

Dinner without Reservations

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Written by Eric McHenry
Hank Gobin loves junk food.



Muckleshoot women prepare salmon on the reservation near Auburn, circa 1950. Photo from the Seattle Post-intelligencer Collection, courtesy of the Museum of History and Industry.

“Let there be no doubt,” he says. “I want a Snickers candy bar. If I have a chocolate chip cookie and a mocha, oh God, I’m in heaven.”

But Gobin, the cultural resources director for the Tulalip Tribes, can’t indulge his sweet tooth as often as he’d like because he suffers from type 2 diabetes, a condition that’s disturbingly common among Native Americans. In the Pacific Northwest, about one Native person in seven has the disease—more than double the rate of the general population. And new diagnoses are coming faster every day. It’s a crisis, for Gobin personally and for his people.

But there may be hope for the future, and it may lie in the past. One day about 10 years ago, Gobin was in a storage facility of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., studying a pair of old skulls. They dated from about 1870 and had belonged to a Tulalip mother and daughter. “And I noticed that their teeth were all so even, so strong-looking,” Gobin says. “There didn’t appear to be any cavities or decay or deformity. And I said, ‘You know, this really is a statement about the diet that

they had during the 1870s, even though that was not a good period for our people.’” Around the same time, one of Gobin’s doctors told him that if Native Americans could somehow revert to a more traditional diet, there might not be any diabetes epidemic.

From these two eye-opening experiences, the Puget Sound Traditional Food and Diabetes Project was born. A collaboration among the Tulalip Tribes, the Muckleshoot Indian Tribe, the Suquamish Indian Tribe, King County and the University of Washington, the project aims to combat diabetes by encouraging Native people to eat what their ancestors ate.

The connection between diet and diabetes is long-established. More recently, studies have shown that high rates of obesity and diabetes in Native Americans can be traced directly to the advent of the reservation system in the 19th century. “We were forced to eat what the government provided us, which was part of the treaty,” says Warren KingGeorge, an oral historian for the Muckleshoot Indian Tribe. “Rancid meat, government cheese, powdered milk, lard. We’re no longer using fat rendered from our game animals, the deer and the elk and the bear. We’re now using lard.”

“Foods that you think of as real traditional Native American foods, like frybread, which you get at every powwow—that’s reservation food,” adds Peter Lape, curator of archaeology for the Burke Museum. “You went from people eating a really diverse array of wild plant and animal food to, within 50 years, eating white flour and fat.”

The diabetes project is based on this knowledge, and on a couple of inferences drawn from it: that Native Americans may be particularly vulnerable to diabetes because their exposure to these foods is still so recent (they may be particularly susceptible to alcoholism for the same reason); and, conversely, that a traditional diet may be uniquely beneficial—even therapeutic—to them. “As far as we know, Native Americans now who trace their ancestry to people from this area—their ancestors have been here for thousands of years,” Lape says. “So they have adapted to eating the kinds of foods that are available here. There are almost certainly evolutionary factors at work that make the diet of your ancestors a healthy diet for you in particular.”

Recent research bears this out as well. In one study, native Hawaiians were allowed to eat anything they wanted, provided it came from their traditional island diet. White rice, macaroni salad and Spam—all popular with Hawaiians, all introduced within the last 100–200 years—were off-limits.

“What the researcher found,” says Dori Khakpour, nutrition and education coordinator for the UW’s Diabetes Care Center, “was that when he put hypertensive, high blood-pressure, high blood-fat, overweight, diabetic Hawaiians on their original diet, those problems all went away, no matter how much they ate.” Using traditional foods to fight diabetes, she says, “totally makes sense.”



Salmonberry blossoms and Siberian miner's lettuce.
Photo by Joy Lacy.

A longstanding complaint of Native Americans is that archaeological research rarely benefits them—archaeologists dig up historic sites, destroying them in the process, for their own obscure purposes. In 2002, Gobin approached Lape about the possibility of bringing his archaeologist's tools to bear on a present-day problem. "He basically challenged me," Lape recalls. "He said, 'Does archaeological data have anything useful to offer Native Americans with diabetes?' And I kind of immediately thought, 'Well, yeah. We should have something. We study what people ate in the past—surely we should be able to say something about it.' "



The team of Tulalip Indians leading the fight against diabetes within the tribes includes, from far left, Marsha Gray Airis and Verna Hill of the Tulalip Health Clinic, and Hank Gobin, Inez Bill and Joy Lacy of the Tulalip Cultural Resources Department. Photo by Mary Levin.

With Gobin's guidance, Lape assembled a team of archaeologists, anthropologists, historians, nutritionists and members of regional tribes to oversee the project. The initial goal was to create a detailed menu of the foods people ate in the Puget Sound region prior to the arrival of European-Americans—a task that involved a lot of digging and sifting, and not through dirt. UW researchers visited the Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation in Olympia and reviewed the paper records of every single excavation done in King, Snohomish and Kitsap counties since the mid-20th century.

It was painstaking work, says Robert Kopperl, '98, '03, an archaeologist with Northwest Archaeological Associates, who as a graduate student was one of the project's main researchers. "They'd have the basic information—what kinds of tools and everything—but you really had to dig deep into what's called the 'gray literature' to find out about food. And oftentimes somebody actually did go through the trouble of identifying the bones—300 salmon bones, 24 flounder bones. But that really useful information was usually buried really deep. We were kind of doing the archaeology of the archaeology."

Ultimately, these site reports yielded a rich record of traditional fare—particularly for coastal populations. (Shell fragments in the soil act as a preservative against its natural acidity.) The researchers found evidence of many fish and invertebrates not mentioned in the existing ethnographies—although the ethnographies, by contrast, provided valuable information about plants, roots, seeds and other food sources that don't tend to survive in the archaeological record.

The overall picture that emerged, which Lape and Kopperl presented at the 2006 conference of the Society for American Archaeology, was of a diet breath-taking in its diversity.

"Just looking at, say, the birds," Lape says, "the variety is mind-blowing. I mean, I eat chicken. Maybe duck or goose once a year. And these people are eating hundreds of different species of birds, of all different sizes and ages, seabirds and landbirds—things that I wouldn't even think of eating, like cormorants. It's just amazing."

Asked if that was because they were subsistence eaters who cooked up whatever was available, he says it's not that simple.

"The evidence suggests that this was a very rich place to live, the resources were abundant, and people were making choices about what to eat—not because they were starving but for other reasons that we may not know about. My pipe dream is someday to really learn more about the cuisine. What did the food taste like? How was it prepared and cooked? What were the traditions? What was the high cuisine of this area? Unfortunately, a lot of that has been lost because of the reservation system. It was really difficult to sustain those traditions in the 20th century because people didn't have access to the ingredients."



Peter Lape, curator of archaeology for the Burke Museum and assistant professor of anthropology at the UW. Photo by Kathy Sauber.

The next task is to repackage the project in a form that's useful to the tribes, and everyone involved agrees that it's not happening fast enough. Gobin is clearly frustrated that the findings remain stuck in 50-page Microsoft Excel spreadsheets and academic conference posters—a frustration compounded by the urgency of his tribe's health situation.

"I think it's Western thinking versus Native American thinking," he says. "They can't translate from their jargon and methodology to Indian people's way of thinking about land and plants, environment and their use."

Lape does not dispute this characterization. "It speaks to the overspecialization of academics, maybe," he says. "As an archaeologist, I'm uncomfortable being a nutrition educator. I could try to do that, become that person. But that's not my job, and I won't keep my job if I do that."

"But it's a very interesting glimpse into how people—for example, folks in Native American tribes—have problems with academia," he says. "And this came up during our meetings: what is the point of this research if you can't do anything useful with it? And it's a totally valid point."

Producing the kinds of materials the tribes want, such as educational packets, will require one or more dedicated individuals and some additional money, Lape says. The project's initial budget—\$5,000 from the UW's Institute for Ethnic Studies in the United States—is long gone.



Marsh (Labrador) tea. Photo by R.D. Turner.

In the meantime, the tribes are exploring diabetes prevention through other avenues, including a partnership with Northwest Indian College in Bellingham. Ethnobotanists at the school recently presented a workshop at the Tulalip Reservation called "Diabetes Prevention Through Native Plants," and have been offering courses on the subject. Tulalip, Muckleshoot and Suquamish also have diabetes programs at their health clinics, and are promoting awareness and dietary change, with an emphasis on native plants, through them.



Cattail rhizomes. Photo by Joy Lacy.

And every four to six weeks, the tribes have been coming together for a meal of traditional fare. Last April, the Tulalips hosted a pan-tribal feast featuring everything from elk roast to cattail rhizomes to

Indian ice cream (see "Bill of Fare"). Inez Bill, rediscovery coordinator for the Tulalip Cultural Resources Department, organized a team of tribal members to help gather the ingredients—an activity that reminded her how recently some traditional foods had fallen out of use. She remembers tramping through the woods as a child, scanning the ground for salmonberry and thimbleberry sprouts.



Huckleberries. Photo by R.D. Turner, from *Keeping It Living: Traditions of Plant Use and Cultivation on the Northwest Coast of North America*, by Douglas Deur and Nancy J. Turner.

"As kids, we'd eat sprouts and stay out of the house all day," she says. "I see moving toward a more traditional diet as a way of remembering. It's going back and remembering these foods, and, if we can, making them more available to our people. Diabetes is something that's new to our people. It's only been since we were forced to change our diet and include all these introduced foods."



Domonique Houle (left) and Lois Ann Henry gather native plants in preparation for a feast of traditional foods hosted by the Tulalip Tribes in April. Photo by Joy Lacy.

A decrease in the diabetes rate isn't the only way that Native Americans stand to benefit, ultimately, from the information Lape and his colleagues have gathered. Another impetus to get the project moving again, he and Gobin say, is the leverage it will give the tribes as they negotiate with state and federal agencies over development, land acquisition and cleanup. "I'm going to let the big banana out of the bag," Gobin says. "Our position here at Tulalip is that if we can substantiate—and we already are—the abundance of fish and shellfish and plants and animals that were consumed by our people 1,000 years ago, 500 years ago, 300 years ago, that gives us an indication of what we lost."

As an oral historian, Warren KingGeorge also sees the potential of the project to help advance his cause: the conservation of a culture. Promoting a more traditional diet "would increase the life-expectancy of Native Americans today," he explains, "but it would also reconnect them to a little bit of their tradition, a little bit of their culture. It would be just one more link, one more tie, to how things used to be, and to who we

are, and to what our place is in this huge world."

• *Eric McHenry is associate editor of Columns.*

Indigenous Wellness

Diabetes isn't the only condition that afflicts Native Americans in disproportionate numbers. There's colon cancer, cervical cancer, alcoholism, lactose intolerance—not to mention environmental and social conditions, like pollution and poverty.

On April 12, to help give Native people a foothold against these and other problems, the UW launched the Indigenous Wellness Research Institute. Housed in the School of Social Work, it will comprise faculty from schools and departments across campus, including medicine, nursing, psychology, American Indian studies, women studies and social work. With \$1.35 million in startup

money from the University, and additional project-specific grants from the federal government, the institute is already investigating such issues as HIV/AIDS and cardiovascular disease in Native communities, and helping to support American Indian students who want to work in Indian child welfare.

“We want to focus on indigenous community research priorities,” says Karina Walters, associate professor of social work and director of the institute. “This means providing research support and development so indigenous people can set the research agenda for their own communities.”—*Eric McHenry*

For more information, see www.iwri.org.

Bill of Fare

The following is a list of traditional foods served at an April tribal feast, hosted by the Tulalip Tribes:

Marsh Tea

made from the Labrador, or wild rosemary, plant

Huckleberry Tea

made from wild huckleberry leaves

Cattail Rhizomes

washed, cut and served raw; have a flavor vaguely like artichoke

Salmon and Smoked Salmon

king and sockeye, locally caught

Deer Roast and Elk Roast

shot and dressed by ceremonial hunters from the Tulalip Cultural Resources Department

Carrot Muffins

sweeten with a sugar substitute

Indian Ice Cream

a foaming whip made from the juice of soapberries, served over wild blackberries

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