

When **Chef Loretta Barrett Oden** approached investors and bankers more than a decade ago

with the idea of opening a restaurant featuring Native American food, they said, “Indian food! What’s that? Fried bread? Stew?” Like many, they had little idea that the wealth of foods originating in the Americas and used by Native Americans long before Europeans arrived now represents more than 60 percent of the most popular foods enjoyed around the world. The list is long, including tomatoes, potatoes, corn, beans, squash, chili peppers, avocados, peanuts, pineapples, chocolate, vanilla, wild rice, and turkey. Drawing from such culinary riches, Oden went on to open the Corn Dance Café in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and within two weeks of a rave review by local critic Pancho Epstein, she was deluged with customers.

Connecting Past and Present

Oden’s success and her predilection for using early Native American foods started with a personal journey. Born into the Potawatomi tribe in Oklahoma, where a melting pot of Native American cultures exists, Oden left home after her divorce and went to visit a relative in the Northwest who was married to a man from the Tlingit tribe. The exposure to the native Tlingit culture, so different from her own, sparked an odyssey to explore the diversity of Native Americans. Oden followed the lead of each tribe she visited, many of whom urged her to meet certain local cooks: “You should go see . . . she does a certain kind of bread . . . she makes a dish . . .” For three years Oden traveled across the United States, connecting these cultural dots and learning from the oral tradition, since written recipes were not available.

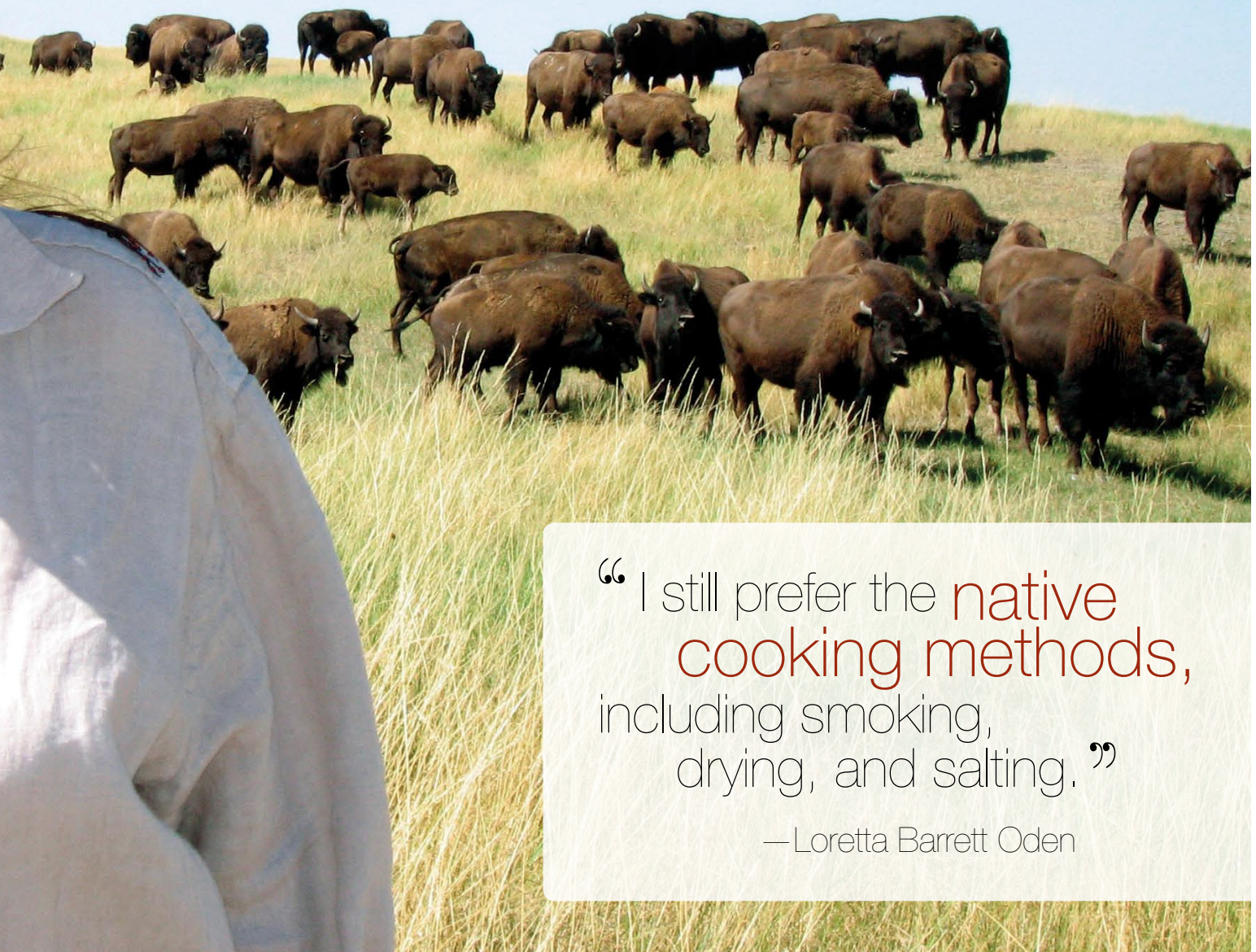
What began as a road trip soon became a mission: to promote the foods of Native Americans, and at the same time reintroduce the surviving tribes and the rest of the world to the earlier healthy diet that Native Americans thrived on before the advent of Europeans.

Chef Loretta Barrett Oden traveled to a buffalo range on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation to learn how they are working to bring the buffalo back to the Great Plains.



PHOTOGRAPH BY ALAN MOSS

Learning from a Legacy



“ I still prefer the **native cooking methods**, including smoking, drying, and salting. ”

—Loretta Barrett Oden

On a South Dakota ranch near the Black Hills, Chef Loretta Oden (right) learns from a native cook how to prepare *wasna*, a Lakota tribe trail food made from dried buffalo meat, chokeberries, and kidney fat.



Of all the foods connected with Native Americans, Oden says, “there is none more closely aligned than the buffalo.” Today, the American buffalo is not the same breed as the native buffalo that once ran wild but is more closely related to the European bison. Nonetheless, many in the restaurant industry use the words interchangeably.

On the Corn Dance Café menu, bison appears in many different forms, from a roast to steaks and also in the house burger. “Bison meat is very low in fat, even lower than skinless chicken and . . . salmon,” Oden notes. “It’s a bit more expensive than beef, but there’s more yield because there’s little shrinkage. And without the fat, the protein is more dense, so you don’t need to eat as much.”

Oden’s approach to cooking bison conforms to common sense regarding this lean meat: always aim for rare to medium; well done will tend to be tough and dry. Bison meat is dark red because it is high in myoglobin, a protein that carries oxygen to the blood, so when cooked to medium, the meat will look like rare beef. Perfectly cooked bison tastes very much like beef, only a little sweeter.

“The trick is to be very careful about how long the meat is cooked,” Oden advises. “For oven cooking, I lower the temperature to 275°F instead of the 325°F used for beef roasts. The roast will be done in about the same amount of time as beef. I always roast bison until it is ten degrees lower than the final temperature I desire [130°F for rare, 160°F for medium]. When I remove the roast from the oven, I cover it lightly with foil and let it sit out of the oven for about 10 to 20 minutes so the temperature rises another ten degrees.”

To grill bison steaks, Oden recommends raising the grill rack and lowering the fire. “I cook [the bison] over a hot flame only to sear and seal, then I place the steaks on the

cool part of the grill for 6 to 12 minutes. Since bison lacks fat, I don’t want any juices to escape, so I avoid piercing the meat.” She cooks a 1-inch-thick steak for 6 to 8 minutes for rare 8 to 12 minutes for medium.

Oden offers her tip for the best bison burger: “Don’t mix the raw meat too much; that can make it tough. Make the patty a little thinner in the center; otherwise, I have found, the edges get too done. I make a thick ridge around the edge so it doesn’t crack—again trying to prevent loss of precious juices. Because bison is so lean, I spray the patty and the grill with oil so it doesn’t stick to the rack. I do not press the patty, because that could cause the juices to exude.”

Bison meat doesn’t shrink like a regular beef burger, Oden explains, and it takes less time to cook—about three minutes on each side. Off the grill, she lets the burgers sit for five to ten minutes before serving.

Old Ideas, New Appreciation

According to Oden, sustaining the native habitat of the buffalo and other valuable creatures and plants was central to the Native American ethos. “Environmentally friendly behavior has a strong basis in the Native American culture,” Oden remarks. For example, the long-held tradition of the Three Sisters—corn, beans, and squash—always being planted together in the same mound is a type of companion planting that is popular today among biodynamic agriculturalists. The corn is planted first, and as it grows the cornstalk provides a trellis for the climbing bean vine that is subsequently planted. In turn, the beans fix nitrogen in the soil for the corn. Then the squash grows on the ground below, its wide leaves keeping moisture in the soil and smothering out weeds. In Native American tradition, the three crops were always planted together, harvested simultaneously, and eaten together. In combination on the plate, the three also form an almost-perfect nutritional supply of protein, complex carbohydrates, fiber, and many micronutrients. Oden serves them in her dish of Three Sisters with Sage Pesto, which features a julienne of various squash, stir-fried with corn and beans, then finished with a blend of sage and piñon nut blend.

Another contribution of the Native Americans that influenced regional cooking was the discovery of sassafras. Oden explains, “Sassafras is a tree that grows in eastern Oklahoma and throughout the southeast. The Choctaw Indians introduced it to the Acadians, who used it to make file for gumbo. The

Acadians cooked tomatoes down to a dark brick-red paste and then added the seafood. At the very end, they added ground sassafras. It is a thickening agent made by drying the sassafras leaves and then, very painstakingly, taking the stems and veins out and grinding what is left of the leaves with mortar and pestle.” With her dish of Sassafras Shrimp Gumbo, Oden continues the tradition of making this Choctaw-inspired dish, but it’s a bit easier these days, she admits, “using a spice grinder.”

Sassafras root was also famously used to make the first root beer, hence the name for this popular beverage (now generally made with artificial flavor). “Root beer was originally used as a medicinal drink,” Oden adds, “which Native Americans made from sassafras roots, leaves, and some of the bark, each of which have medicinal qualities.”

Buffalo Meatloaf

By Loretta Barrett Oden, former chef-owner,
Corn Dance Café, Santa Fe, New Mexico

Yield: 6 to 8 servings

Olive oil	1 oz
Onions, finely chopped	½ lb
Celery, finely chopped	2 stalks
Garlic, finely minced	2 Tbsp
Chipotle pepper, seeded and minced	1
Fresh sage, chopped	2 Tbsp
Dry bread crumbs	4 oz
Tomato sauce	3 oz
Milk	2 oz
Ground buffalo	2½ lbs
Large eggs, lightly beaten	2
Salt	½ Tbsp
Freshly ground black pepper	½ tsp

1. In large skillet, heat oil over medium heat; add onions and celery, sauteing until soft. Add garlic, chipotle pepper, and sage; cook a minute longer. Remove mixture from pan and cool. Heat oven to 350°F.
2. In large bowl, soak bread crumbs in tomato sauce and milk. Add onion mixture, buffalo meat, eggs, salt, and pepper, mixing gently until just combined. Do not overmix.
3. Form mixture in a loaf pan and bake for 1 to 1¼ hours or until thermometer inserted in center registers 165°F. Serve hot, preferably with garlic mashed potatoes and gravy.



Seasoning Santa Fe

After ten years in Santa Fe, Oden closed the Corn Dance Café to pursue the filming of her Emmy-award-winning PBS series on Native American cooking, *Seasoned with Spirit* (available on DVD from visionmaker.com). Today she is busy at work planning the next part of the series, cooking native foods at special events throughout the country, and scouting locations for a new restaurant to continue her culinary mission. Like Corn Dance Café, it will no doubt reflect the best of traditional foods and technique. “I still prefer the native cooking methods,” Oden states, “including smoking, drying, and salting. I pre-smoke meat a lot—such as in my dish of achiote-marinated quail smoked over sassafras wood and then finished on the grill.” To preserve foods and intensify flavors, Oden adds, “I do a lot of dehydrating, usually between two window screens out in the hot sun. We put the drying frames on the flat roof of the restaurant.”

Even though Oden used authentic Ojibway hand-gathered wild rice, bison, and fresh, wild, line-caught Pacific Coast salmon at Corn Dance Cafe, she claims, “we always kept the average food cost at around 30 to 32 percent by stretching the wild rice with quinoa, and by using plenty of corn, beans, and squash on the menu.” A typical holiday meal at Corn



Quinoa and Black Bean Salpicon

By Loretta Barrett Oden, former chef-owner,
Corn Dance Café, Sante Fe, New Mexico

Yield: 8 servings

Black beans, uncooked	1 cup
Garlic	4 cloves
Dried epazote (optional)	1 Tbsp
Quinoa, uncooked	1 cup
Cumin seeds	¼ tsp
Juice of a large lime	
Extra virgin olive oil	3 Tbsp
Sea salt and black pepper	½ tsp each
Raw summer squash or zucchini, unpeeled and julienned	1 cup
Plum tomatoes, seeded and chopped	4
Jicama, peeled and diced	1 cup
Jalapeño pepper, seeded and minced	1
Green onions, thinly sliced	2
Fresh mint, finely minced	⅓ cup
Fresh cilantro, chopped	⅓ cup
Fresh parsley, finely minced	⅓ cup
Romaine lettuce leaves	8

Dance Café included Potawatomi Popcorn to nibble; a first course of Field Greens with Sage-Piñon Vinaigrette; and an entree of Bison Tenderloin with Chipotle Onions, Squash stuffed with Quinoa and Wild Rice, and a Mushroom and Sunchoke Saute. A favorite dessert was the house-made A'Maize'ing Corn Ice Cream.

Keeping connected to her vision and heritage, the wine list Oden paired with her food at Corn Dance Café was made up entirely of North and South American bottles, from the far northwest of Washington and Oregon all the way down to Chile. The only exception was Champagne, because, Oden admits unabashedly, "I'm a big lover of French Champagne." One can hardly blame her, even if bubbly and bison do seem odd culinary bedfellows. In the spirit of her resourceful Native American ancestors, Oden finds a way to pair both pleasures.

► Libby Platus is a freelance writer based in Sherman Oaks (Los Angeles), California, who specializes in stories on food and film from around the world.

1. In saucepot, cover black beans with water, add 2 cloves garlic and the epazote; bring to boil, reduce heat, and simmer until just tender. Drain and set aside.
2. Meanwhile, rinse quinoa thoroughly to remove bitter saponin coating. Mince remaining two cloves garlic. Combine quinoa, minced garlic, and 4 cups boiling water in saucepot. Cover and simmer over low heat, stirring occasionally, for 8 minutes. Drain and rinse with cold water to stop cooking. Set aside.
3. Dry-toast cumin seeds in skillet over medium heat for about 1 minute, stirring or shaking pan constantly. Remove from heat and grind seeds with mortar and pestle or spice mill.
4. Combine ground cumin with lime juice, olive oil, salt and pepper. Toss with cooked black beans and let sit 15 minutes.
5. Meanwhile, fluff quinoa in large mixing bowl and toss with squash, tomatoes, jicama, jalapeño, green onions, mint, cilantro, and parsley. Add black bean mixture and combine well.
6. Scoop mixture into lettuce leaves and serve. (Oden garnishes with sliced avocado.)