

First Foods Celebration thanks Mother Nature

By Brent Merrill
Smoke Signals staff writer

The annual First Foods Celebration was held on Saturday, May 21, at the Tribal Community Center in Grand Ronde with the theme “Food is History. Food is Life. Food is Medicine.”

Culture Committee Secretary Sarah Ross welcomed the membership to the annual event and explained everything attendees were about to eat.

“This is our First Foods celebration and it happens every spring,” said Ross of the traditional ceremony. “It is welcoming in a new gathering season, it’s being grateful for the abundance of new plants and the return of the animals and everything around us. What we are trying to do, and we began last year, is incorporate more of our old traditional foods.”

Tribal Council members Jon A. George, Chris Mercier and Denise Harvey joined as many as 100 people to celebrate the foods of the Grand Ronde culture. George and Mercier were joined by Eric Bernando, Greg Archuleta and Chris Rempel for the drumming to open the event and George offered the invocation.

“This day has been honored for all of us,” said George, who recognized the efforts of the Tribe’s Culture Committee to organize the event. “It’s great to see all of you today. It’s wonderful to have our Elders here. I remember when everyone took care of everyone and we shared everything. We may not have had much, but we were such a rich community.”

Following George’s invocation, Culture Committee Vice Chair Marcus Gibbons blessed the spirit plate and then performed a water blessing ceremony that culminated in everyone drinking water simultaneously.

“I just want to welcome everybody here to our First Foods ceremony and celebration,” said Gibbons. “To me it’s a ceremony. It’s an honor for me and a blessing for me to be standing here. I don’t take any of this stuff lightly.”

Gibbons recognized the people who gathered, readied and prepared food for the ceremony.

“Thank you for the time and effort you put into preparing for this feast,” said Gibbons. “All of the



Brian Krehbiel, left, and Tribal Elder and Culture Committee member Faye Smith make fry bread to be served at the Tribe’s annual First Foods Celebration held at the Tribal Community Center on Saturday, May 21. The event is organized by the Tribe’s Culture Committee.

things we are doing here today, a lot of people don’t even realize what goes into this.”

For example, Ross detailed on Facebook recently the process for making camas cakes. She said it takes four hours of digging and three days of cooking to get the camas bulbs ready to make camas cakes for the First Foods meal. Next Ross spent a day burning, collecting and roasting tarweed seeds, and a day collecting, one day cracking, one day grinding and five days leeching acorns for traditional acorn flour.

Ross, who is in her second year on the Culture Committee, said she has been learning and working with traditional plants and preparing traditional foods for her family for 10 years and was happy to share that knowledge with the membership.

Gibbons held up a glass of water and sang four verses of a water blessing song. He said the song was about connectedness.

“Water is the lifeblood of all living things,” said Gibbons. “Every step I take on Mother Earth is a prayer. We are the connection between the voices of Earth and sky. You are that connection between the spiritual and the physical. All these things connect us and make us who we are.”

Gibbons then waited until everybody was ready and the gathering sipped their water together.

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“I love you all,” said Gibbons. “We are all related.”

The meal was served family style and tables were loaded with bowls of fresh salad greens each topped with a cluster of raspberries and platters full of smoked salmon, cheese and crackers, and pitchers of fresh water.

Tribal Royalty dressed in their regalia served Elders their meals while others went through the line to be served.

Among the items on the menu were salmon, eel, venison, elk, bear, quail, game hen, duck, turkey, rabbit, crab, shellfish, tarweed, acorn soup, camas cakes, bitterroot, wild rice, mush-

rooms, nuts, berries, fry bread, jams and huckleberry ice cream.

Ross made elderberry juice and fir bow water for everyone to try. Food items and drinks were arranged on a table with a sign telling what the item was in English and Chinuk Wawa.

Ross said elderberry juice could be used a couple of different ways.

“Elderberries are high in antioxidants and they are good for preventing flus, colds and even allergies,” said Ross. “This is kind of a diluted version with just the elderberries so that people can enjoy it with their meal. We could also make a thicker, richer syrup that is used for illness.”

Ross said the fir bow water also was very good for people.

“That one is a spring tonic,” said Ross. “It wakes up the body from the winter time. There are fir tips in it, there are hawthorn leaves and Nootka rose in there and all those combinations jump start the heart, gets circulation going, boosts immune systems with vitamin C, and the fir tips and Nootka rose are good for cleansing and flavor.”

Ross said nettle tea and huckleberries are especially important first foods.

“Nettle tea is really good for strengthening the body, strengthening the blood and helping our spirit,” said Ross. “And huckleberries are really important because it is one of our primary first foods. It’s something we have eaten this way since time immemorial.”

Gibbons said it is important to be thankful and to recognize the abundance of gifts provided by Mother Earth.

“In order to give back for all the blessings just say, ‘Thank you,’” said Gibbons. “It’s that simple.” ■



Photos by Michelle Alaimo

Culture Committee Vice Chair Marcus Gibbons, left, gives a welcome during the Tribe’s annual First Foods Celebration held at the Tribal Community Center on Saturday, May 21. Listening is Culture Committee Secretary Sarah Ross, middle, and Tribal Council member Jon A. George. George is also Tribal Council liaison to the committee.



Madison Ross tops camas cakes with blueberry sauce for the annual First Foods Celebration held at the Tribal Community Center on Saturday, May 21.