

Excerpt from

Biscuits & Buffalo: The Reinvention of American Indian Culture in the 20th & 21st Centuries

Vernon W. surprised me with a yellow cake recipe this past summer as we chatted over lunch at a community center on the Crow reservation in southern Montana. Vernon spent most of his career as the manager of the Crow Bison Pasture, the largest and oldest Indian-operated buffalo herd in the country. His brother and father were wheat farmers. He told me he got the recipe from his aunt, who years before had found it on a bag of government-issued flour. Family snapshots dating back to at least the 1950s, along with heirloom cookbooks—such “Recipes from Lala Land,” created by Vernon’s aunt in 1999—document Crow Indians’ pride and pleasure in such baked goods.

The temptation might be to think of pies and cakes, especially made from bags of commodity flour, as forms of assimilation, and therefore as a loss of American Indian culture. Food is one of the most powerful cultural symbols, but also among the most malleable of traditions, for any community. The shift from buffalo meat and wild plants to beef and wheat products (most notoriously fry bread) has become a marker of the dramatic upheaval and loss that Plains Indians had to endure when they were forced to abandon their roaming way of life for a sedentary life on reservations in the late nineteenth century. With the recent renaissance of American Indian foods, pre-colonial foods such as buffalo, corn, and squash have become authentic markers of Indian-ness among Indians and non-Indians alike. The consumption of non-native foods, in turn, has become a powerful symbol of colonialism, and has been stigmatized as the cause of the severe health problems on reservations today.

The central point of my book is to argue against that reaction as far too simplistic, and instead to interpret Vernon’s family recipes as a strategy that Crow Indians have developed to keep their Native culture alive. Being adaptive, flexible, and innovative—and not doing everything exactly the same way as their ancestors did—has always been essential to Crow heritage. Cultural stasis was never a Crow tradition in the first place. As the Crow educator and politician William Yellowtail summed it up: “The romance is fine, but it sets up a cultural dissonance...Young people are taught that what is valuable about being Indian is stuff that’s three hundred years old; and that, in effect, denies and devalues their daily existence. It leaves a vacuum. They need to find something to be proud of in their...contemporary daily culture.”