# Interviewed by Jonathan Thomas

Jonathan Thomas: There aren't many Native American restaurants in this city. I mean, there aren't many Native American restaurants in this country.

Sean Sherman: I know. I noticed that void quite a few years back. I thought about doing a Lakota cookbook because I realized how little information was out there on the subject. There was just no representation of any kind of a real, traditional, Native American restaurant anywhere, and the same could be said for any indigenous groups throughout North America for that matter. I saw this in Mexico, in the United States, and in Canada. Traditional foodways were wiped off the map across the board. When I was in Mexico I realized there are so many different indigenous groups still doing things in the old, traditional ways, cooking on clay grills, using fire, growing corn and drying it out, pounding it, gathering things from the desert or forest or wherever they were living. So when I was living in Mexico—

Thomas: When was this?

Sherman: This was in 2007-2008.

Thomas: Where in Mexico?

Sherman: About an hour north of Puerto Vallarta in a town called San Francisco, although the locals called it San Pancho. It's on the Nayarit coast, just outside of Jalisco. When I was living down there, watching people, I could that see these traditions have been passed down for a long time, often from mother to daughter. There were so many similarities to my experience growing up on the Pine Ridge Reservation, the echoes of these teachings, and it really got me thinking about the indigenous foods of North America.

As a chef, I really became curious. I wanted to learn, but I wanted to do it right. What are the foundations? That's what I wanted to figure out. So I started reading. I bought every book I could find on the subject, only there wasn't anything out there that was telling me anything I didn't already know. I wanted to learn more so I started studying wild foods, first off. Then I started studying ethnobotony books, to learn about what people were using. And then, just being out there was important. I went from Mexico to Montana, where I played around in the mountains and the prairie; I was outside a lot, learning about plants. After the Montana stint I moved back to Minneapolis and spent a lot of time around the woods in Minnesota, digging into the histories more and more. So it took me a long time just to fill my head up with my own education before coming out and calling myself a Native American chef. Some of this stuff was passed down, I could see, but very little of it, and I knew there was so much more out there: an understanding of the plants, of what people were growing, the farming techniques, the histories of all the peoples, the migrations, the different cultures all over the place. It's this whole education that will probably take me the rest of my lifetime to figure out. But I feel like I got far enough that I wanted to show people what I could do—full dinners and menus and recipes, and even the design of the food truck [the award-winning Tatanka Truck] we opened using only indigenous foods of a particular region, focusing on only Dakota and Ojibwe ingredients. I wanted to show people what could be done, since we still have all these foods around us, and all these flavors around us, and as a modern chef we can pull all of these teaching from the past into the future. The best part of all of this food, I should say, is the health benefits. It's a super-healthy diet that drops all the sugars and carbs out of everything and it's extremely low-glycemic, so it's a healthy diet all around. That's one of the most important aspects for my company and we're trying to figure out how to give access to these foods to the communities that really need them. We're working with Native communities to figure out how we can make these foods accessible, whether it's through a restaurant or a grocery store, or whether it's just through a couple shelves at their local convenience store. These foods shouldn't be expensive for families to have. These people have so many flavors around them, so it's important to rethink going outside during the growing season and collecting and pulling all this stuff that the earth just throws at you. It doesn't matter what part of the nation you're in, there's always food outside that people used to utilize a lot, even if we've gotten so far from that.

Thomas: How old were you when you started cooking?

Sherman: Well, my parents got divorced when I was pretty young. My mom moved us off the reservation when I was about twelve, so I started cooking at home for my sister and myself when I was eleven, since my mom had to work a lot, and then I got my first restaurant job when I had just barely turned thirteen. I pretty much did everything—dishwashing, bussing, prepping—but I always worked in the back of the house. So all through high school and college I worked in kitchens.

Thomas: Was there a point when you knew that you wanted to commit to the life of a chef?

Sherman: I guess I had no idea, since I didn't go to school formally to be a chef. I didn't have it in my mind. It's just the job I always had, and I kept leveling up, making more money doing what I was doing, becoming kitchen manager, sous chef, executive chef. To step back, I originally moved to Minneapolis because I wanted to go to art school. My dream was to go to MCAD at the time. I was just out of college in the Black Hills in South Dakota, where I had gone to school for business, but I wasn't passionate about anything because it was so general and vague. I wanted to do art, so I moved to the city and realized right away that with my own means there was no way I could afford to go to art school, so I just kept working in restaurants. When I became a chef I found that I could do the art on the plate. It's a whole different style of art, but when you're doing the dinners and the presentations you're playing with everybody's senses, all of them. It's the sounds you hear, the flavors you experience through tasting, the textures you feel. It's this whole mood that you create—and then over a period of a couple hours, it's gone. So it's like a Zen form of art. You take all this time to create something, and it just dissipates in front of you. Then, it's just a memory, and each memory's different. It's really an interesting way to look at food.

Thomas: Did you have relatives or people close to you growing up who practiced foraging or other traditions or practices of indigenous cooking, or is that something you decided to explore on your own once you were older and on your way?

Sherman: Growing up on the reservation, when we were kids, we gathered things like chokecherry and timpsula, which is a prairie turnip that grows wild all over the plains. It's a pretty traditional food for the Lakota.

Thomas: So you were foraging foods as a kid?

Sherman: Yeah, we gathered them because it has always been done down there and at certain times of the year these things would come out. So we would gather them and give them to our grandmother, who would process them. Later, at the end of my high school career, I worked for the forest service in the Black Hills. I had a job as a field surveyor, so I had to learn all the plants that were in the Black Hills as part of my job. I soaked it up pretty quickly, only I didn't realize how useful that knowledge would become much later in life. I just had this nice foundation by knowing the Latin names and the English names for all this stuff that was out there. I didn't always know the context at the time, but at least I was able to identify what I saw. When I started to study wild foods later, that experience helped me; when I became devoted to learning about indigenous foods, I knew that reconnecting with nature and understanding how these plants could be used was important. I bought tons of books on wild foraging and ethnobotany and I tried to go out there in the field as much as I could, to try to identify and harvest stuff and play with it as a chef, to figure it out.

Thomas: Were there chefs that became important mentors along the way?

Sherman: You know, it was nice that I found some other Native chefs that were working on their own foods in their own areas. But my path was always right in front of me. I knew what I needed to learn and I felt like I was the only one who could really teach myself a lot of the information I needed to learn. I also went out to speak to a lot of elders. I have an uncle who's written quite a few books on the ethnobotony of the Lakota and he's been able to share a lot of information that's helped me in that region. But there are so many regions around the nation; the food systems change everywhere you go. When you travel a few hundred miles, the whole area can change—and the food system completely changes. So for me it's been an immense amount of self-study, searching and digging on a personal level.

Thomas: When did you decide to start The Sioux Chef?

Sherman: After a good six

years of letting it soak in and figuring out what my path was, I got to a point where I felt like it was the right time. I had an executive chef job here in Minneapolis, running a small cafe and a large catering operation with a nice organic company. I quit that job and started working for myself under the name The Sioux Chef. That was in September of 2014. My plan was to open a restaurant and I started getting a lot of press right off the bat. Somebody from New York picked up my story, Indian Country picked up my story, NPR picked up my story, and then it just started rolling. That was awesome and it's helped me reach a large audience, but right away I realized that the restaurant wasn't the best choice for getting out there to reach the most people. I could definitely do the restaurant—I have a couple awesome plans for restaurants—but I literally would have locked myself in a box and there's no way I would have been able to do all I've done this past year with all the traveling and moving around. I've learned so much being able to be as free as I've been, being able to go to different parts of the country and soak in their histories and their landscapes and their food systems and really develop this larger view that I have now. Originally I started off just wanting to focus on Lakota, then I shifted in Minneapolis to the groups here, the Dakota and the Ojibwe, and now we're shifting our focus to all of North America, from Mexico all the way up to Alaska.

▬ Thomas: So the focus of The Sioux Chef is on flavors and ingredients and techniques that were used in Native American cooking before the settlers came along, which is to say, before forced relocation, when Native peoples were cut off from their food systems?

▬ Sherman: Yes. Pre-reservation is another term we use. When we say pre-contact a lot of people think of the year 1492, but that year doesn't have anything to do with the peoples of this region, where contact was in the 1800s, which isn't that long ago. I'm just looking at the food systems of my great-grandfather's era, basically.

▬ Thomas: If the forced relocations began in the 1830s and the reservations were entrenched in the 1850s, how far back do you go? And how do you go about learning about practices from this period?

▬ Sherman: Basically, since I started looking at many different areas through many different eyes, the ethnobotonists, for me, were the most helpful, because their study is of how past cultures were utilizing these different plants for medicine and for food. I'm not just looking at Ojibwe and I'm not just looking at Navajo, I'm looking at the country as a whole, and even blurring the lines of where Canada and Mexico are. I'm looking into Mexican culture because there are a lot of texts from the south, from Mexico, that people have been studying. The Spanish recorded a lot. And people have really held on to a lot of their cultures. We can see the perseverence in food systems, in the heavy use of nixtamalized corn, cooking over fire with clay vessels and things like that. It's hard to give an exact date range, but it's basically from the 1500s to today that I look at, for the most part.

▬ Thomas: In terms of techniques in the kitchen, do you try to replicate procedures that were used in the past?

▬ Sherman: We try to keep things very simple. We've been using the term un-modernist cuisine a lot, because it's just about keeping these foods really simple. I think to myself, if I was here 250 years ago, in this exact spot, what foods were around me and what were people eating? Having the skills that I have as a chef, I try to understand what I can do with this food and what can I make with these things, that's my approach. I try to figure out what people were storing away for the winters and holding on to. But we also try to replicate techniques from the past. Some of the main ways of cooking would have been cooking on a hot stone, cooking in an earthen oven, boiling things for a long time, letting things simmer for a long time. You don't have to add a lot of stuff to it. It could simply be some berries, cooked down berries with water, maybe a little bit of seasoning like some wild ginger or maple sugar. We try to keep things simple. When we braise down buffalo—we have a cedar-braised buffalo on the truck that we serve all the time—we just go out and harvest wild cedar, throw it in with the buffalo meat, the roast pieces that we're using, some water, some salt, and some maple, and that's it. We'll just let it slow-stew at a low temperature for a really long time until it just falls apart. It's kind of like braising, only not really. It's not the French method of searing. The best part of this is that I got to throw away a lot of the European structure I had stuck in my brain as a chef and as a culinary person and just start the rules all over, knowing what was here before, what I have in front of me, and how people were cooking. Cooking with the elements, with fire and water and stone and wood and all these basic elements. Bringing it back to basics as best we can. Smoking a lot of things, drying a lot of things, slow-stewing a lot of things, or just throwing something on a hot grill with no oil, or maybe a light oil.

▬ Thomas: What are some of your favorite flavor combinations at the moment?

▬ Sherman: It really depends on the region we're in because, here, we use a lot of cedar, maple, wild ginger, sumac, and those flavors are all over the board—we've got sweet, we've got sour and tart, we've got bitter, it's a full range of flavor profiles. It's really fun to just experiment and see what goes with what. So using sumac as a citrus-type flavor for fish and vegetables, or using that well-rounded heavy cedar flavor for slow-stewed meats and smoking things, or just making a simple tea or stock or broth out of some of those elements, or simply using blueberry as a broth.

▬ Thomas: You've been catering and doing pop-up events that feature what you're talking about here, but you've also been traveling a lot this past year, to give talks and to educate.

▬ Sherman: Yes, we've received a lot of requests from all over the nation. We've done quite a few pop-ups all around. I think I traveled to twelve or thirteen states last year, and we also did two days at a James Beard restaurant in Milan, and I was featured at this indigenous slow food gathering in India. There's been a lot of interest in the work, I think because we took a different approach to looking at indigenous food and trying to build businesses with it too. That's another part of what we want to do is not only educate and make the foods accessible but one of the ways of making foods accessible is by creating small social enterprise businesses that can offer these foods and get people to understand what they are in their own communities. It seems like such a sleeping demand that's been there for a long time. There should be plenty of Native restaurants across the country and hopefully there will be. But yeah, the travelling's been great. It's also been a bit tiring, though it's fun and I've gotten to see a lot. We really try to approach the education the same wherever we go; if we go someplace we haven't been before, we look at the landscape, we dig into the history, we try to figure out a clear picture of what an area is historically.

▬ Thomas: It sounds like you ate some interesting foods on your travels as well? I think you mentioned something about spiders and goat brains?

Sherman: Yeah, that was in India at an indigenous food conference where there were indigenous peoples from all around the world. One of the tastings was of insects, so one of the local chefs in the hills that we were in, in Northeastern India—we were basically right above Bangladesh—had gathered a bunch of edible insects. There were three different types of grubs, some grasshoppers, and a spider. That was interesting!

Thomas: And I noticed that you're putting together a dinner event soon that focuses on the Oaxaca region of Southern Mexico, where it's not unusual to eat grasshoppers (*chapulines*) or worms (*gusanos*).

Sherman: No, it's not unusual at all. They were staples all the way up to this region, grasshoppers and crickets and things like that, and I'm sure there's got to be a lot of grubs that are utilized here and there. But yeah, in Mexico, even at the Walmart, there'd be a big bin of dried grasshopper for your use, because people put it in sauces and grind it up. And there are other bugs, for instance one by Cuernavaca, a worm that eats off this pepper plant and adds something spicy to a dish, since it feeds off the pepper. So there's a whole bunch of interesting uses of indigenous insects that are out there. I think it's a lot more prevalent in Mexico today than anywhere else.

Thomas: You've mentioned the emphasis on simplicity in what you're doing, although Oaxacan cuisine is known for its moles, which are actually fairly complicated in that they involve so many ingredients. Can you tell me a bit about the dinner you're planning and how it connects to your larger project?

Sherman: We are getting ready to launch a nonprofit organization and we're shifting focus to all of North America, to all North American indigenous foods across the board. We're going from Mexico to Alaska. So this first pop-up dinner that we're doing to launch this nonprofit is just a showcase. There are many regions and Mexico is such an important area to understand for its indigenous foods—a lot of ancient foods are coming out of Mexico, like the process of nixtamalizing corn, which has spread everywhere. There are still a lot of families in Mexico that continue to practice these indigenous food system values that have always been there, that have been there for centuries, and they remain fairly untouched. There are so many indigenous groups throughout Mexico, and this is important because they're losing a battle, losing a lot of traditional foodways, just as we are across the board throughout the world. I think if people start to see the importance of it there also, it's going to help us move forward. So for this first dinner we're bringing in a chef friend of mine from Oaxaca, Chef Neftali Duran; we're featuring him so I'm letting him design most of the menu and recipes and we're collaborating to put it together for the end product. It will be a full-on indigenous Mexican dinner with six courses that focuses on foods and flavors that have been there for quite a few hundred years.

Thomas: What is the aim of your nonprofit?

Sherman: There are a lot of things we want to do. We want to help design social enterprise businesses around the country, along the lines of the Tatanka Truck, to help get Native foods out there. But our ultimate goal is to open an indigenous culinary center, which would be a learning center, a culinary school that teaches about indigenous food. It will be based on the foods of this region, but the education stretches around the world to any indigenous culture. We feel like it's an important project that needs to happen sometime

soon. I also have a cookbook deal that I've signed with the University of Minnesota Press, and I'm working with a local author here to turn in the manuscript next month. The book will be about a year out from that point.

Thomas: Is this the Lakota cookbook?

Sherman: It's going to be a cookbook that looks at breaking down what the food systems are of indigenous Americans. We're showing the foundations that make up a Native food system, so there's Native agriculture if it's applicable, or permaculture if there's wild food, because not all groups had farming. So the focus will be on understanding agriculture, permaculture, ethnobotony, wild food gathering and identification, harvesting foods both wild and cultivated, cooking techniques, even down to the tools; understanding histories and migrations and why people are where they are today and why that's important for understanding food systems too. Breaking it down to understand all the pillars of a Native food system and laying it out. There will be quite a few recipes in the book as well, to showcase. It's really a means of starting this curriculum that we can use as we move forward, so we can use the book as a tool later when we get to the point of opening the cooking school. We'll have a lot of the classroom structure spread out.

Thomas: That sounds excellent. And it's great counter-knowledge, because of course the dominant industrialized food system is controlled by a handful of multinational corporations, from the seeds to the supermarket. This is something I meant to bring up earlier, but it's also biased in the direction of bad calories, so that profit is valued above health. I mean, given the allocation of farm subsidies, it's somehow cheaper to buy a bacon cheeseburger from a fast food restaurant than it is to buy a bell pepper from the grocery store, which means we have a lot of health problems. This is a pressing issue on reservations and in so-called food deserts, so I wonder if you're aiming to bring your teaching back into those settings?

Sherman: Yeah, our focus is really on trying to help Native communities in general, which is why we feel that education and sharing is the best way to get a lot of this work done. There are a lot of movements among different nations throughout the United States that are really focused on food sovereignty. It's about getting the communities to rethink their food systems.

Thomas: Can you clarify what you mean by food sovereignty?

Sherman: It's basically people doing their best to try to keep their food coming from themselves, by starting gardens and farms on their territories and lands, getting the kids to do a lot of community gardening work, and just growing a lot of food. But it's also about getting people to think about the traditional ways of going out and finding food that grows naturally in the wild in the areas that they're in and using flavors that have always been used by the specific groups of whatever region you might be in, and holding on to that. So there's a lot of strong movements happening now and there's a lot of money going around out there for groups to help with those kinds of projects, which is why we feel that with the work that we're doing we can really help benefit a lot of different communities by giving them a broad understanding for totally rethinking their food systems and by putting healthy foods back on their menu. The biggest problem I saw when we first started, of course, was that frybread was the dominant example people would go to when they think of indigenous or Native American food. It was really just depression food, the best thing they could make out of government subsidies of flour, lard, salt and sugar. We want to get people away from this really unhealthy high-glycemic diet that doesn't do anybody any good, regardless of whether you're Native or not. A high-glycemic diet is going to be detrimental to your health. Over the years it rots your teeth and leads to obesity, heart disease, and type 2 diabetes, all these ailments we see especially in Native communities but really anywhere where there's low income and poor diets. We feel that spreading Native food systems and restaurants, giving people access, is only going to help people if they want to try out an indigenous diet that would be extremely beneficial and keep food dollars flowing around their particular region. We try to buy as much food from indigenous growers and purveyors as possible and in doing so we're creating larger economic doors for these Native food producers to create more and sell more and create more economy in these communities that need it.

Thomas: Can you say a little about the broader movement to reintroduce an understanding of Native American culinary traditions? For instance I noticed that you're involved with the Native American Culinary Association (NACA)?

Sherman: Yeah, Chef Nephi Craig started NACA and I've done two events with them. And it's great because he's really reached out to a lot of Native chefs and he's done a lot of research, searching to pull everyone together. It really helps to create a group like this and we keep in touch with each other quite a bit, because there aren't that many of us Native chefs out there around the nation. We're growing more and more every year, but it started out very slow, with only a handful of us, some of us utilizing real indigenous food systems to make our food, which I hope is inspiring for all chefs moving forward.

## Duck & Wild Rice Pemmican

Serves 4

**Ingredients**
2 duck breasts with skin
4 tablespoons of maple sugar
1 tablespoon of salt
4 ounces of dried blueberries
¼ cup raw wild rice

**Instructions**

RENDER DUCK FAT
Remove duck fat from breasts and place in shallow sauté pan on low heat to render fat (approximately 45 minutes), then remove fat and save oil

DRY DUCK
Mix salt & maple sugar

Slice duck breast into thin long strips along grain

Rub duck breast strips with salt/ sugar mix

Dehydrate duck strips either in oven at very low heat (180°) for anywhere from one to four hours, tasting until it's a little chewy, or in a food dehydrator until dry

POP WILD RICE
Heat duck fat in sauté pan on low/med heat and place wild rice in pan

Stir and shake pan until wild rice begins to "pop" and "puff"

Remove wild rice and place paper towel

MIX
Place crisp duck fat, dried duck, puffed wild rice, any leftover duck fat oil, and dried blueberries in a food processor (or mortar and pestle if you feel strong enough) and mix until consistent

Form into small bites and garnish with more puffed wild rice

## Mixed Berry Wojapi

**Ingredients**
1 cup water
1 pinch mineral salt
1 cup blackberries
1 cup blueberries
1 cup raspberries
1 cup strawberries, tops removed
2 tablespoons maple syrup

**Instructions**
Bring the water to a simmer in a medium saucepan; add the mineral salt and the berries. Let simmer for 20 to 30 minutes, continuing to stir as the berries break down. Cook to your desired consistency. Remove from the heat and stir in the maple syrup.