

Cooking for the community: What can you bring to the table?

By Andy Taylor

Think about all of the historical events that have occurred as a result of food, most of us celebrate pretty regularly around a table. In fact, a lot of celebrations and traditions we know today are a direct result of this and it spans between modern-day agriculture and having a party.

Why do we celebrate birthdays with cake and anniversaries with a meaningful dinner? Did you make a ham at Christmas? Do you prepare a casserole for someone who just brought new life as congratulations, or maybe you've made one for a grieving family? What about dancing and a feast for a couple who has just started a new life together? Perhaps it's something as common as offering a drink and snack when you have a guest over.

When you think about food celebrations, what do you think about? For most of us, the first things that come to mind are an Independence Day barbeque, Easter brunch and all-famous Thanksgiving dinner. We don't really connect celebrations with what started as a tradition.

Some people believe anything that is done for more than 10 consecutive years becomes a tradition. American Indians have gathered around food in a variety of ways. We would celebrate after harvesting the winter food supply and the first salmon caught in the run with the Salmon Ceremony. Even today as tradition we hold the Feather Dance Celebration Dinner.

A meal was held in such high value, that in old Indian law it was a crime to refuse a meal that had been prepared for you. If someone took the time to make a meal as offering, you had better take it. Refusing said food could be punishable and you would have to do something in return to make it right.

Food is not as simple as a basic need. It has the power to comfort, to heal and to bring people closer together. So it's no wonder it plays such a powerful emotional and social role in our lives. There are a handful of folks who are at nearly every Tribal event serving our people in every way that they can. As you can imagine, I wanted to learn more about the food side of things and what they call tradition.

Charlie Black's (Nooksack/Quileute) tradition is not to cook or eat outside after dark. Growing up he was told the spirits walk around at night and "you don't want them to get into your food and make you sick."

He practices that today when he's cooking salmon in our traditional ways at the annual Nesika Illahee Pow-Wow, at a Tribal member's memorial service or at weddings, and when he cooked for the University of Oregon: Native Higher Education Students.

"I only cook natural-grown fish, I won't do it if it's from a hatchery," Black said. The cooking process is long and completely worth it, he says, "You've got to go out and find the cedar to use and start the fire early so it's good and hot when it's time to start cooking."

Splitting a large cedar stick as a stake and sharpening smaller ones to keep the salmon open while cooking, he rubs salt and pepper on the fish and props them up on cinder blocks over an alder wood fire.

Black knows when the salmon is ready to eat using what he calls the "drip speed



File photos

Chris Sherrod (left) presses apples for cider and Charlie Black (right) cooks salmon.

indicator." This is a method of keeping an eye on how fast the oil is dripping off the salmon which tells him when it's fully cooked.

He recognizes that he's gotten a lot of help at pow-wow from local Tribal youth Ash Bloomstrom the last couple years and he hopes that more will join them the years to come. He says, "You know, I'm not getting any younger. We need to get more of the younger Tribal members out here and start teaching them how we make the salmon. That way when I retire the tradition will continue."

A tradition he takes seriously is family time. Whole family participation, is something he would like to see more of at Tribal and community events. He said, "The children are already pretty involved. I'd like to start seeing more parental involvement. A lot of parents drop off and leave. I think it's really important for the kids to experience these things with their parents."

Although he loves to volunteer and cook for the community, Black describes his favorite part of it all by saying, "Oh definitely the cultural exchanges made while I'm at pow-wow or other events I've done. Seeing people I know and meeting people I don't know, and seeing how much they enjoy the whole process and how good it tastes."

Jenifer Metcalf, a Tribal member who spends most of her time these days volunteering for just about every event in Lincoln County, says, "I usually direct people or try recruiting other volunteers. I also spend a lot of time prepping, cooking and praying with others who need it."

Some of her favorite events that she attends include Celebrate Recovery, South Beach Church cleaning crew and kitchen help, Tribal member memorial services, Culture Camp, pow-wow, Hands Across the Bridge and mentoring at Lincoln County Drug Court.

Metcalf, who loves cooking for others, noted that her favorite part is "everyone getting to eat the food that we've prepared with love and in return being filled with that love!"

She has a usual crew of people she enjoys working with, including Delina John, Violet Lafferty, Rachelle Endres and Jessica Garcia. However, the most rewarding part of it is giving back to the community in any way she can. Metcalf says, "Anytime that you can get out of yourself and serve someone else is one of the greatest forms of service that you can do."

Frank Aspria is popularly known in the community for his culinary expertise. He attended the Horst Mager Culinary Institute, now known as Le Cordon Bleu, graduating in 1991. He took an internship at the Portland Hilton right after as a pastry chef.

Although he goes where he is called, you'll see him primarily at Culture Camp and Run to the Rogue, mostly for what he says is "the volume of food that needs made and my ability to move that food fast."

Aspria's usual role is head chef at such events if and when he has a team to help.

"I'm often there doing it alone when it's a more specialty event. Some people will stop in for a bit and I am really appreciative of help when I can get it," he said. "It's mostly the same people at community events. I get a lot of help from the Culture Department, Stuart Whitehead and the A&D program."

He loves helping out in every way, although it's tiring at the end of a long day when you're cooking for 200-500 people.

"I'd love to start showing the next generation the process to getting these events done. I'd love to teach them how I do things and pass on my recipes to help them take the lead on some of these projects," Aspria said. "You know that's a part of how tradition works? It's passing knowledge on for the next leaders in line and them passing it on, and so forth."

His favorite part of working and cooking at such large community events is the end result. He says, "It's a good feeling seeing that people are full and they enjoyed what you made for them."

Kathy Kentta, Healthy Traditions project coordinator, and Chris Sherrod, Diabetes Program director, often work as a team when they're cooking for work or sometimes just to help out in the community.

One of their goals is to bring healthy food into the community by recruiting other programs within the Tribe. This not only reaches more Tribal members but helps to connect them with other services that can be provided to them.

Sherrod, who is a frequent flyer in all the kitchens at the Diabetes Luncheon, Tribal wellness events and carnivals, trauma response team, Healthy Traditions canning classes and all the video screenings hosted or presented by a Tribal program, has a personal passion for cooking. He says, "Cooking is peace to me. I really love cooking and if I can pass that on it's so fulfilling."

"I really love showing folks how to cook healthy food and making sure that they can take what they learn home with them," Sherrod said. "Sometimes I walk away from class having been taught something and how they prepare something, so it's a fun learning experience all around!"

One thing he would like to see more of is families working together. He says, "We try to make our events centered on culture, traditions and keeping things family-oriented." Seeing family engagement and the happiness they receive from their work "makes it all worthwhile" said Sherrod with a huge grin on his face.

Kentta volunteers at multiple Siletz Tribal events, including but not limited to Siletz Community Garden, helping Siletz Valley Schools and their boosters, Feather Dance, funeral services, Culture Camp and Cooking Matters.

She loves all aspects of traditional planting, harvesting, cooking and how we serve our food. Teaching basic cooking skills and exposing people to traditional foods and healthier lifestyles are her strongest skills. You could almost say she literally brings them to the table!

The tradition of giving back to the people is one of many that Kentta practices. Another she realizes has been forgotten about in the community is bringing something to share when you're either invited to or are attending an event.

"For instance," she says, "if you are sitting on a committee, bring something to share with the others." Some examples she gave include cups and juice or a treat, whether it's homemade or store-bought.

A saying she teaches as a good principle goes, "You have the right to gather, but the responsibility to take care of the land as well." It has always been an American Indian tradition to take care of the earth so it, in return, will keep providing for us. Pruning the bushes to make room for new blooms, keeping the land around a plant so it grows big and strong and being conservative to the earth and others.

All of these folks and many other unnamed heroes have one likeminded goal in common – serving the community. Without a doubt, everyone agreed that the reward is received in the satisfaction of those they have served.

We all have our up's and down's, our positives and negatives, and giving back to the community however you can is an important tradition in every culture. Food was one of the biggest ways our people showed strength. Working together selflessly as a community and as a Tribe, we can only have positive benefits.

Gathering, preparing food and helping one another through the good times and the bad are only some of the ways that you too can volunteer. To look for other volunteer opportunities, get more involved and get more information about how you can give your skills for the community or to attend a Tribal event, visit the Tribal website at ctsi.nsn.us or 541-444-2532 or 800-922-1399.

If you or someone you know is doing something commendable and want to share it, contact Andy Taylor at andreas@ctsi.nsn.us, 800-922-1399, ext. 1293, or 541-444-8293.