and we'll get her take on Indigenous Foods that are important to her, and we'll also explore her understandings of

Indigenous foods through her stories of Sky Woman and the metaphor of "the common pot". So what are 'Indigenous foods'? I asked Kahente, and I asked some of my students, and there was a common theme:

Student: Moose meat and pemmican.

KHM: Usually just flour, a little bit of baking powder.

Student: Fresh caught fish.

KHM: Some salt.

Student: Deer...

KHM: Maybe some lard.

Student: The Three Sisters: beans, squash and corn, question mark? Maybe some milk.

Student: And, like, meat.

KHM: And you make like a sticky dough and put it into a greased pan.

Student: Bannock Burger.

Student: Bannock.

KHM: And then you flip it and it makes into this hot, hot bread that some people might know it as Bannock.

MS: Most students mentioned bannock. Kahente also talks about bannock. I wasn't surprised to hear of bannock, but this did raise questions. How do we think about foods like bannock? One student said that her experience of eating bannock with Indigenous people in Thunder Bay made her feel a bit better about Canada.

Student: Field trips growing up, we would sit by the fire and make bannock and jam with Indigenous people, like while we're getting a story told to us. I'm very glad to have those experiences. Like I feel like, I don't know, a better Canadian for it almost in a sense, just because like I feel like that's real Canada. Like we have obviously like the settler version of Canada, but like that was Canada first.

MS: But some Indigenous folks say bannock is more complicated. In a CBC interview, Chef Sean Sherman of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, founder of The Sioux Chef and the Indigenous Food Lab, was asked if bannock is an Indigenous food. He said "no".

SS: People really need to know what true North American foods are because it's not fry bread, tacos, or bannock. It goes way deeper than that.

MS: Sherman grew up on the government commodity food program, where the government provided staples, canned foods- the most famous American blocks of cheese, and things like flour and sugar and lard--those were dominant. In one CBC article, he said, those commodity foods "have really nothing to do with who we are". And he's not the only one. Rich Francis, a Gwich'in chef, says he doesn't consider fry bread a traditional Indigenous food because it's made

from wheat, which was imported. Wheat was brought over and introduced to North American landscapes with European colonizers. Wheat production played a big part in destroying Indigenous foodways and the grasslands that cover so much of North America. So, for Chef Francis, bannock and fry bread are symbols of survival. But others, like First Nation Chef Christa Bruneau-Guenther talks about fry bread as authentic and traditional. And Wet'suwet'en Chef Andrew George says, "You won't find a native community in Canada where bannock is not made in one form or another."

The question of bannock; whether bannock is an Indigenous food- it's not straightforward. The concept of 'Indigenous Foods' is not straightforward either. For Kahente Horn-Miller, the question "what are Indigenous foods?" it doesn't quite hit the mark. Food is important, but not just for taste or calories or an individual experience. For Kahente, food is relational.

KHM: I was always taught the importance of food. I think up until the age of five, my mother only spoke in our language to my older sister and I. So, my first language is Kanyen'kéha, Mohawk. And when I was five, we had to leave our community and come to Ottawa because my mother had to work, and she was raising us on our own. But we would always go back to Kahnewake, which is about 2 hours from Ottawa to visit family. And I always remember the very first thing that they would do when we came to the house is offer us food and we would sit down and have [Kanyen'kéha word for] meat pie, other things. And it was always that point of reconnection for me, I think that I remember the most. And it's by that example, I think, that I do the same when someone comes into my house. The very first thing I do is say, "would you like something to eat?".

MS: So, what is this story telling us? The emphasis is not on what Kahente ate- on the calories and ingredients. The emphasis is on her memory of relationships around food. There are relationships and encounters embedded in foods that we can learn from. Relationships in family and community for sure, but also colonial relations. Bannock comes out of those colonial encounters. So, if we play with the idea that bannock is not necessarily 'traditional', that bannock doesn't exist without colonialism, is there some historical picture that we can reach back to and find an authentic Indigenous Food system? If so, what did this look like and should it be recreated? Kahente has written the story of Sky Woman. It's a creation story that reveals how Sky Woman journeyed to the earth, what that journey looked like for her, what she brought with her, and how she related to the living things around her.

KHM: You know, Sky Woman she had in her hands and in her hair short shrubs, pieces of the natural world up there. She brought them to Turtle Island, to the natural world here. And that's how it began.

KHM: In her writing, Kahente illustrates that this natural world started with relationships between Sky Woman, what she brought, with the new earth, with the animals. Here's Kahente reading an excerpt from her book chapter in *Living on the Land: Indigenous Women's Understandings of Place* in which she adopts the first-person voice of Sky Woman.

KHM: "As I danced, the roots and seeds from the sky world that were caught in my hair fell to the newly formed earth, while my dancing feet covered them over with good black earth. Immediately, tiny green shoots began to appear. New life was beginning on earth. It was as though my relatives in the sky world were with me, planting in my garden, ensuring that my

baby and I wouldn't starve. I looked down and around me in wonder. At the new life growing. Cornstalks began to appear, growing taller and forming silken hair that peered from their crown. As the minutes went by, beans and squash also appeared. I could see all kinds of herbs and fruits and medicines in the ground around me, and the air started to smell of the fragrant aromas of rich black soil and lush plant growth. I could also see bright red strawberries and large black tobacco leaves."

MS: In her clip, Kahente talks about simple foods: corn, squash, beans and strawberries. I asked Kahente what she learned from Sky Woman.

KHM: She danced, these things fell and they began to grow. And the animals came and they watched and they celebrated with her. So, when we eat, it's a celebration. The time to come together. She teaches us that in that story, that idea of coming together and gathering around these foods and eating them and sharing and enjoying them. And in rewriting it, it brought that forward and I realized: oh, this is me. This is what I do.

MS: This spirit of coming together, of sharing and of celebrating was an important reminder to me. And I wondered how Kahente brought this teaching into her own life, into her own kitchen. How does she make Sky Women's historical lessons relevant today?

KHM: I think on a deep level, it's considering those kinds of ways that my ancestors ate and trying to bring that, those ideas forward into my own kitchen. You know my diet is, is reminiscent of that, of that pureness. Where a berry is a berry and it tastes, you know what a berry tastes like. The way I cook is very simple. I'm not into the heavy sauces. Salt and pepper. That's it. Clear broth, very simple foods. I love the taste of corn for itself. Beans- you know what they taste like. And I think to her, you know, those are the kinds of tastes and smells and feeling in her tongue that she experienced when she was here. On a deeper level, I think it speaks to this idea of, you know, this is the way my ancestors ate and I really enjoy it.

MS: This image of an ancestral way of eating and relating to food has practical value in Kahente's kitchen. But it doesn't mean romanticizing the past or ignoring the challenges and joys of contemporary Indigenous food systems and diets.

KHM: Living in the 21st century is very different than what our ancestors experienced. You know, we know that. And we live it. When a student sits in one of our classes, they understand that we're not something of the past. We are alive. We are here today. We've adapted. If we didn't, we wouldn't be here. I wouldn't be sitting here talking to you using my Kanyen'kéha name. You know, I don't have an English name. My name is Kahente. And I'm able to say that and say proudly who I am. Because we have the ability to adapt. We were strong. We are strong.

MS: This adaptation: the encounters of colonialism, they've impacted Kahente's kitchen and her favourite foods even, and how she envisions relationships with her community. She shared a bit about her favourite food.

KHM: I would have to say Kanyen'kéha meat pie. That's one of my comfort foods and that's one of the foods that I associate with my community. It's a very simple pie, a meat pie. It's almost like a tourtiere, but it's mixed pork and potatoes where you make it into a very soft kind of a filling and that all it is salt and pepper and spices in a pie crust.

MS: So, for some, there are authentic ancestral foods or traditional diets that are important to understand and maybe even to recreate. But there are also adaptations, foods that have blended and that have become central to Indigenous communities and people through encounters. How do we make sense of respecting and valuing traditional Indigenous diets and contemporary foodways today? How do we bring together understanding and respect and desire to keep alive traditions and ancestral foods in the contemporary postcolonial world? For Kahente, her diet is a product of those encounters and that adaptation and strength and resilience that came out of colonialism plays out in her food practice. And meat pie is one example of how the colonial project impacted diets in her community.

KHM: I also associate it with the history of our community and the poverty of our community. You know, we had to find ingenious ways to make filling food.

MS: Kahente's discussion of meat pie reminded me of what Chef Francis said about bannock and fry bread being symbols of survival. So, when we think about whether foods like bannock or meat pie that come from imported wheat or canned goods or sugar, whether they're traditional, authentic Indigenous foods, we're missing the mark, maybe. The question is less about authenticity and more about situating these foods within colonial histories and encounters.

Again, Kahente frames this in terms of relationships.

KHM: We have to remember when we when we think about Indigenous communities of the past, our Indigenous nation, there was a lot of interrelationships in terms of foods, you know, influences, the songs. We know of songs like we have a song that we sing in the longhouse as part of our gathering. It's the alligator song. Are there alligators in New York State in the Mohawk Valley? No. But what this is indicative of is the trading that went on, the movement that took place, the sharing of knowledge and the gifting that went on. And I think, you know, if we were to reframe some of that thinking in terms of the food systems and the foods that we shared with one another.

MS: For Kahente, that reframing of food systems should be rooted in longstanding Indigenous principles of respect, and equality, and relationships. But this discussion is not apolitical or romanticized. It's something that needs to be actively created with intention and with recognition that the advent of bannock and meat pie are rooted in relationships of colonialism. Kahante is clear that this has had persistent, damaging effects.

KHM: Our concept of equality comes from the natural world. No one human, animal or object is better than any other. Rather, we are all part of a whole. For a time, however, these core elements of respect and equality have changed and become distorted. Through the effects of colonization, however, our natural abilities and responsibilities have been eroded and our identities and self-perception have been negated, disregarded, re-visioned and reconstituted according to the ideals of another people. In many cases, we have come to believe what someone else says of us and taken it on as our own truth.

MS: So how do we move forward? What kinds of food systems would Kahente like to see? Brette asked this question.

BT: In your sort of utopia, what kind of food system would you want to see? Like what does that look like for you?

MS: Again, Kahente used a story to discuss her vision, the metaphor of the Common Pot, of resource sharing.

KHM: One of the symbols is the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Belt. That Dish with One Spoon Belt represents this idea of the natural world as a shared resource. It's a philosophy that we would use and is represented in that belt that when we would have to travel through another nation's territory, we would first ask permission to do so, and that we would also ask permission to draw from the resources of that land. So that would be gathering foods, hunting, the water, things like that. But we would also agree that we would put down our weapons of war. So, when you sit down to a common pot of food, weapons are put aside and everyone eats from the same pot and you take the same spoon and you share that. When you sit down to that common pot of food, you're agreeing not to fight and not to disagree. Also, too you are asking to share in these resources. These resources are there for everyone. The bowl, the common pot. That concept, right, it informs who I am.

MS: For the United Nations, Indigenous knowledge is closely considered in the search for appropriate and sustainable ways of managing natural resources. But many of these discourses imply that Indigenous people are the holders of some kind of magical secret that can save the world. But Indigenous knowledge and Indigenous foods are diverse and highly localized.

According to the political scientist in the School of Natural Resources and Environment at the University of Michigan, Arun Agarwal, “it makes much more sense to talk about multiple domains and types of knowledge with differing logics and ways of knowing, than to focus on differences between Indigenous knowledge and Western knowledge or Indigenous foods and Western foods”. Indigenous foods are about more than nutrition and calories and individual food items. Indigenous foods are diverse, in process, and, for Kahente, about connections, encounters and relationships. But there's also something valuable and centering in remembering the food of the past and learning from the story of Sky Woman, from the sharing and from the relationships with each other and all living things.

Here's a final reading excerpt from Kahente.

KHM: I knew that as long as I had the sacred medicine, along with corn, the beans and the squash, my baby and I would be fine. And the animals appeared and sniffed delicately at the new growth. I stood still and spread my arms out, welcoming the animals to taste what had come from the sky world. "Come and eat" I said. “I planted all the things that we will need in this world to survive. My relatives from the sky world made sure we would not starve. I planted them as we did together in the sky world. And I want to share them with you”. (Singing) and they sang together.

{[Musical Interlude]}

MS: Kahente Horn-Miller is an Associate Professor in the School of Indigenous and Canadian Studies and Assistant Vice President of Indigenous Initiatives at Carleton University. Kahente, thank you for joining me on the Indigenous Health and Food Systems podcast.

KHM: Thank you so much for inviting me. It's been fun.

MS: Music for this podcast is by Keith Whiteduck. Thanks also to Sonia Wesche and Victoria Marchand and Josh Steckley. This podcast is funded through a Shared Online Partnership Initiative Grant through the University of Ottawa and Carleton University.

I'm Marylyn Steckley and this is the Indigenous Health and Food Systems Podcast.