

## Fry bread furor: Standing by a food tradition in a negative light

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**Abstract:** The company, based out of Kyle on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, creates health food products, including the Tanka Bar. HISTORY OF FRY BREAD While fry bread sometimes is considered a traditional Native American food, its makeup - mainly white flour, sugar, salt and cooked in anything from lard to canola oil - is far from foods that Native Americans ate as part of their hunter-and-gatherer lifestyle.

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**Full text:** When 62-year-old Mary Tsosie makes fry bread - the doughy concoction that graces booths at fairs and tables at Native American celebrations - she starts making the dough in the morning.

She uses yeast, flour and a little bit of salt and lets the dough rise for an hour before frying it in hot oil. If she's making Indian tacos, she cuts the dough into round pieces, or into smaller squares to eat with soup.

"My mom taught me how to make it a long time ago. I make it for some special occasions," says Tsosie, a member of the Yankton Sioux Tribe, who lives in Sioux Falls.

Rarely has a food been tied to such strong sentiments and controversy over its nutrition, history and cultural significance.

Fry bread, named South Dakota's state bread in 2005, has been in the news recently - and not in a positive light.

Health magazine named fry bread one of the 50 fattiest foods in the nation in an online exclusive June 29.

The article linked fry bread to Native American cuisine and to rising obesity levels in Native Americans: "... Fry bread may also contribute to obesity - 67 percent of Native Americans in the U.S. are overweight or obese."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimated that one slice of fry bread the size of a large paper plate has about 25 grams of fat, Health reported.

In a recent episode of "Losing it with Jillian," fitness guru Jillian Michaels threw pieces of fry bread away in front of some members of the Yavapai-Apache tribe in Arizona. Michaels called the food "poison."

Some Native Americans say that fry bread is just one part of unhealthy eating habits across the nation.

The issue points to the need for a healthier lifestyle both for Native Americans and American society as a whole, says Mark Tilsen, president and co-founder of Native American Natural Foods.

"Fry bread has become part of the modern negative food culture that exists, just like hamburgers and french fries are part of the American food culture."

The company, based out of Kyle on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, creates health food products, including the Tanka Bar. The products are sold in more than 4,000 stores nationwide and were recently picked up by outdoor recreation chain REI.

Registered dietitian Joanne Shearer also points to American food culture as problematic.

"You have to look at the whole picture, not just any one food as being the culprit," she says. "In general, as Americans, we overeat in relationship to our activity." Shearer is the the food and nutrition director for Avera Heart Hospital.

Tilsen sees the mission of Native American Natural Foods as working to change the "negative food culture" on reservations.

That includes making fruits and vegetables more accessible on reservations and educating people on healthy eating.

"Walk into any grocery store on the reservation, and tell me how many fruits and vegetables you find," Tilsen

says. "We have to find out, in this modern society, how to make food and preparation of food healthier again and spend the time and money to do it."

It's part of working together as a community, Tilsen says.

"I think it's important that we don't look at this issue with fry bread as an 'us vs. them' issue. It's really that we together as a community, as the state of South Dakota, together have to find healthier ways of feeding our children. We have to figure out what's become a negative food culture and turn it into a positive food culture."

#### HISTORY OF FRY BREAD

While fry bread sometimes is considered a traditional Native American food, its makeup - mainly white flour, sugar, salt and cooked in anything from lard to canola oil - is far from foods that Native Americans ate as part of their hunter-and-gatherer lifestyle.

"It's become such a part of our diet that we think it is traditional. But traditionally, it was not. Traditionally, obviously we didn't have flour, we didn't have lard," says Jace DeCory, an instructor with the American Indian Studies Program at Black Hills State University in Spearfish and a member of the Lakota Cheyenne River Sioux tribe.

Fry bread was created out of necessity by Native Americans when they were sequestered on reservations during the 1800s. Native Americans didn't have familiar foods available, like deer, buffalo, antelope and prairie chickens. Women had to feed their families with government rations, like flour, salt and lard.

DeCory says other foods typically served at Native American event ceremonies, like buffalo soup and wojapi, a dessert made from dried fruit, are more traditional Native American foods.

#### INGRAINED IN THE CULTURE

The Health article upset Ansel Wooden Knife, who owns Wooden Knife Co., located in Interior, a town in Jackson County in the Badlands.

"If they want to trim Native Americans down, maybe they should work on the rations, commodities that they give out. To try to attack fry bread is wrong," says Wooden Knife, an enrolled member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe.

The company produces an Indian fry bread mix that is sold at retailers, including Walmart.

Wooden Knife agrees that bread in general often is unhealthy, but contests that moderation is key. He has tried to make the bread healthier. He cooks his fry bread in canola oil and has tried using whole wheat flour, but says it falls apart.

People expect the food at Native American celebrations, DeCory says. "It's become so inculcated in our feasts and our ceremonies, when we have food, that everyone thinks, 'Where's the fry bread?'"

She tries to encourage women to cut the fry bread into small pieces at traditional events, like powwows and sun dances.

"Fry bread, for those of us who are trying to lose weight, trying to not get on the diabetes train, that's one of the things that we can't be eating," she says.

#### TRADITIONAL EATING/MODERATION

But cutting out the food may not be feasible - or practical.

"It falls into the category that I call a splurge food," Shearer says. "It's one of those foods that's a treat, something that you might have at the fair once a year. ... Certainly not something you want to have on a daily basis, for obvious reasons, because there's nothing in the bread that's really of any nutritional benefit."

The long-term solution may be going back to a more traditional diet that doesn't include flour and processed foods.

Dietitians and nutritionist are promoting that Native Americans should choose foods that are most compatible with what was a traditional Native American diet, Shearer says.

"That would be your very lean meats, fruits and vegetables, beans and lentils, nuts and seeds, berries - all of those things, and have those as more of a basis of a diet," she says.

Tilsen hopes he's leading people down the path to more traditional eating with his products. The Tanka bar, for

example, is based on the traditional Native American food wasna, which was buffalo and chokecherries pounded together. The 70-calorie Tanka Bar is made with cranberries and buffalo. The spicy version, Tanka Bar Spicy, was named Backpacker magazine's 2010 Editors' Choice award winner. The products are 100 percent natural and diabetic-friendly.

"What we're learning, along with everyone else, is that less is more when it comes to food. ... I think it's the answer for everyone," Tilsen says.

Shearer also suggests making fry bread with healthier products, like with whole wheat flour or adding flax seed. Cooking in canola oil also makes the product healthier.

That's how many fry the food now, including Wooden Knife and Tsosie.

Tsosie considers fry bread the fare of special occasions. She otherwise tries to eat a healthy diet of nuts and fruit and encourages her children and grandchildren to do the same.

"Diabetes does run in our family," she says. "I'm trying to teach them they have to eat a little bit better and exercise more."

Despite the grim statistical outlook for diabetes and obesity, Tilsen remains committed to slow and steady change.

"Native people are returning to traditional ways of living and traditional methods," he says. "People are trying out how to do it. It's not an easy thing. Being a diabetic on an Indian reservation is very difficult. ... I believe we're in the middle of a process."

Reach reporter BryAnn Becker at 977-3908.

Find information about the Native American Natural Foods products, including the Tanka Bar and a new product called Tanka Wild, a buffalo stick with cranberries and wild rice, at <http://www.tankabar.com>.

Here is a link to the 50 foods Health condemned:

<http://www.health.com/health/gallery/thumbnails/0,,20393387,00.html>

And here are regional selections:

South Dakota: Frybread

North Dakota: Fleischkuechle, a meat patty smothered in a fried dough wrapping.

Iowa: Hot beef sundae

Nebraska: Eskimo pie

Minnesota: Dairy Queen's FlameThrower GrillBurger

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