





FLAVOURS OF THE GREAT PLAINS

AMID THE EXPANSIVE GRASSLANDS OF SOUTH DAKOTA, MATTE WILSON
AND HIS FAMILY AND FRIENDS ARE USING FOOD TO RECLAIM THEIR
NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURE, ONE DISH AT A TIME

WORDS: ZOHEY GOTO. PHOTOGRAPHS: MATT DUTILE



Daybreak hesitates on the horizon as we make our bone-rattling journey across the prairies. Up ahead is a scene so majestic, even the shock of the 4am wake-up call suddenly loses its sting. Illuminated by the first mellow rays of buttery sunlight, a herd of over 1,000 mighty buffalo roams into view, a little overdressed for South Dakota's balmy summer climate in thick woolly overcoats and Viking horns.

The odd velvety muzzle nudges a wobbly legged calf, still far too trusting, away from our off-road buggy, which is parked just a short stampede away from the herd. But in general the dusty beasts just eyeball us coolly from under a thick fringe of eyelashes before nonchalantly carrying on with the task at hand — grazing the plains. It's an epic sight made all the more special by the fact that for many generations, buffalo were sorely absent on the Rosebud Reservation, the ancestral land of the Sicangu Lakota Oyate tribe — a band of Lakota people.

More than 30 million buffalo were almost hunted to extinction by European and North American settlers in the 19th century, but today, thanks to the trailblazing work of community development corporation

Sicangu Co, the animals have returned. The Wolakota Buffalo Range is now home to the largest Native American-owned buffalo herd in the world.

I've travelled a couple of hours southeast of Rapid City to meet 30-year-old Matte Wilson, food sovereignty director at Sicangu Co, who was born and raised on the Rosebud Reservation. Reintroducing the buffalo, whom the Sicangu Lakota call their relatives, has revived certain cultural ceremonies, Matte tells me, as we bump along a wiggling dirt track through the wildflower meadows.

"When we do a buffalo harvest, it starts with prayers. The hunter waits patiently and the buffalo sense what we're asking of them. One will usually step forward and present itself to be hunted," he says, the smell of sage heavy in the air around us. "We then say a prayer thanking the buffalo for its sacrifice." Self-taught cook Matte will be serving up one such buffalo offering later today, as part of a community feast in the sun-dappled garden he shares with his neighbours.

First, though, we need to gather ingredients for the meal. We drive through the reservation, which is slightly larger in size than Cornwall, yet home to just three grocery shops. As we pull up at Keya Wakpala Gardens, a small

Clockwise from above left: Fresh salad leaves picked from the reservation; Wolakota Buffalo Range assistant range manager TJ Heinert watches the herd; Matte Wilson gathers flowers for the table; garlic is picked before being set out to dry at Sicangu Co's Keya Wakpala Gardens. Previous pages from left: Family and friends gather for the feast; vegetables from the community garden





Clockwise from top left: Matte prepares nettle ice cream; the sun rises over the chicken coop in Keya Wakpala Gardens; Bailee Boyd brings marinated buffalo meat to the table; fresh produce, including courgettes and squash blossoms

farm tucked behind a carpark, at first glance it appears we've arrived at a scrap of land by the roadside. But as Matte eases open the gate, greeted by a chorus of cackling chickens, it's quickly apparent that this little oasis has a footprint larger than its shoe size, providing the community with space to grow nutritious ingredients self-sufficiently. Matte leads the way past a domed greenhouse towards neat rows of leafy chard, plump cucumbers and joyful clusters of sunflowers, all of which he crouches down to pick and throw into his basket for later.

"When we talk about food sovereignty, it's not just about feeding ourselves but also remembering that we once had a system that was in tune with nature," Matte says, adding that produce is grown here without the addition of chemicals, instead using regenerative farming techniques and comfrey — a shrub also known as knitbone — to fertilise crops. "We're not living entirely as our ancestors did, but it's about taking the values of the old ways and applying them to a modern-day context," he says.

It's an exciting time for Lakota gastronomy, Matte tells me as he plucks a few dandelions to sprinkle on the salad he'll be making us this evening. "People around here are becoming more interested in gardening, foraging and preserving food. It's a spirit that we get from the buffalo." Basket overflowing with orange courgette flowers, he walks past a shaggy buffalo hide that's been stretched across a wooden frame to tan naturally in the hazy mid-morning sunshine.

To hear Matte speak of Lakota cuisine with such ease, you'd imagine it to have loomed large throughout his childhood. But that wasn't quite the case, he confides, as we pull the car over to meet fellow forager Robert, who's waiting for us beside a marshy creek.

"We mainly ate processed food through the commodity food programme (a federal assistance scheme for low-income tribal members living on reservations). I didn't grow

up knowing my cultural foods — it always felt like something was missing," Matte says as we slip off our shoes and inch our way down an oozing mud slope towards Robert. When Matte went to university in Nebraska, and later moved to Arizona, he was often questioned about his Native American cuisine and language. "I felt ashamed that I wasn't familiar with buffalo meat or chokecherry berries, so I didn't have the words to describe their taste. Growing up, I also hadn't spoken the Lakota language until middle school, so I could only manage a few sentences," he says.

Call of the wild

As we reach the rippling stream, Robert has already waded in up to his knees, head down, scanning the riverbed for wild mint, or ceyaka, which we'll soon be drinking as tea. Tattooed wild flowers creep up Robert's forearm and his hair is neatly plaited down his back, his head topped with a hipster trucker cap. Much like Matte, Robert also left the reservation in search of opportunities before returning to reconnect with his heritage. "This landscape drew me back," Robert smiles, clutching a prized fistful of fragrant mint. I can see why — despite being one of the poorest areas in the US, there's a whispering beauty to the scenery that surrounds us.

Shaking wet feet dry, Matte and Robert jokingly debate if they're feeling generous enough to share the location of this herbal hotspot with their WhatsApp group, a collective of young Sicangu Lakota foragers who upload images of vegetation with an enthusiasm usually reserved for sporting victories. YouTube tutorials have also helped Matte to identify plants and learn their medicinal qualities, he tells me as we scramble back into the car.

Minutes later and we're crunching to a halt on the gravel driveway of Matte's next-door neighbour's house. This afternoon he's using Mike and Margaret's kitchen in their spacious

SOUTH DAKOTA SPECIALITIES

Frybread

Often considered an indigenous food, frybread — a deep-fried flatbread — actually originated when displaced Native Americans were forced onto reservations and provided with only basic food rations by the US government. However, Matte says, every family has its own recipe, and innovation abounds — "At indigenous annual fairs you'll find corn dogs wrapped in frybread, called Indian dogs or rez dogs."

Ceyaka

Wild mint tea has been used for healing and ceremonial purposes by Native American tribes for thousands of years. It's either picked and brewed fresh or dried and crushed for later. Once the mint has been boiled and strained, a dash of honey is added, and it can also be drunk chilled with ice.

Barbecue sauce

Matte has reimagined barbecue sauce using chokecherries — which taste a little like sour cherries — and blueberries. "It's a typical tomato-based sauce, with vinegar, sugar and spices, but I'll replace half the tomatoes with berries," he says. It goes well with buffalo meat.



Left: A guest at the dinner party holds a buffalo-filled banh mi

log-cabin family home to prepare his dishes. A posse of animals — including Matte's pekingese-pug, which looks like it might share DNA with a teddy bear — are unconcerned with trivial domestic boundaries, moving freely between the two wooden houses that stand side by side.

Tying a band of fabric across his forehead to keep the sweat out of his eyes, Matte throws a slab of buffalo meat down onto the kitchen island and gets to work on trimming off the silver skin with a chef's knife. "Here, use this instead," Margaret advises, rummaging through a drawer and handing him an ulu, a curved blade used by Indigenous communities in her birthplace of Alaska. The buffalo meat is sliced thinly, to be used not in a traditional stew but instead in a dish inspired by Matte's recent passion for Asian cuisine. His fresh take for this evening's meal is what he's calling buffalo banh mi.

The fusion dish forms part of a broader reimagining of his ancestral diet, Matte tells me as he dips slivers of buffalo meat into an aromatic marinade of soy and hoisin sauce, Chinese five spice, sesame oil and a heap of brown sugar, leaving them to luxuriate for an hour. "I like to take a dish and think about how I can indigenise it. What colonised ingredients can I swap for pre-colonised ones? And where can I add deer or buffalo meat into the mix?" he muses, as a knock on the front

door signals the arrival of a cast of helpful friends and relatives.

A basket of homemade ciabatta baguettes is delivered, fresh from the oven, while ice cream is churned by hand. Through the window, I glimpse a long table being set up in the meadow of swaying grasses. A group of women in ribbon skirts rustle past to decorate it with plaited sweetgrass, corn and juniper boughs. I wander outside and strike up a conversation with personal trainer Franky, who shows me on his phone an innovative dish he recently rustled up. Lit up on the screen is a picture of pozole, a brothy Mexican stew made with chilli peppers and shredded cabbage, but his version features buffalo meat as the star of the show. It's a homage to his combined Lakota and Mexican heritage, Franky tells me as we sit on the deck, watching the stage theatrically being set for the meal.

A culinary legacy

Back in the kitchen, things are heating up. Standing at the hob like a captain at the helm of a ship, Matte is barely visible through the cloud of steam billowing from a vast silver pot. Swimming around inside are grains of rich, nutty black rice that have been sourced online from Red Lake Nation Foods, a tribally owned company that grows and harvests its own wild rice. Matte starts to fry the buffalo strips in a drizzle of oil, while I chat with Carmelita,



Blue corn sugar cookies

Inspired by Matte's time living on the Navajo Nation reservation in Arizona, this recipe includes blue corn for a nutty flavour and unique colouring.

SERVES: 6-8 **TAKES: 30 MINS**

INGREDIENTS

115g unsalted butter, softened
250g white sugar
1 large egg
½ tsp baking powder
¼ tsp salt
1 tsp vanilla extract
130g blue corn masa harina (flour)
or very fine blue cornmeal
95g plain flour, sifted

METHOD

- 1 Heat oven to 190C, fan 170C, gas 5. Line two baking sheets with parchment paper or silicone baking mats.
- 2 Cream the butter and 150g of the sugar together in a large bowl using an electric mixer. Mix in the egg, baking powder, salt and vanilla. Add the blue corn masa harina (or blue cornmeal) and flour and mix until smooth.
- 3 Sprinkle the remaining sugar onto a plate or worktop. Scoop up around 2 tbsp of the dough using your hands (or a dough scooper) and form it into a ball. Toss or roll the dough ball in the sugar to coat, then place on the baking sheet. Repeat with the remaining dough, evenly spacing the dough balls around 5cm apart.
- 4 Put in the oven and bake for 10-12 mins until the edges are slightly golden. Remove from oven and cool on a wire rack.



The table falls quiet, mouths either too full to speak or perhaps out of respect for the offering of buffalo, which is still only eaten on special occasions

a primary school teacher in her 20s with a striking geometric star tattoo on her throat. She's part of a community of people committed to learning their native language as adults and now proudly teaches as many of her classes in Lakota as possible, although she points out that learning something alongside her students brings its own unique set of challenges.

The shrill of the oven interrupts our chat and alerts Matte that his sugar cookies are ready. They've been made using blue corn, which he first encountered while living in Arizona, and it lends them a delicate lilac hue. Leaving the gooey biscuits to cool on the side, he piles a serving dish high with glistening strips of buffalo meat, scatters blue borage blossoms over the salad of wild greens heaped into bamboo bowls and, with the air of a conductor hitting a crescendo, brings the dishes to the table where 13 hungry mouths await.

A tangy marinade runs down my hands as I take a bite of the buffalo banh mi — a delicious harmony of juicy meat, chewy bread and crunchy carrots and cucumbers plucked earlier on, all slathered in mayonnaise. The table falls quiet, mouths either too full to speak or perhaps out of respect for the offering of buffalo, which is still only eaten on special occasions. But we all agree that Matte's buffalo fusion dish is a triumph, the meat beautifully tender and lean.

Three-year-old Willow, Mike and Margaret's eldest child, fancies a quick interlude between courses, so gives me a guided tour of her family's vegetable patch. "Mushrooms, garlic,

spring onions, green and yellow zucchini. And my favourite, tomatoes," she calls confidently over her shoulder, pointing to the backyard bounty, clearly more connected to the land than most other pre-schoolers. Serenaded by a chorus of cicadas, we head back to the table for the grand finale, as bowls of melting ice cream infused with nettles and citrusy spruce tips, crowned with the blue corn cookies, are placed before us.

As we tuck in, Matte tells me how healing his food journey has been. "Coming back to the reservation and learning about the plants, I've been able to connect to my cultural identity," he says. "It's now my mission to pass that on to the next generation." He takes a sip of honeyed mint tea as young Willow bounces on a nearby knee.

I bid the group farewell, leaving Matte and his friends to put their feet up around the crackle of the campfire. I step away from the table to be swallowed up by the inky South Dakota night, having tasted new-wave Native American cooking — a cuisine with one eye on the past, the other firmly on the present. **D**

HOW TO DO IT: British Airways, United Airlines and Virgin Atlantic fly from London to Rapid City, all with one stopover. Lakota Youth Development offers overnight stays on the Rosebud Reservation in canvas tipis from \$150 (£123) per tipi, sleeping up to four. Profits support the local youth programme and cultural activities such as a medicinal and wild edibles herb tour can be arranged additionally. lakotayouthdevelopment.org sicangu.co greatamericanwest.co.uk/south-dakota

Above from left: The group gathers to share a meal outside; a tray of banh mi toppings — strips of cucumber, sliced jalapeños and fresh coriander