Episode 9: Reconnecting Through Food with Sean Sherman

00:00:00:02
Sean Sherman
For me, this work was never about recreating a past because the past isn't recreatable anyways. Like, we can't go backwards, you know? We can't go to a time before colonization. And so it was really about setting a path forward.

00:00:24:21
Melody Reese
The foods we grow and eat are a part of how we connect to the places we live, the people around us, and the generations who came before us. Over time, some of those connections have been lost. Traditional foods have disappeared from our everyday diets. Knowledge about growing and preparing them has become more difficult to find, and many varieties that were once widely grown are now rare.

In this featured episode, we sit down with chef and indigenous food advocate Sean Sherman to discuss how connecting to traditional foods can help strengthen communities, preserve cultural knowledge, and create many opportunities for the future. Then we'll introduce you to a variety from the Seed Savers Exchange collection. ‘Bear Paw’ popcorn. We'll learn how this once popular variety nearly disappeared, but is now available for gardeners everywhere. I'm Melody. This is *Sowing Connections*, and I'm so glad you're here

00:01:30:06
Mike Bollinger
Sean, it's good to catch up with you. I'm looking forward to the conversation. So many people, you know, know you as an incredible chef, and I'm excited to talk about that, for sure. But I also think, you know, the food that you work with is a doorway into a much bigger conversation, right? About community and culture. And you're doing education in the future of food. So I'm really hoping that we can, you know, peel back some of those layers too.

00:01:55:14
Sean Sherman
Yeah, absolutely. We have a lot going on. Right. For sure.

00:01:59:03
Mike Bollinger
You know, but before we get into some of those bigger ideas, you know, I'd love to start with just a really foundational question. And although, you know, it's hard for me to believe, you know, at this point that there aren't many people who are familiar with your work. For those of you that are, you know, for those that you know, are just discovering this, you know, where do you

usually begin and what do you hope that people come to understand about indigenous foodways and the work that you're that you're doing?

00:02:28:24
Sean Sherman
I think, you know, for me, it was just it was so invisible, like, even to myself. Like growing up on Pine Ridge Reservation and, you know, having all Lakota family and, you know, becoming a chef and working in restaurants for many years. And then all of a sudden realizing that my heritage was completely left out of the conversation.

There just weren't any Native American restaurants out there. There was very few cookbooks on the topic, and there just wasn't a lot of information anywhere, you know? And there was, so for me, it just was personally I just wanted to know, you know, I wanted to know what my ancestors were eating. What was their food systems? What were we harvesting? Were we growing? Were we trading with other people? What was our cooking techniques? Where did we get fats and salts and sugars? And just trying to figure it out, you know. And the goal wasn't to try and recreate the past, but just try to, you know, develop a philosophy of how we're portraying indigenous foods in today's world.

So, you know, what we did was basically remove colonial ingredients of things that were brought over by European immigrants. So no dairy, no wheat flour, no cane sugar, no beef, pork, chicken. And just focusing on the whole food systems of what was here already. So looking at the vast knowledge of wild plants and the different kinds of flavors of pieces that are out there, whether they're berries or roots or leaves or flowers or fruits or trees or whatever it might be. And then obviously, obviously looking at protein diversity, you know, knowing that cows and pigs and chickens weren't even from this continent. So what were people utilizing? And then just looking at everything, you know, so there's, you know, we use a lot of venison and elk and bison and rabbits and quail and turkeys and geese and ducks and all the lake fish. And from the coastal regions, you have a whole other food system with everything else there.

And so for me, it was just trying to normalize, as an understanding of what indigenous foods were, since it's the basis of the foods here in the Americas and just kind of shining a light, you know, and we've done a lot. So I formed the company, The Sioux Chef in 2014, and then just kind of took off from there. And I think I joined Seed Savers Board about that time in 2015.

00:04:32:24
Mike Bollinger
You know, one of the things that, you know, I've always appreciated about, you know, your work is how inviting it is. You know, you make these ideas accessible, you know, and I think also, while recognizing that every community has knowledge and is rooted in its own history and experience, you know, I think as interest in Indigenous foods continues to grow. I mean, you've got a new restaurant, you've doubled your size, and we'll get into some of that. But, you know, how do you think about sharing that knowledge in ways that are both welcoming yet really just acknowledge the truth and respects history?

00:05:13:02
Sean Sherman
Yeah, I mean, I think that we just wanted to put it out there.So, you know, for me, I started working on *The Sioux Chef's Indigenous Kitchen Cookbook* early, like in early 2015 even, and just I didn't have big expectations for that cookbook. I just wanted to create something to use as an educational tool just to share, as we were kind of moving around and doing some of this work and some other tribes and regions and things like that.

But obviously that book kind of took a life of its own and became very popular and still sells really well. But, you know, and then shortly after I started working on *Turtle Island*, which we just released in November, but the goal was really just to release some of this information to make it accessible, you know, so people can see kind of what our philosophy was, how we're approaching looking at all this regional diversity of Indigeneity everywhere, kind of erasing colonial lines of looking past like the US Mexico border as an example and just exploring Indigeneity there, because these colonial lines kind of crossed us as Indigenous people.

So it's just looking at land spaces differently and looking at regions differently. But there's so much to explore. There's so much work out there. And, you know, in my time with Seed Savers was really, part of my, my, my growth because it really did help me connect with a lot of seedkeepers and especially looking for Indigenous seedkeepers and being able to see what was out there, the kinds of seed varieties that were still being used, who was growing them. Then being able to play with some of these really cool varieties of different kinds of beans and corns and squash and, you know, things that were out there. And so that was just a lot of help in the early days when I was just kind of starting of making those connections and just kind of exploring who was out there and, you know, working really closely with Rowen back then and when she was chairing the board and going through some of the processes that they were doing in those early days too. And so that stuff really helped me on my journey as I was just kind of getting up and coming.

00:07:09:28
Mike Bollinger
Yeah. You know, and of course, we're, you know, we've just launched in our into our first season of, of this podcast. But, you know, as you mentioned, you know, you're, you know, doing things like this all the time, right? You're interviewing interviewing all the time. And in one of the podcasts I recently listened to you on, you referenced, yourself as a “futurist”. And I just, I wonder if you would speak to that a little bit. And you know, what possibilities you know, you're seeing that maybe the rest of us haven't learned to imagine yet.

00:07:44:21
Sean Sherman
Yeah. I just see so much opportunity of having a deeper understanding of Indigenous food systems, no matter where you might be, you know, and on a global scale. And I see the connections of Indigenous peoples across the globe, you know, and especially Indigenous communities who have been deeply affected by colonization and colonialism like we have here

in the US. And so I just see, like, being able to, like, look past, you know, kind of, what was taken from us and look past the invisibility and all these things that happened to us, but kind of really kind of digging in into a really, truly understanding, like the basis of everything, you know. And so for me, this work was never about recreating a past because the past isn't recreatable anyways. Like, we can't go backwards, you know, we can't go to a time before colonization. And so it was really about setting a path forward. It was really about understanding as much as we could from the past when it came from, you know, looking at Indigenous food systems or what, like my ancestors and other ancestors were utilizing and their vast knowledge of everything when it came to food and how food is, you know, like plants, especially because plants can be food, lodging, crafting tools, weapons, medicine, like plants give you kind of everything.

And just those huge, vast knowledge that are lying out there still largely untapped because they've been kind of living in this very Westernized diet, you know, and the US, and has never really, you know, explored too much the Indigeneity of the land that it sits on. And so I think there's a lot of missed opportunities, and I think there's more opportunity in the future to really kind of pull this together.

And so some of the projects that we're working on right now really looks at all of that. It looks at the regional aspect of nutritional understandings of what was there first and what's been modernized. And, you know, where can we get a diverse amount of plants and proteins and, and all the things that come with it with like sugars and fats and minerals and, and vitamins and things like that? Because some of those are plant-derived, some of those are animal-derived, some of those even mineral-derived, you know, and just exploring how that food is medicine really ties together because the Indigenous philosophies around food is medicine is very similar to what people already know as Eastern medicines and like traditional Chinese medicine, for example. Because if you ever go to a traditional, traditional Chinese doctor, you know acupuncture might be a part of it. But the bigger part of it is the apothecary that they're holding there and how they're prescribing a lot of these natural pieces to help your body work better by identifying where you need help, you know, physically and and everything. So a lot of the Indigenous philosophies around medicine were always tied to food. And so we're working on projects that kind of explore how that all comes together. And people can really see a lot of this kind of everywhere.

00:10:29:09
Mike Bollinger
Right, yeah. No, I really I appreciate that, you know, and, you know, to dig in a little bit more about just your, you know, the work of Seed Savers Exchange, but also, you know, your personal journey, right? I mean, we spend a lot of time, as you know, you know, thinking about, you know, the relationships people have with seeds, you know, and the stories that travel with them. You know, and you mentioned kind of, you know, early days and connecting with Seed Savers Exchange and, and, you know, The Sioux Chef work that you kind of said that you spent your life savings on. Right? It was like, what do you say, $3,000 or something like that, right? (Three month's salary.) You know, but I guess I'm, you know, I'm curious how, you know, for you personally, you know, because you're, you know, you you, you know, this is you're evolving

along with the work. Right? And how has your own relationship with seeds and foods changed? You know, are there particular plants, you know, or ingredients that you see, you know, differently than, than you did when you first started in your career?

00:11:30:15
Sean Sherman
Oh, yeah, I would say so for sure. You know, because I had a little basis of education around some plants, like working for the Forest Service right out of high school and having to learn how to identify all the, like, the plants and trees in the Northern Black Hills, you know, and then seeing how that education comes in pretty handy much later, as I find a new focus of reconnecting with the plants and the natural world.

And I feel like, you know, you know, just in my own personal space, like at my house in Minneapolis, like I have in my in front yard, a garden, because that's where all the sun's at, you know, and it's a better use than a, than a lawn. And, and I just have a lot of wild foods kind of all over the place. Like everything, almost everything around the yard is some kind of edible because it's just the way it was set up, you know. And so I think it's just working through those seasons and being connected to that. And I think that's a lot of fun to do because I can grab some cedar or wild ginger or sochan or bergamot or hyssop and all this stuff's just around the yard, you know, on top of whatever seeds I might be growing in the garden boxes, too.

And so I think that growing food is a big piece to it all, you know? But I do love growing things, you know, and I fail at things horribly sometimes, too. But that's part of it. I feel like, you know, you you have to make some mistakes and in order to learn to grow.

And so but I think people need to be more connected to where food actually comes from, because we live in a society where we're so disconnected from food. And, you know, most kids just think food comes from a grocery store or a restaurant, and they're not making the connection of seeds and the cycle of plants and all of these things, you know, and I think that the education that you guys work on is vastly important.

And, you know, just the the historical connections that Seed Savers has made across the nation of preserving a lot of these seeds is pretty massive, you know, and I don't think people really realize the legacy that's been kind of set in motion with a lot of the work that you've already done and how a lot of seed saving helped save a lot of Native culture and identity to by holding on to some of these seeds that Native peoples lost but were eventually able to get back. And we've seen those stories happen quite a few times. And so I think that there's an importance out there to consider, like all of these pieces, you know, both wild and domesticated plants and, you know, just thinking about what can make a really healthy environment and what could be a better food system for us in the future. And that's where, for me, again, I see much I see so much opportunity in the future, which is why I call myself a futurist.

00:13:54:12
Mike Bollinger

Yeah, yeah. And it's a living system, right? I mean, that's part of the work, even in the, you know, the preservation, you know, collection that we have. I mean, the goal is always to have as much of that accessible as we can. And that's what our daily work is. Right? Is, you know, we were we were a backup to, you know, work that was happening in communities, you know, all over. And and so we were able to, you know, to, to have those for safekeeping. But, you know, that germplasm is alive. And so we're always working to regenerate those and find ways to be able to get them back into the communities and with the families and that, you know, that have a connection to those and those that don't either. Right? Just to be able to to keep them active and adapting and important people part of people's lives. And, you know, at the same time, it's nutritious and it's good and it's what we want for our, for our communities. Right.

00:14:46:04
Sean Sherman
And we just need so much more plant diversity in our diets, you know, because I feel like, you know the USDA's upside down pyramid really should, you know, be a pyramid of NASCAR corporate branding of who lobbied that. And I think that we need to really focus on the more regional aspect of our diets, you know, and how that more regional and seasonal foods into our diet and find growers who are growing really interesting pieces out there, you know, and just have a lot more plant diversity in general.

And I think there's so much more education we can be pushing out there, which is just not a part of our system right now. And we just don't talk about food or plants or anything in, in our, you know, in our school curriculums. And I think that that's a such a massive missed opportunity.

00:15:29:04
Mike Bollinger
Yeah. And I think that's a you know, it's a really great segue into, you know, some of the current work that you're doing. You know, I know that, you know, I've heard you referenced that, you know, restaurants are really just one tool of a much larger purpose, right? That it wasn't, you know, it's not necessarily about, you know, food access because it's a privilege to be able to go to a restaurant, you know, but, you know, since those, you know, those early days of a. Right. You mean you've expanded, and, you know, the Indigenous Food Lab has also evolved, right? It's at Wóyute Thipi. Do you want to speak a little bit about that and show to and, you know, kind of the evolution of of that, of all of that work, too. I think it's really incredible.

00:16:16:17
Sean Sherman
Yeah. I mean, we have a lot going on. So NATIFS is kind of the over, overseeing entity of everything, and NATIFS is the 501c3 nonprofit, and it's an acronym for North American Traditional Indigenous Food Systems. And under NATIFS we have a brand new building in South Minneapolis, just right on the Native American Cultural Corridor, which is on Franklin. So not too far from the American Indian Center in Minneapolis. And it's a beautiful building. It's two stories tall with a full basement. So it's about a 21,000 square foot building. That's our new home. And so we have all of our offices out of there now. We've been working out there for a

while now, and we have a massive commissary kitchen in the, on the main level that we're launching a project called Meals for Native Institutions, or MNI. And that project basically creates large format institutional foods for particularly it's anybody's for serving lots of people like schools and hospitals or could be penitentiaries or community centers or anything, but it's basically just creating ready-to-eat foods for those because, that came from just understanding after working with a lot of rural school districts and things like that, and seeing their kitchens where the food's being prepared, that they don't have the right equipment to do a lot of scratch cooking anyways. So even if we train them how to cook healthy Native American foods, they wouldn't really have the resources or equipment to pull it off in those schools, in those kitchens. And typically what they're stuck with is just whatever the offerings are coming out of Sysco and Aramark and US Foods, which are typically just a lot of heat-and-serve kind of things. So we decided that we would just move into that modality and just start making healthy Indigenous recipes so that they could just order directly from us.

So we copied the program from the Minneapolis Public School Systems, and they have a large commissary kitchen in the center of Minneapolis. And they make massive amounts of foods that they ship to all the different schools around the city. And they're feeding, you know, tens of thousands of kids a day. And so we're just kind of using that same format of how they're producing these large formats, how they're cooling them properly, and how they're freezing them and packaging them and just using that same thing so we can start shipping out a lot of ready-to-eat foods kind of regionally all over the place.

And then we also are focused on kind of ramping up our online market availabilities, because we've had the Indigenous Food Lab market up for a while, but we're getting ready to launch a new website with a better platform and just push a lot more media behind it just to raise awareness. But we've collected a lot of different Indigenous purveyors from across the country, and we have a lot of wholesale, too, so we can be selling bulk items as needed. But we just want to really set up those markets to keep pushing food dollars towards those producers, and finding homes and making the food accessible for people at home to be able to order and just have these foods to play with, you know?

And then we're also getting ready to launch a second restaurant concept. So Owamni itself, we moved out of our original location and we moved into a larger space at the Guthrie Theater, which was this massive national theater in downtown Minneapolis, and that had a massive restaurant space that's been dormant for a while, and it's almost three times the size of what we had before. Because we had 78 seats in the previous restaurant, we have a little over 200 right now, not including the patio outside. And so we have quite a bit of space, but we have been open about five weeks now, so it's still pretty new. We launched our first official grand opening day was July 4th, which just seemed like a pretty fitting day for us since it was America's birthday. And, we just, we're doing really well there.

But now we have a secondary restaurant that'll be inside our new building on Franklin in South Minneapolis. And that restaurant concept called ŠHOTÁ, which is a Dakota word that loosely means smoke. It's part of the word Minnesota. It's Mni Sóta Makoce, which just means a place

where the clouds live in the water or the reflection of the clouds. Talking about all the lakes and all the beautiful landscape and scenery that we have. So, ŠHOTÁ just loosely refers to smoke or wispiness, you know, and so it fits because it's going to be a Native barbecue concept and will be a market and barbecue space for people to come in and grab some cool Native barbecue foods using our style of just using Indigenous ingredients, lots of game meats and lots of interesting sides. But it's barbecue, so it'll be lower price than our downtown restaurant. It's a little bit more accessible and just fun. So it's just another cool concept. Then we're also continuing our education. So we have a YouTube channel ourselves under Indigenous Food Lab. We have about 250 videos uploaded, I believe, right now. And we have a massive following on social media that just really kind of took off this last year. And, I think we have like 175,000 followers on Instagram or something like that and growing.

And then we are getting ready to replicate. And so we have a position opened in Bozeman, Montana, to hire a first regional director. And they're going to start building all these pieces out there. So we already have a kitchen. And inside this big food pantry space that has massive storage spaces. So we're going to launch the Meals for Native Institutions program there and start being able to cover that part, that region out there around Montana. And we also we'll be setting up our wholesale and retail distribution spaces too, so we can move foods a little bit cheaper out that way too. And so we're excited to be able to learn and grow because everything is always set up to be able to grow, you know, and we have some monies to start working in Alaska soon after Bozeman.

But the goal was to set up regional center points kind of everywhere to help steward a lot of Indigenous knowledge, make food, Indigenous foods more accessible. You know, using restaurants as tools to create large workforces and build a lot of future leaders and skills to move tons of food dollars. Because the original Owamni, we tracked $600,000 a year, was going towards indigenous producers alone, and now we think we're going to quadruple that number with everything we have going on by the end of next year. So nearly, probably close a little over $2 million a year will be going out the door to just towards Indigenous producers, which is a massive boost for those economies, you know. And that's sort of two kitchens, you know. So I think we have, as we grow and grow and grow, we're just going to see exponential growth and support out there for more Indigenous food producers, farmers growing cool heirloom seeds, you know, that we can use in a lot of these products. And so there's just, again, a really bright future with everything.

00:22:29:27
Mike Bollinger
So, you know, that really kind of leads me to what I feel like is the next logical question. Right. Like, you've got this public awareness that seems to be growing incredibly quickly. You've got, you know, more restaurants, you know, schools, hospitals involved. Right? Communities that want access to, you know, Indigenous foods. What has to happen on the supply side, like what does that look like? You know, again, as a farmer thinking about, you know, the kinds of growers and seedkeepers, you know, what distribution systems, you know, and how do you, how does

that keep up with what you have going on in your mind and your vision? And for where you know, this, this movement and work is headed?

00:23:10:11
Sean Sherman
Yeah. I mean, I think distributions are the next big trick for just figuring out how we move things around in our region, like how we're getting foods up to northern Minnesota or western Minnesota, for example, from Minneapolis or even, you know, crossing down into state lines which foods we can cross state lines with. And, I think that we're just opening up a lot of doors for more opportunity for producers out there.

And we've seen some producers grow. So there's one produce one, one producer I use as an example all the time, because there was a husband and wife duo up in Minnesota, and when I was just starting, a woman had reached out asking if I wanted to buy wild rice. And I said, sure, what have you got? And they're like, we have 600 pounds. And so I'm like, I'll just take all of that. And so the wife drives it down in a hatchback, you know, and it's filled with everything. Like she's the only thing that could fit in there besides the wild rice. And then the next year they have a truck, and then the next year they have a van, and the next year they have a bison herd. And we just watch them grow because we're just pushing food dollars towards them, you know, and helping support their business ventures. And I think that as we grow and create more opportunity to sell more Indigenous foods, and that is just going to create them, you know, that opportunity to purchase more, so our purchasing power is going to get massive, and we can support more and more people.

And hopefully, like, tribes will start to invest in a lot more food production because like down there in Iowa, maybe like Meskwaki Nation could like ramp up their farms and we can start purchasing a lot of their product from them, for example. And that can only help them more as they grow. You know, when we can even help them with some of their food service operation developments, too, so we can help them with restaurant concepts or catering concepts and recipe development and those kinds of things, and just writing more Native foods into everything, which is another piece of the puzzle, you know, just getting it more normalized.

And, you know, because I have this blend of for-profit nonprofit, because the fo- profit arm is completely controlled by the nonprofit, but that gives me the opportunity to create more of these restaurants with those purposes of moving more food dollars, creating more staff, and raising more awareness in other areas. So as we move into places like Bozeman, like, you know, and be great to set up some more food operations and some of those touristy zones or work in, like, I've been working with Yellowstone and getting them to consider maybe helping putting more Native food products in some of their menu offerings, which would fit in really well, you know, for example, and finding a lot of Native food producers to really support first, because that was kind of the goal is local, regional food production first and then national, just to try to keep the food dollars as close as possible. But Indígena, I think, is going to be a really great model to show what's possible of how much food we move out the door. The MNI project, I think, is going to be a game changer of just turning food access on to especially rural kids out there, just so they can

grow up seeing Native foods on their menus weekly instead of just around Thanksgiving time, you know? And so I think that there's, you know, so much things we will need to get through. But, you know, this is a big project. And, you know, I'm trying to just open up a lot of doors because eventually I hope this will outlast me. You know, in my position. Hopefully this will just start, build, build something that can continue to go on and grow outwards and hopefully, you know, create more and more of these support centers out there and eventually even cross colonial lines and be in other countries.

00:26:22:22
Mike Bollinger
Right. You know, one of the things that, you know, you talked about your YouTube channel and, you know, of course I see all of that and, you know, in my algorithm too. Right. And I just see this growing, you know, network of chefs that you're highlighting from all over the country, right? I mean, you're constantly highlighting that work. And I just wonder too, right? I mean, is that, is watching that kind of community grow and, and, you know, those relationships develop, you know, changed what you feel is possible?

00:26:51:05
Sean Sherman
Yeah. And I think it's always been it's been a lot of fun for me just to stay connected with a lot of the other Indigenous chefs out there around the country. And now we have the space where we can invite a lot of people to do specialty dinners and hang out with us and stuff like that. And we just want to play a support role, you know, and we kind of open sourced a lot of our recipes because we just want to we just want to share and just want to see more of these projects happen out there.

So we've been connected and there's a restaurant team in Portland. They have a restaurant called Javelina. And so we've been working with them and sending them foods. And my friend Crystal Wahpepah, which was nominated for a James Beard Award a couple of years back, and she's got her place in Oakland. And then we have Tocabe in Denver, and we just have these Native chefs kind of dotted here and there that are up and coming, and some of them are doing really well. And we just wanted to, you know, continue to be in that community and play support with that, because we all had the similar goal of normalizing Indigenous foods, using Indigenous products, pushing food dollars towards Indigenous producers, raising awareness to especially regional Indigenous cultures and the foods that are out there too.

And, you know, I list a lot of this work going into the cookbooks, like *Turtle Island* was a massive project, you know, to be able to cover all of North America and just kind of scratch the surface of what's possible out there.

00:28:06:01
Mike Bollinger
Yeah. You know, I think part of, you know, you and I have had conversations in the past where we've talked about, you know, the that kind of balance of, you know, earned revenue and

nonprofit work and what that allows you to accomplish. But, you know, a significant part of that, I think, is also the equity, you know, and just, you know, you've got an, you know, a growing staff. I don't know, I mean, you're probably pushing close to 200 people that work, you know, with you now and, and so, you know, the way that you're balancing the growth, but also the way that you care for people in, you know, in compensation and, you know, those sorts of things really, you know, go a long way, I think, to be able to, to getting by and, and, and to kind of feed this.

00:28:47:05
Sean Sherman
Yeah. I mean again so much opportunity and yeah massive staff because we are close to 200 employees right now. And if we're and we're still growing, we're still adding people right now. And so and I feel like after we have everything kind of said and done, we'll be closer to 300 next year also. And so it's just and it gives us more opportunities to work on better benefits for people. And you know, we work really hard to pay people really well because even, you know, the restaurants are part of the nonprofit. So we don't have an owner draw on it. You're able to push more, more resources towards employees, you know, and it's tricky because restaurants are also really dangerous business models because they're so razor thin when it comes to your your marks. So it's just a constant. But that's part of the trick. You're just constantly watching labor and food costs and trying to keep it balanced the best you can. But under nonprofit thumb, like it's a little bit easier. So if it ever slips a little bit, we can feed it some money and it's worth it because it keeps those jobs going and it keeps those food dollars moving. And it just does a lot of benefit in that way, you know?

00:29:44:09
Mike Bollinger
Yeah. Yeah. Okay. That's that's great. I might pivot a little bit and just think a little bit about or talk a little bit about the work of the Seed Savers Exchange. And you know, kind of this another idea that we're constantly faced with, right, is we're thinking about preserving seeds. But again, how that preservation work is really only a part of the story. You know, those seeds need to ultimately be grown and shared and cooked, and, and ultimately part of people's lives in a way that's kind of going back to the way that people used to be connected to food. How do you think about the the relationship between kind of that conserving diversity and creating living food systems?

00:30:28:17
Sean Sherman
I mean, I think it's huge. I think that we need more seed diversity because we have these giant corporations that, you know, literally trademarked and own so much of the world's seed sources. And, you know, we need to keep a lot of these seeds in the hands of communities, and we need people to, you know, who have these stories of who have been holding on to these seeds for generations now, like those stories need to be, need to be kept alive. And Indigenous seed keepers of some of these families who have been for multiple generations, growing out some of these amazing products, you know, these different varieties of corn and beans and squash and sunflowers and all these cool things that are out there that they should really be able to hold on

to those legacies. And there should be support for continuing those legacies moving forward. You know, because I feel like all seeds are at danger at the hands of these big corporations that just want to control everything and, you know, manipulate everything in their own way. And that's just a dangerous way to be. And I think that we need too the more education we put out, the more accessibility we put out to cool plants and the way, getting chefs to be able to play with them and getting people excited about using some of these things, you know, it's all part of it.

And again, it's just it's more plant diversity too, because you can do tons of studies and they are just going to be more nutritious than what you pull out of a Costco or something, you know? And so then and just like all these big scares, like people are afraid to eat salads right now because of the of what's happening, you know, and so we, we but again, if you're eating local foods, like, you shouldn't have to worry about any of that stuff if you know exactly where your food is coming from, you know, and we just need more restaurants and chefs that are bold to just, you know, really be choosy and intentional about who they're purchasing foods from. And, you know, like, we have enough restaurants that are just basically how well can you heat up Sysco? And we need to be able to have more restaurants that are focused on how many of our food dollars can we push out to our own community, you know?

00:32:21:28
Mike Bollinger
Yeah. You know, and then to, to go to the, you know, to the stories in the donor history side of this, right? I mean, and again, you and I have had conversations about it and, you know, you know this from our work as well, right? Sometimes, you know, there are very complicated, you know, cultural histories. And, you know, we're always doing our best to try to document to the extent that we can. And, you know, there's always room to be to do better. And we've learned a lot along the way. You know, but from your perspective, you know, what should organizations, you know, doing seed work or, you know, like Seed Savers Exchange keep in mind, when we're caring for seeds or food knowledge, connected to Indigenous communities,

00:33:01:00
Sean Sherman
I think it's just important to understand where those stories are, you know, and hopefully people not trying to culturally appropriate by, you know, trying to cash in on somebody else's story. And I think you always have to be careful with that a little bit. And I think that supporting, you know, some of the tribes that have had a lot of struggle with having nutritional access, you know, we should be pushing a little bit more resources into some of those areas because, you know, like my reservation, if you look up statistics on Pine Ridge, it's pretty dismal of just like what's going on there with unemployment and health issues and rates of obesity and diabetes and stuff like that, and all comes down from food access, you know?

And so that's a big part of this work, because the work was never about me personally trying to become a famous chef. The work was about trying to change what I grew up with and creating something different, you know? And again, I see the opportunity, but it's going to take a lot of work and seeds and growing is a big part of this work because we need to be able to have

access to these things. And, you know, Indigenous peoples are deeply connected, Indigenous peoples where agriculture was the thing, like, we're so deeply connected to the growing of foods, you know, and connected to the natural world of everything and using a lot of plant diversity outside of just the seeds, too. But, I think it's really important to see those connections and to understand, like these variety of foods that come from these different areas, you know, and we tried to put some of that into *Turtle Island*, but it's such a massive like area like to, you know, like we you can't cover everything. So but it just starts the conversation, I hope for a lot of people to kind of look into some of that stuff, especially when you like go down into Mexico, like it's insane. Like how many cool heirloom varieties of things are down there still, you know, and, but again, like, everything's in danger. We have to preserve. People have to realize it's up to us to save things, and we should all be playing a role in that in some way or another, you know?

00:34:52:23
Mike Bollinger
Yeah, yeah. You know, and I think that, you know, digging into that work and, and trying to, you know, kind of, you know, understand to the extent that we're able to find, you know, somebody to talk to or, you know, a, an article that was written or whatever it is that kind of, you know, contributes to the to the history of a, of a variety that we're able to document. I mean, it speaks too kind of this idea that you've talked about too, which is, you know, educational sovereignty, right, right alongside food sovereignty. You know, and I see that through and through your work. Right? It's this kind of like, you know, kind of multifaceted, you know, we're talking about food and food sovereignty. But through that, right, we also get this deeper educational understanding about where we come from, where we've come from and where we're going.

00:35:40:22
Sean Sherman
Yeah, absolutely. I mean, educational sovereignty is a huge, massive part of it. Just because I you know, as Indigenous communities we lost our own education, programing and understanding just because of assimilation efforts, the violence, and all these really awful things that happened to Indigenous communities in U.S. history. And because of that, you know, we lost a lot of food knowledge. We lost a lot of, you know, farming knowledge and all sorts of things kind of fall at fall in that, in that situation. So I think it's really important that we reframe what's really important to teach people, you know, and we should be teaching about where food comes from, our connection to the plants or seasonal cycles and the different varieties of things, and what plants are great for, you know, because they could be good for so many different things.

And so I think just putting more and more education out there as important, which is why we started doing these videos, which is teaching about, you know, plant identification and cooking techniques and making teas and or interviewing other people with knowledge and all those kinds of things, and just trying to steward a lot of that, a lot of those pieces, you know, and we're working on a big website to start to harvest and keep all of that information into one space. So it's accessible for everybody to, to look into and kind of deep dive if they want to, and to their particular region of what's around them.

00:36:54:21
Mike Bollinger
Yeah, yeah. You know, it also makes me just think about, you know, you know, kind of sustaining change. Right? And how that happens over time. And, you know, I talked to a lot of people or hear a lot of people say, like, if you're going to make sustaining change right, you need to you need to start that policy, right? That that's where that work begins. And I, you know, the beauty of what you've, you know, you're accomplishing, right? Is it like you started with your own savings and you built a restaurant and training programs and markets and food infrastructure, right. And then that, you know, but I know you've also been out in D.C., right. But that you talk about how that is something that kind of comes later, is that, you know, was that a plan from the beginning? Or you know, talk about that approach a little bit and, and kind of that idea around creating sustaining change. I mean, it's a movement first.

00:37:46:27
Sean Sherman
Yeah. I mean, and I think as the as the opportunities grew, I just kept seeing the opportunities and kept just moving forward with things, seeing the opportunity to create an online market, seeing an opportunity to create an online, you know, video archive of stewarding knowledge through videos which are shareable and they're easy to storage and, you know, creating restaurants with a purpose, with intentions, you know, and being intentional all along the way with kind of everything that we do and just really even like working towards a lot of zero waste right now, which is a huge challenge to do because we're so used to just the convenience of single-use plastics and, you know, all these kinds of things that are just normal, you know, but it's also a great challenge just to be more creative with what we're doing and how we're treating food waste and turning some food waste into other edible pieces, you know, and stuff like that. And so I think there's plenty of challenges out there.

But again, like, we just had to move with a lot of intention and challenge ourselves constantly as we grow. And, you know, and it's very political too. I don't really, it doesn't have a choice because it just is political. Right. And, you know, with an administration like we're under right now, like it even intensifies, you know, and so it's just I feel like this work is really, really important to kind of help people find a path, especially tribal communities, to think about how they can invest in food sovereignty and making tangible models like the Meals for Native Institutions kitchen, which is just like we have a like a 4000 square foot kitchen space that's set up just to make a massive amounts of food. But we can replicate this model on a tribal community like where I grew up and, you know, for like $1 million, you know, which sounds like a lot of money, but it's not when you're building out buildings and all these things. Like you can create a massive kitchen which could create a ton of jobs and then eventually create enough food to cover the whole region, you know, for that million dollars. And that's a massive return. And so it's just getting tribes to see the potentiality of a lot of these models that we're building, because that's what we're hoping is that they'll start to use this, and we can plug this in in other regions and start to work and impact a lot of Indigenous peoples everywhere, but also just creating access so, you know, non-Indigenous peoples can see a better way to think about the land that they're on, the struggles that Indigenous peoples went through, the contributions that

those Indigenous communities gave, and the kinds of foods that are still out there. And there's so much more we can learn about just where we are, the plant diversity around us, and all those pieces and all kind of ties together.

00:40:08:24
Mike Bollinger
Yeah. You know, and I think, you know, I want to be respectful of your time here, you know, so maybe we'll, we'll end in this on, you know, this next one, which is both a little bit of a plug for your new book, but also just helping us think about how we, you know, how we carry this work forward.

You know, I've heard you talk about how *Turtle Island* isn't a cookbook in the traditional sense, right? That, you know, it can be more of a handbook for seeing the world differently. And, and I guess, you know, just to speak a little bit about, you know, about what you put in there, you know, and what do you, you know, what do you hope people that, that read that and have the opportunity to cross paths with it carry with them?

00:40:47:17
Sean Sherman
I just really hope that, you know, it starts to open up people's eyes a little bit about how much more there is to learn and how much we don't really know because we just haven't been taught. And there's so much more to explore about really understanding the food systems everywhere and how diverse it is and how special it is everywhere. You know, whether you're in the middle of Iowa or Southern California or Arizona or New York, wherever, like every place is unique and every place has a lot of amazing history and a lot of amazing foods that come from it. And there's so much regional diversity that we could be embracing if we include the Indigenous like lens inside of it, too, because it's always been overlooked.

And so that's what *Turtle Island* attempts to do, is just kind of reframe the way we look at region, the way we look at foods. And, you know, just looking at, again, like erasing these colonial lines that crossed us as Indigenous peoples, you know, especially like here in Minneapolis with Operation Metro Surge, with the intensity of attacking our immigrant communities, largely people who are speaking Spanish, coming from south of the border, really just racial profiling them, you know, but they're there, like a lot of them are coming from Indigenous descents, too, and their families have been here for way longer than, you know, a lot of European descendants, you know, and we have to remember that, you know, it's crazy to be like, punishing people because they come from a Spanish speaking country where English is also a foreign language on this land space. You know, there's so much more we need to be thinking about. And so for me, it just opens up the doors to just a better understanding. So it's a better understanding of history. It's a better understanding of region. It's a better understanding of culture. It's more inclusive. But it brings us in a way where we use food as a language to start to celebrate these diversities, instead of being afraid of them and trying to keep things homogenized, that we should be really embracing global diversity and protecting it instead of watching it slip away.

00:42:38:22
Mike Bollinger
Yeah. Well, Sean, thank you so much for taking the time to chat with me. (Always.) I really appreciate it.

00:42:46:10
Melody Reese
Throughout the conversation, Sean emphasizes that preserving seeds is just part of the story. It's also important for those seeds to be grown, shared and used. That is something we see in the history of many of the varieties of the Seed Savers Exchange collection.

In this episode's Variety Spotlight, inventory operations manager, Heidi, shares the story of 'Bear Paw' Popcorn, a variety that nearly disappeared before finding its way back into gardens.

00:43:20:04
Heidi Hackman
Imagine you're spending a nice, quiet evening at home. You've been joined by your family, or maybe some of your friends for a movie night. Now everyone is excited about the big feature. The lights are low. You've all found your seat. However, you remember something you forgot. If you guessed popcorn, you'd be correct.

Hi, my name is Heidi Hackman and I'm the inventory operations manager here at Seed Savers Exchange. I'm here today to tell you about a collection of popcorn that we hold near and dear to our hearts. This is the story of the 'Bear Paw.'

'Bear Paw' is a rare heirloom variety. It was developed in the 1930s by a farmer named Glenn Thompson in Vermont. Now, once he developed this, he began selling it commercially for the next 30 years, and it became so popular that it was offered in movie theaters all over the northeastern United States. It was also featured at a Vermont agriculture exhibit in a World's Fair. Now, sadly, in the 1960s, Glenn's health began to decline, and with that commercial production of this variety stopped. Luckily, there were a few home gardeners and seed stewards who held interest in this variety and were able to keep it alive. And finally, in the 1980s, it was introduced to Seed Savers Exchange.

From there, we grew the 'Bear Paw' out in our gardens at the Heritage Farm. We studied it, made sure that the variety was healthy and that it was genetically pure. And once we established that, we were able to harvest it and place the seed into our seed bank for preservation and long term storage. And finally, because we enjoyed growing the 'Bear Paw' so much at the Heritage Farm in 2014, we introduced this variety into our catalog so that now it can be enjoyed widely to gardeners everywhere.

With maturity being 70 to 80 days. The 'Bear Paw' can be grown in cooler, shorter season climates. And for us in northeast Iowa, this is a perfect variety to choose. The corn stalks reach anywhere from 4 to 6ft tall, and the cobs reach anywhere from 4 to 6 inches long. Now, my

favorite part is the cob, because at the end of the cob, it forms a finger-like pattern. Glenn thought this resembled the bear's paw, which is why it got its name.

Now it's harvest time when the stocks begin to lose their color and the husks become dry and papery. Simply remove the corn from the stalk. Peel back the layers of the husk and lay your cobs out to dry. Now I usually let my cobs sit out to dry for about a month. Make sure your area is dry, cool, and well ventilated. As the corn dries down, the cob will become dry and papery. And this is when you know you're ready to remove the kernels from the cob.

Now it's simple as a home gardener, by just taking the cob in your hand and in a circular motion around the cob, the kernels will release, and with a little cleaning, you are ready to enjoy your first bowl of popcorn.

You can find the ‘Bear Paw’ popcorn in our catalog, or if you visit our website at SeedSavers.org. Now, ever since we introduced this in 2014, I have been absolutely impressed with this popcorn. I've grown it in my garden every single year. It's reliable and it's so easy to grow. Its flavor is as timeless as its story. I hope you get a chance to try ‘Bear Paw’ in your garden, and that you enjoy it as much as we do.

00:47:43:05
Melody Reese
Sean reminds us that food can be a way to reconnect with history, culture and the places we call home. And the story of ‘Bear Paw’ popcorn shows us how the work of seed savers can help keep a variety growing and available for the future. Whether it's preserving traditional food knowledge, supporting growers, or planting a variety that might otherwise be lost, there are many ways to keep food diversity alive.

Thank you for joining us on this episode of *Sowing Connections*. We have just two episodes left of season one. In two weeks, we'll have another “From the Archives” episode. And then our final episode of the season will feature Jennifer Jewell and release on December 3rd. Subscribe so you don't miss them. We'll see you soon.