



# *Staying in the Circle of Life*

## **Traditional Food Principles**

Materials accessed from <http://nwicplantsandfoods.com/traditional-foods>.

### **Food is at the center of culture**

People traditionally harvested, processed, prepared and shared meals together. Our ancestors understood that food is precious, a gift from nature, and is necessary for our existence. Individuals can become nourished as they partake in a fundamental aspect of survival with the ones they love, and the family is also strengthened. Eating collectively can also be a time when culture is transmitted from one generation to the next through conversation and leading by example.

### **Honor the food web/chain**

Living in harmony with nature is a Native teaching. As we know, everything is connected. It must be remembered that the ramifications of polluting our soil and our water can be seen in the health of plants, animals and ultimately, ourselves. We have a responsibility to maintain the health of our food system as our ancestors did, so that we pass down a world that will support generations to come.

### **Eat with the Seasons**

A traditional food diet is diverse and is based on the seasons. The power of being in the moment and harvesting what is available ensures that a variety of foods will be on the menu. Seasonal foods prepared people for seasonal changes as well. For example, eating berries when they are ripe in the fall boosts your immunity, helping you to get through the flu season.

### **Eat a Variety of Foods**

Our ancestors ate more complex foods and received a greater variety of vitamins and minerals in their diet. Eating many types of foods also helped preserve the diversity of the environment, which helped uphold the entire ecosystem by avoiding over harvesting of any one resource. We know that healthy ecosystems are diverse ones. Now that people are eating relatively few foods due to mass monocrops like corn, wheat and soy, we are losing environmental diversity along with diversity in our diet.

## **Traditional Foods are Whole Foods**

Traditional foods are “real foods” that have grown in nature. They are not industrialized foods that have been refined or contain additives, dyes or chemicals. A whole food is alive and consists of one ingredient: itself. If you read the ingredients list on a pre-packaged food and do not understand the words, you probably should not eat it. You should not need a science degree to understand food labels. If you cannot picture an ingredient growing in nature, it most likely is not food at all

## **Eat local foods**

Plants breathe, respire and require water. So after they are cut off from their food source they begin to die, which means they lose nutrients and flavor. This makes eating fresh, local food especially important. Eating local is also good for the environment, as it reduces the amount of fossil fuels used to get the food to us and helps support our local economy.

## **Wild and organic foods are better for health**

Wild foods are denser in nutrients and lower in calories. Processed and refined food tends to provide empty calories and may only offer a part of a food. This contributes to weight gain as our body, in its natural wisdom, craves all the missing parts of processed and refined foods. Organic foods also guarantee that we are getting all the nutrients essential for our bodies. Intensive agricultural practices deplete mineral content in the soil and therefore in the plants that grow from the soil. When we eat wild and organic foods, we are supporting a healthier body and environment.

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## **Cook and Eat with Good Intention**

The *way we eat* is just as important as *what we eat*. We are frequently eating while on the go and hurrying on to the next task. This takes the pleasure out of eating our food, and it does not allow sufficient time for our body to relax enough to savor and digest, leaving us hungry for more.

## Promote Generosity

Generosity is a value inherent to northwest Native culture, which includes both giving and receiving. People often express gratitude for the abundance of the land and water, and they pass that gratitude on by sharing. In potlatch and other ceremonies families work hard to give food and other items away. When we harvest native foods for elders or those in need we are caring for the health of our community. It is through giving, not through acquiring money or things, that we become truly wealthy.

## Cultivate Food Sovereignty

People Food sovereignty is at the core of tribal sovereignty. It is the inherent right of a community to have access to healthy, culturally appropriate food. When our ancestors signed the tribal treaties they made sure that we would have native foods for generations to come. Each time we exercise our right to harvest native foods we strengthen cultural identity, relationship to land and to our community.

# TRADITIONAL FOOD PRINCIPLES

*At longhouse gatherings, public feasts and community events in Western Washington tribal communities, elders often speak about the importance of native foods. They say that wealth is having access to native foods, and the knowledge of how to gather, prepare and serve them. The values and cultural traditions around food today are as applicable as they were generations ago. We call these Traditional Foods Principles. They address the physical and spiritual health of individuals and communities, in conjunction with the well-being of the land.*

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## Cook and Eat with Good Intention

Cooking is a time to pay respect to the plants and animals that gave their lives to nourish our bodies. It is a time to honor the people with whom we are sharing food. If we eat while on the go, hurrying to the next task, we miss the pleasure of eating, and our bodies do not have sufficient time to savor and digest. This can leave us feeling hungry for more. When we put good intention into the food we harvest, prepare, serve and consume, we are fed in body and spirit.

## Honor the Food Web

Everything in our food system is connected. Salmon return to their ancestral rivers every year and give their lives so that others can have life. If we take too much of one food or do not give back, we disrupt the balance. Elders instruct us to return oyster shells to the beach to provide a matrix for new oysters to inhabit. It is my responsibility to maintain the health of our food system so I can pass down a world that will support generations to come.

## Food is the Center of Culture

People have always come together around food. It is at the heart of celebrations, family gatherings, holidays and memorials. During European colonization Native Peoples' access to wild foods was suppressed, as was the right to practice cultural traditions. This changed people's relationships with the land, the seasons and their community. As we eat together, we tell stories, share songs, observe protocols and remember our connection to the land, the water, and each other. These hold together the deep values embedded in our culture.

## Wild & Organic Foods are Better for Health

The health of the environment determines the health of our food. Wild foraged foods usually contain complex nutrients. Industrial agricultural practices with harmful pesticides and fertilizers deplete the health of the soil and the plants and animals it supports. Organic gardening is simply returning to the way our ancestors grew food. As we return to a sustainable way of growing food, our health and the health of the land we cultivate will thrive.

## Traditional Foods are Whole Foods

Traditional foods are "real foods" that are grown in nature. A whole food consists of one ingredient. It is not industrialized, genetically modified, refined, or blended with additives, dyes or chemicals. Our ancestors believed that good food satisfies the wholeness within us, while most modern foods are fragmented and can leave us hungry. I imagine walking through the grocery store with my great grandparents and wonder: What would they recognize as food?

## Eat with the Seasons

We live in a time when many people do not know where their food comes from. Native people historically traveled to areas where food was in season. In spring, families visited prairies to harvest and cultivate camas. In summer, people camped where berries were ripe. And always, people congregated at abundant fish runs and seasonal bird migration sites. Eating seasonal foods reconnects me to the rhythm of the land, which is intertwined with my own rhythms.

## Eat a Variety of Foods

Before European contact, Northwest Coastal Native People ate over 300 types of foods and therefore received a wide variety of nutrients in their diet. Today, most Americans eat only 12-20 foods on a regular basis. This negatively impacts our health and the health of the environment. When I eat a wide variety of foods, I ensure my own health and promote biodiversity.

## Eat Local Foods

Plants breathe, drink water, and absorb nutrients. After they are cut off from their life source, they begin to lose vitality. The fresher the food, the better it is for you. Eating local food supports our local economy, and protects the environment by reducing the amount of fossil fuels used to transport food to us. When I choose local foods, I help grow a strong regional food system. I taste the bounty of the land in which I belong.

**SPRING** **SUMMER**  
**WINTER** **AUTUMN**

**NORTHWEST INDIAN COLLEGE**  
Sáwənt ʔib ʔə-łə-see-ʔəp

Researched, edited and compiled by Elise Krohn and Valerie Segrest. These principles emerged from conversations with many tribal stakeholders in Western Washington during the Northwest Indian College's Traditional Foods of Puget Sound Project. For more information on our traditional foods and medicines projects and educational resources, visit: [www.nwipianandfoods.com](http://www.nwipianandfoods.com)  
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