

'We have a strong core of people'

FIRST FOODS
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Ceremonial Hunting Board member Jade Unger staked salmon and brought 15 pounds of smoked salmon and eight lamprey to cook for guests. Tribal Elder Debi Anderson sat at a table cutting bite-size pieces of lamprey and Cultural Resources employees Brian Krehbiel and Flicka Lucero received help from several volunteers while frying the fry bread made by Culture Committee member Faye Smith.

"I started learning how to do this when I was in college at Portland State University," Unger said as he whittled down a stick of dogwood. "I had some Elders teach me their method. They were really awesome people. They showed me how to do it (stake out a salmon filet). That's where I started doing it and I have always liked this traditional way of cooking. You can't beat it."

Unger said he is happiest when he's preparing salmon.

"I'm thankful that I have an opportunity to be here," Unger said. "I feel grounded by it in terms of giving other people enjoyment from it and exposing them to something traditional. I feel really good about it."

Culture Committee member Eric Bernardo said the committee planned for as many as 100 people to attend the First Foods event. Despite the fact that there were only about half as many people as anticipated, he said he hoped that future events would see a larger turnout.

A few minutes before 11 a.m., drummers gathered inside the plankhouse to welcome everyone and sing "New Beginnings," which was performed by Krehbiel, Bernardo, George, Tuomi, Gleason-Shepek, Chris Mercier, Jordan Mercier, Tynan George, Nacoma Liebelt, Mabel Brisbois and Hailey Lewis-Little.

"Every day you wake up it's a chance to have a new beginning in your life," Krehbiel said. "Today you have a new beginning to try some food you never had before."

Soderberg gave the invocation and Jon A. George introduced himself and other Tribal Council members.

"We thank you for joining us today," Jon A. George said. "As Tribal leaders standing before you, we are honored."

Chris Mercier said that he is involved with Food Bank Coordinator Francene Ambrose on the Food Access Community Team and that he loves all kinds of foods.

"A lot of people, when you talk about Native culture, they think of carving and they think of songs and that is part of our traditions and culture, but food is one of those practices that has been hardest to keep alive," Mercier said.

"The ability to get back to our



Photos by Michelle Alaimo

Culture Committee member Shayla Murphy cuts yampah to add to elk and deer stew that she made for the Culture Committee's First Foods celebration held at achaf-hammi, the Tribe's plankhouse, on Saturday, June 3.



Tasina Bluehorse, middle, adds fry bread to a serving bowl as she and Mabel Brisbois, left, and Hailey Lewis-Little, right, help prepare food for the Culture Committee's First Foods celebration held at achaf-hammi, the Tribe's plankhouse, on Saturday, June 3.

for attending, as well as those who prepared the food.

Gleason-Shepek said she hopes Tribal members will see a day when traditional foods return to be part of everyday diets.

"I do hope we eventually get to a point where it's not just a ceremony that we're eating these foods," Gleason-Shepek said. "This is that first step to get there. I'm so happy that we are all here today to share in this. We're making great progress. Thank you for all the hard work that went into putting this together."

Jon A. George began the storytelling part of the event when he shared that he rarely saw the top of the family's kitchen table when he was young because it was always covered in newspapers for venison. He also pondered the never-ending

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Native diet will have long-term health benefits for our people. The more we can return to our dietary roots the better off our people will be in the long run so that's why I'm glad we are keeping this tradition of first foods alive every year."

Tuomi said she appreciated Chris Mercier's passion for first foods and that she felt it was a "blessing to be here with you to celebrate our first foods." She thanked everyone



Culture Committee Chair Francene Ambrose, right, speaks during the committee's First Foods celebration held at achaf-hammi, the Tribe's plankhouse, on Saturday, June 3. Next to her, from second from right, are Tribal Council Secretary Jon A. George and Tribal Council members Chris Mercier, Brenda Tuomi and Tonya Gleason-Shepek.

supply of bed sheets that his mother used to wrap deer.

"I always wondered, 'Where did all the sheets come from?'" George said. "I loved deer heart sandwiches on white, buttered bread – that was absolutely delicious."

George said that he admired family members for how they hunted and gathered and, in later Reservation-era years, for their creativity with government-issued commodity foods.

"This is what they did to sustain our people. This is what they did to survive," George said. "And we ate grilled cheese sandwiches from commodity cheese and chicken and beef in a can."

Ambrose, who is also Culture Committee chair, said she wanted to honor ancestors by keeping their traditional way of gathering Native foods alive for this and future generations.

"I look at today as a celebration of who we are as a people and who we are as a community," Ambrose said. "I have to thank the ancestors who came before us who helped us not just survive, but thrive through culture. The songs that we learned when we gathered provided good medicine for our foods and we're bringing that here today to celebrate what they did carrying a culture forward to present day."

Ambrose introduced fellow Culture Committee members Joanna Brisbois, Shayla Murphy and Smith, and asked Jordan Mercier to talk about Cultural Education's gathering and Native food projects.

"It makes me happy to be a part of this and to see everybody here and the passion that everybody brings to this day is inspiring for me as somebody who really cares about our traditions and our culture," Jordan Mercier said. "I really have a passion for first foods and learning about all of our foods and our basket materials and the things that we used to gather, the things that we are gathering today. It's really important work. We have a strong core of people."

Jordan Mercier said he felt good about Tribal members preserving traditions and keeping ceremonies alive.

"We should feel good about all the work that our Elders have done to get us to this place where we can focus on our first foods and focus on our traditions and not worry about having the right to exist," Jordan Mercier said. "It's been secured for us by all of our Elders. We're waking that stuff back up and trying to rekindle that fire. Today is a celebration of all of our foods and a time for us to get together."

Culture Committee member Marcus Gibbons sang the traditional first water blessing ceremony.

"What matters is this is where we start," Gibbons said. "I'm honored to be here among my Elders, my peers."

After the celebration and meal, some attendees visited the Tye Nature Reserve near the Tribal Housing Department office to learn how to identify Native plants. ■