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How frybread became Native American's most popular food

BY DAVID HAMMOND September 11, 2012 10:05AM

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At the Crow Agency, a large reservation in southeastern Montana, I asked Bernadette Smith (her English name) about traditional foods she prepares

"Well," Smith said, "there's berry pudding. You make a paste of flour and water and cook it. Then you add berries and sugar."

"There's also buffalo pudding," she added, "which is made of flour, buffalo grease, and chokecherries, if they're available." Much Native American cooking depends upon seasonal ingredients, as many indigenous peoples gathered food in the wild.

Then Smith mentioned frybread, the most commonly recognized Native American food, much like a funnel cake, served sweet or savory.

I sampled frybread several years ago at the American Indian Center of Chicago Powwow, the "Midwest's largest gathering of Native American culture." The frybread I tried, topped with bison and condiments, is called an "Indian taco."

What surprising about this dish, as well as the puddings, is that flour is not "traditional" to indigenous cultures. As a Cherokee friend of mine once said, "We didn't do wheat."

But it's naive to think the American Indian menu is static. Many ingredients we associate with traditional cuisines are actually relatively recent developments. Before Columbus delivered New World groceries to the Old World, Italians were without tomato sauce, Irish had never eaten potatoes, and Szechuan Chinese cuisine contained no chiles. Similarly, Native Americans had no wheat flour, a food they received from Euro-Americans.

According to Smithsonian Magazine (July, 2008), "To prevent ... indigenous populations from starving, the government gave them ... white flour, processed sugar and lard — the makings of frybread."

Today, frybread has become a Native American symbol of how proud people persevere under tough conditions, making something delicious — and now beloved — out of ingredients they'd never used before.

Frybread itself is evolving. Last month, at a Crow Powwow just outside the Little Bighorn Battlefield, I enjoyed frybread pizza. Such culinary variations are inevitable.

The 59th Annual AIC Powwow is Friday through Sunday in Busse Woods, Elk Grove Village. Expect traditional dance, native skateboarding demos, and, of course, frybread.

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