



Out of the frying pan

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 Big Picture

By TANTRI WIJA | The New Mexican
August 16, 2006

It may be a cliché to say that wherever one finds North American Indians, one finds frybread, but it isn't necessarily untrue.

Whether or not one believes the simple fried dough has a genuine place in a tribe's traditions, almost every Native American gathering features the soft, often sugar-dusted dough.

The role of frybread in American Indian culture dates to the second half of the 19th century, when tribes forced to move to reservations were given “commodities” — or government rations — consisting largely of flour and lard. With these unfamiliar, limited and nutrition-poor ingredients, they created frybread and adopted it as a dietary staple.

According to Joyce Begay-Foss, the director of education at the Museum of Indian Arts & Culture, “(Frybread) was a survival food that came out of being rounded up and put in captivity and given commodities that (American Indians) weren't used to having. (The government) even gave them coffee beans, and they weren't used to coffee. It made them sick.

“They struggled to figure out what to do with flour and lard and things that they weren't used to eating,” Begay-Foss, a Navajo, said. “And that totally changed their diet.”

Most cultures have some version of a simple fried dough; frybread is not all that different from a doughnut, a beignet, a sopaipilla, a buñuelo, a johnnycake or a poori, for example.

Indian frybread also is similar to the fried dough that American settlers ate while crossing the prairie on their way west. In John Steinbeck's novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, the impoverished, itinerant Okies eat fried dough for every meal.

Frybread also has become popular in the larger American culture. The Cheesecake Factory — a national casual-dining chain — has frybread on its menus, and one can sometimes find it, dressed up in truffles or gourmet chocolate, among the selections of some of the pricier restaurants around town. Ironically, even the government has officially recognized frybread: It was named the state bread of South Dakota in 2005.

Though eating fried dough is not unique to American Indians, many permutations of the dish are distinctively Native. In New Mexico, for example, one can order a Navajo burger — a burger folded in frybread — and Navajo or Indian tacos — frybread topped with beans, cheese, lettuce, meat and other savory fillings. The replacement of the tortilla with the round frybread is distinctive to Southwestern tribes.

Health controversy

What is also uniquely Native is frybread's role in the history — past and present — of the people who consume it. Indian frybread has lately come under fire for its unhealthiness as well as its cultural implications.

In her January 2005 article in *Indian Country Today*, American Indian activist Susan Harjo asked her fellow Indians to abstain from frybread because it contributes to the high obesity rates on reservations and, as she put it, gives the impression of Natives as “simple-minded people who salute the little grease bread and get misty-eyed about it.”

Harjo is referring to frybread's origins as a product of government rations, implying that by continuing to consume frybread every day, American Indians are perpetuating the indignities thrust upon them in the past.

“If frybread were a movie, it would be hard-core porn,” Harjo writes. “No redeeming qualities. Zero nutrition.”

Not everyone would agree with Harjo.

Lois Ellen Frank, author of the award-winning cookbook *Foods of the Southwest Indian Nations*, is part Kiowa and a doctoral candidate in cultural anthropology at The University of New Mexico. Frank has been doing extensive research on foods, especially the connection between food and culture in American Indian society.

“Frybread has really an interesting history,” Frank said, “and from a Native American perspective, it's split.

“On one side they love frybread, they cook it every day, and they consider it a traditional food. (So) I would say yes, it is traditional from the perspective that it's been around for 150 years.”

But there's now a second wave of reaction to frybread that Frank calls the “resistance.”

“Because diabetes is rampant — as high as 90 percent on some reservations, primarily Type II — the diet has deviated so far from its origins that people are very concerned,” Frank said.

She also points out that frybread has become symbolic of some Native health problems even if it's not necessarily the primary cause of those conditions.

“My prediction,” Frank said, “is we're going to see frybread become iconic. There used to be T-shirts that said ‘Frybread power.’ Now there are T-shirts with a red circle with a line through it (meaning) ‘No frybread.’ We want to be healthy.”

The reintroduction of traditional foods such as cacti, beans, corn and pinocha, as well as an increase in activity associated with farming those foods, could be key to turning the American Indian diabetes epidemic around, Frank said.

“When you reintroduce traditional food,” she said, “it brings back all the culture associated with the indigenous food, which is as vitally important as the food itself. Not only is the food important from a health standard, but all the group activities have been given new life, things that have almost disappeared — a renewal of old traditions that have cultural importance.”

Moderation, modification

In small amounts, contemporary versions of frybread — topped with cinnamon and powdered sugar or honey or chile and beans — are a recipe for pure heaven. In larger amounts, the dinner-plate sized delight has been linked to obesity on reservations.

There are ways to reduce the fat content — by frying the bread discs in vegetable oil, for example. Some feel that nothing is as tasty as the original lard-fried version, but Begay-Foss insists it can be just as good made with corn or vegetable oil.

“The trick is to have really hot oil — the bread absorbs the grease if you don’t. I’ve been out on the reservation where people have put blue cornmeal in the dough,” she said. “I think there are some people looking at changing the recipe so it’s a little healthier.”

Begay-Foss also points out, however, that frybread cannot be blamed for everything; there is a strong junk-food culture on many reservations, she said.

“People who are at risk with diabetes should try and avoid these kinds of foods,” she said.

Not going away

Both Begay-Foss and Frank hope American Indians will reintroduce healthier Native foods into their diets rather than banish frybread and blame it for health problems that are probably caused by a larger pattern of poor nutrition and high junk-food consumption.

“(Frybread) has become a traditional food,” Begay-Foss said, “even though it wasn’t one prior to the 1800s. But things change with time, and now it is a traditional food.”

Given the considerable persuasive powers of a warm, sugary piece of frybread and its deeply entrenched position in American Indian culture, it’s doubtful that large numbers of American Indians will abstain as Harjo advocates.

Both Frank and Begay-Foss say that, eaten once in a while, frybread can satisfy the human craving for fat, salt and sugar like nothing else.

“We go to a lot of social things,” Begay-Foss said. “The frybread’s there; it’s not going away. It has a lot of cultural value: You mention the word ‘frybread,’ and you think of being somewhere on the reservation. ... But people have to do it in moderation.”

Recipes

The following recipes are excerpted from *Food of the Southwest Indian Nations: Traditional and Contemporary Native American Recipes* by Lois Ellen Frank (10 Speed Press, 2002):

You can serve frybread plain, with powdered sugar sprinkled on it, or made into an Indian Taco (recipes below). “Either way, it’s delicious,” Frank writes.

INDIAN FRYBREAD

(Makes 16 breads)

4 cups flour
2 tablespoons baking powder
1 teaspoon salt
2 cups warm water
Vegetable oil or shortening, melted, for frying

Mix the flour, baking powder and salt in a large bowl. Gradually stir in the water until the dough becomes soft and pliable without sticking to the bowl.

Knead the dough on a lightly floured surface or in the bowl for 5 minutes, folding the outer edges of the dough toward the center.

Return the dough to the bowl, cover with a clean towel and let rest for 30 minutes to allow it to rise.

Shape the dough into egg-sized balls and roll out to a thickness of 1/2 inch (or thinner, for crispier bread) on a lightly floured board. It is traditional to use your hands, but a rolling pin can be used as well. Try it with your hands and then, if you are having difficulty, roll the dough out.

Place a piece of dough between your hands and pat it from hand to hand as you would a tortilla or pizza dough until it has stretched to 8 to 12 inches in diameter. Repeat with the rest of the dough.

With your finger, poke a small hole in the center of each piece to prevent bursting during frying.

Pour about 1 1/2 inches of oil into a large frying pan or saucepan (the saucepan's greater depth will prevent the oil from splattering) and heat over medium heat until the oil is hot but not smoking.

Carefully place a piece of the dough in the hot oil, slipping it in gently to avoid splattering. Cook until the dough turns golden brown and puffs. Turn over with two forks and cook until both sides are golden brown.

Remove and drain on paper towels until the excess oil is absorbed. Repeat this with each piece of dough. Keep warm between two clean kitchen towels in the oven set on low. Serve immediately.

“The Indian Taco has become one of today's best-known Native American dishes,” Frank writes. “It is served at national fairs, intertribal powwows, and community events, both on the reservations and in urban areas. Its base, unlike the more familiar Mexican-style taco, is a piece of frybread.”

INDIAN TACOS: TRADITIONAL VERSION

(serves 6)

1 cup dried pinto beans
4 green New Mexico or Anaheim chiles
1 tablespoon olive oil
1 onion, coarsely chopped
1 pound lean ground beef
1 teaspoon salt
6 pieces Indian frybread
2 cups lettuce, shredded

2 tomatoes, diced
2 cups grated cheddar cheese

To prepare the pinto beans, soak them overnight in water to cover. The next day, drain the beans and place them in a saucepan with fresh water to cover. Bring to a boil, decrease the heat and let the beans simmer until the skins break and the beans are soft, about 3 hours. It may be necessary to add water as the beans cook to prevent them from burning and sticking. After the beans are cooked, remove from the heat and set aside. You should have about 2 cups of cooked beans.

While the beans are cooking, roast, peel, seed and devein the chiles and then chop them.

In a skillet over medium-high heat, add the oil and sauté the onion for 3 minutes until translucent, then add the ground beef and cook for another 5 to 6 minutes, until the meat has browned. Pour off any fat. Add the beans, chiles and salt and decrease heat and cook for another 5 minutes. Remove from the heat and set aside.

Make the frybread according to the recipe and set aside.

Reheat the meat, bean and chile mixture so it is warm and begin building your tacos. Place some of the meat, bean and chile mixture, about 1 cup, on top of each piece of frybread. Place some lettuce, diced tomatoes and grated cheese on top of the meat, bean and chile mixture. Serve immediately.

“This version of the Indian Taco includes ingredients that you will not see in the traditional version,” Frank writes, “except for its frybread base.” The recipe calls for anasazi beans instead of the traditional pinto beans — but you can substitute pintos if you cannot find anasazis, which are usually available at Santa Fe’s natural foods markets.

INDIAN TACOS: MODERN VERSION

(Serves 6)

1 1/2 cups dried anasazi beans
6 green New Mexico or Anaheim chiles
1 large red bell pepper
6 pieces Indian frybread
1 1/2 cups mâche or arugula, washed and stemmed
1 large ripe red tomato, sliced
2 ripe avocados, halved and sliced
1 red onion, thinly sliced
1 bunch red radishes, sliced
18 golden yellow plum tomatoes, halved

To prepare the anasazi beans, soak them overnight in water to cover. The next day, drain the beans and place them in a saucepan with fresh water to cover. Bring to a boil, decrease the heat, and let the beans simmer until the skins break and the beans are soft, about 3 hours. It may be necessary to add water as the beans cook to prevent them from burning and sticking. After the beans are cooked, remove from the heat and set aside. You should have about 3 cups of cooked beans.

While the beans are cooking, roast, seed and devein the chiles and the red bell pepper. Leave the green chiles whole; slice the red bell pepper lengthwise into small strips.

Make the frybread according to the recipe and set aside.

Reheat the beans so they are warm and begin building your tacos. Place 1/2 cup cooked beans on each piece of frybread. For each taco, add 1/4 cup mâche, followed by a red tomato slice; add 4 slices avocado and 1 slice red onion separated into rings; follow with radish slices and 6 golden yellow plum tomato halves; and top with 1 roasted green chile and 2 slices roasted red bell pepper.

You can vary the toppings and the order in which the taco is built. Serve immediately.

YOU DON'T HAVE TO FRY YOUR OWN

If you're lucky enough to be in Santa Fe during Indian Market, you can buy some frybread from one of the many Native food vendors set up for the occasion.

This weekend, eight vendors with federally recognized tribal affiliations will be set up in the parking lot behind First National Bank of Santa Fe at Lincoln and Palace avenues. Booth hours are the same as those for market vendors: 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday and 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday. All offer some form — or several forms — of frybread.

_Calabaza and Pula — two booths from Santo Domingo Pueblo — offer frybread with calabacitas, a traditional Southwestern combination of squash and corn.

_Mace and Mace, from the Navajo Nation, have a Shepherders Special — stewed meat, bell peppers and chile served on frybread.

_Representing San Felipe and Jemez pueblos, Edward and Felicita's Famous Indian Frybread stand specializes in Indian burgers served on — what else? — frybread.

_Annabell's Native Foods, also from the Navajo Nation, offers roasted mutton with chile and a traditional lamb stew; both are served with frybread.

_When you've had enough frybread, stop by Toya's Famous Pueblo Food from Jemez Pueblo for some atole, a traditional bluecorn drink, and some little prune pies. And yes, you can get frybread there too.

_Yazzie's Concession, another Navajo Nation visitor, offers a steamed dry corn stew with lamb and, yup, frybread.

_Yepa's Famous Indian Frybread and Tacos sells all of the above. But the vendors, from Laguna and Jemez pueblos, also specialize in an Indian Breakfast: eggs, bacon and green chile served on your choice of frybread or (horrors!) a tortilla.

Comments

By **MP Bumsted** (Submitted: 08/16/2006 3:01 pm)

The Canadian version is bannock (with baking powder) and CINE has developed nutritional varieties. In the Bethelated version, I use yoghurt instead of milk or water and add berries from the tundra. "The Centre for Indigenous Peoples' Nutrition and Environment (CINE) is an independent, multi-disciplinary research and education resource for Indigenous Peoples, created by Canada's Aboriginal leaders. "

<http://www.mcgill.ca/cine/>

Bannock started off in Scotland, I think. The English have bacon bread -- fry a slice in leftover bacon grease (no skillet to clean!) -- unfortunately that has to remain a childhood memory.

Athabaskan and Eskimo people here in Alaska have a "fry bread" which is more like a raised doughnut. Good, but not NM frybread.

I really miss Friday posole and fry bread at the former Tewa Restaurant in San Juan P (Okhay-owengee)

Now I have to dry off the keyboard again.

By Paula Lozar (Submitted: 08/16/2006 1:26 pm)

Re: Preciliano's comment

A number of years ago, I was working for IBM in Europe, and I and some of the people I worked with (mostly British) took a visiting couple from the U.S. out to dinner. We got into a conversation about food; the Brits asked whether Native American cuisine had had any effect on the way Americans eat today, and the visitors swore up one side and down the other that it was totally extinct. The irony is that we were, at the time, dining on tortillas, beans, corn, etc. at a Mexican restaurant!

By Paula Lozar (Submitted: 08/16/2006 1:20 pm)

I saw a T-shirt at Indian Market a few years back that said, in huge letters, "FBI." Underneath it, in tiny letters, "Fry Bread Inspector." (Where do I apply for that job? -- heh!)

By Preciliano Martin (Submitted: 08/16/2006 12:06 pm)

We went to eat at the Pueblo Indian Cultural Center in ABQ last year and thought it was funny that they had to explain **on the menu** why "Indian" food and "Mexican" food in NM is pretty much the same thing.

And stopped at a Spanish Restraunt in Bernallio where they serve Spanish and American food, and the watress got mad when I insisted on Arroz con Pollo. They didn't serve that so I asked for some other Spanish dish. Finally I asked if they had Mexican food and the waitress said no. I finally ordered a No. 2 before they thre me out of ther with nothing to eat.

By Richard Harris (Submitted: 08/16/2006 8:56 am)

Preciliano - There are many different types of bunuelos throughout Mexico and other parts of Latin America. In general, I think, sopaiillas are hollow inside and bunuelos aren't. They're made from the same ingredients, but bunuelos are often flavored differently, like with anise seed or mango.

By Eldon Howell (Submitted: 08/16/2006 8:15 am)

Carb heaven!

By Preciliano Martin (Submitted: 08/16/2006 8:09 am)

Pizza sauce before the cheese! I forgot that.

By Preciliano Martin (Submitted: 08/16/2006 8:04 am)

Can anyone tell me the difference between a sopaipilla and a buñuelo. When I was a kid we ate buñuelos, now I eat sopaipillas. And they sem the same to me.

And Indian fry bread with cheese and sausage, olives and lettuce and tomatoes makes a wonderful Indian Pizza. Trust me on that one. Put the cheese and sausage on the fry bread heat it in a toster oven till the cheese melts then put the veggies an top and go for it,

And if it ain't healthy, so what. My grandfather used to say "Vive quando estas vivo, y quando es tiempo de murir, muere te".



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