

An aerial photograph of a person in a brown jacket and dark pants, crouching in a field of tall, dry grass and fallen leaves. The person is positioned in the lower-left quadrant of the frame. The field is dense with vegetation, and the lighting is warm, suggesting late afternoon or early morning. The overall scene is a natural, somewhat overgrown landscape.

# AT THIS TABLE WE SING WITH JOY, WITH SORROW

*Sean Sherman is foraging ancestral knowledge to decolonize cuisine and culture*

BY STEVE MARSH

*Photographs by Bill Phelps*

*Commissioned by The Great Northern*

“**T**his is a nice little slice of what Minnesota should look like,” Sean Sherman says over his shoulder. We are passing through a fenced-in wetland—the wildest land left in Minneapolis—in its full midsummer languor. “This is all wild ginger,” he says, gesturing toward a colony of green, heart-shaped leaves covering the ground just off the well-manicured path. “It’s really strong,” he says, “so you don’t need to use a lot of it.”

I’m already starting to sweat in the humidity of what will become a scorching mid-July day, but I can still feel the cool damp clinging to the ferns unfurling beneath the oaks and tamaracks. It’s great to be back in the Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden. The spring wave of Covid-19 delayed the garden’s opening by almost

two months, and there are reminders that things are still extremely weird outside its gate: the path is newly marked as a one-way, and all the park benches are taped off like miniature crime scenes. Yet the vegetation is teeming more or less exactly the way it teemed a century ago, before many of the native plants in this area were tilled over into the undulating fairways of the big golf course next door—not too long after the state violently exiled the Native Dakota inhabitants to reservations out on the plains.

The Wildflower Garden is named for the white schoolteacher and amateur botanist who preserved this refuge back in 1907, ensuring that a pocket of aboriginal plants remained to welcome back the occasional surviving Native—like the guy a couple steps ahead of me.

Sherman is a sturdily built, very chill Lakota dude in his mid-40s, gracefully padding through the garden in Texas, jeans, and a faded Velvet Underground t-shirt. His hair is parted, plaited into two braids that brush his shoulders. We pass by a gooseberry bush. “Gooseberries are so good,” he marvels. “They’re a cool fruit because they’re tart and juicy with big berries.” He cooks with them by drying them out or making a sauce. “Just simple,” he says. “Reduce them down to a jelly. And we don’t add sugar, because we’ve cut all that out.”

It’s still early enough that we’re the only two visitors. The gate was locked when I showed up, and after a slight panic, I convinced the young docent in the cabin to let us in an hour early: she acquiesced, sufficiently impressed that I was profiling the celebrated Sioux Chef. Over the last five years, Sherman’s moniker, a clever culinary pun, has become a wildly successful brand. First it was the calling card for his catering operation, then his persona as an in-demand lecturer on the global circuit, and finally the title of his James Beard Award-winning cookbook. Now, Sherman as the Sioux Chef is the frontman of an 18-employee business, with non- and for-profit wings lifting his team toward an ambitious goal: the decolonization of the U.S. food industry.

2020 was always going to be a watershed year for that mission, but Sherman’s plans have been forced to adapt to its ruthless volatility. More than two decades into a career mostly spent managing somebody else’s kitchen, Sherman is set to finally open his own restaurant, Owamni, in the Water Works building. A spectacular, \$21 million architecturally-salvaged gem designed in partnership with the Minneapolis Park Board, the site has dramatic windows looking out on a sacred Dakota waterfall on the banks of the so-called Mississippi River (Sherman’s Dakota ancestors knew the river as *Hahawakpa*, roughly translated as “the river of the falls”). Slated to open in spring 2021, Owamni will be his cookbook manifesto come to life, a showcase destination for decolonized cuisine. And, in Sherman’s estimation, an even more important project will be this fall’s opening of the Indigenous Food Lab, a think tank and training center intended to develop a new generation of Indigenous food creatives. But then 2020 happened, and now his plans are as uncertain as everybody else’s.

By midsummer, the suffering of Minneapolis’ homeless and food-insecure populations had never been more acute (or apparent). So, funded by a donation from local medical device giant Medtronic, and in partnership with Minnesota Central Kitchen (a group of caterers supporting social justice), Sherman pivoted his entire Sioux Chef catering operation. It became a grain bowl kitchen, pumping out hundreds of healthy meals a day for communities struggling with food insecurity. In ways nothing else could, Sherman says, the pandemic has revealed the urgent necessity of decolonizing our foodways.

We’re on a boardwalk now, crossing the Wildflower Garden’s lowest point, with a thicket of brown cattails shooting out of the water. Sherman, ever the cool professor, points out that the entire spike is edible. “It’s best when you get it early,” he continues. “Like from late spring until right about now.” He says you can peel away layers, like a leek, and then eat the fatty center. “Tastes like cucumber,” he says. He looks at the wood underneath our feet. “But there’s usually no boardwalk to get out to the cattails,” he says. “They’re a swampy plant and harvesting them takes some effort.”

Sherman looks out over the swamp. “More gooseberries here,” he says, “or maybe they’re currants.” He learned how to identify plants in his first job out of high school, with the U.S. Forest Service. “I was a field surveyor,” he says. “And my job was to learn all the plants in the Northern Black Hills.” He would be given an aerial photograph before heading out in a truck to find plot points for his survey. “I would take an eleven-foot radius and record everything in that circle.” Sherman learned all the plant names, and he would determine the ages of the saplings and write everything down in a little black book. Over the years, he’s built up his mental database, which he now supplements with an iPhone app called Picture This.

“It’s pretty cool,” he says. He points his phone’s camera at a leafy plant with little white flowers, and we wait a second. “Bloodroot,” he says. “Huh.”

But what he’d really like to see is signs with Dakota names for the plants, listed above the flora’s common English and Latin names.

Sherman chuckles. “I always joke that if you’re gonna live here, you might as well learn the language.” Sherman believes the nameplates would normalize the Native tongue of our region. And he also points out that to the Dakota, the plant names are just as much about narrative as classification, and isn’t that a more interesting way to catalog knowledge anyway? “For Indigenous, these plants carry stories,” he says. “These plants carry legends. Some of these plants are deities, some of them have spirit, you know?”

It doesn’t take long to realize that Sherman’s vision is far more ambitious than having park board docents stick trilingual placards in the Wildflower Garden.

“It’s not just about understanding wild plants and foraging,” Sherman impresses upon me. “That’s a very small portion of what this is about. It’s more about understanding how Indigenous peoples had a blueprint to live sustainably, utilizing the world around them.”

Sherman believes that cities all over the country should set aside many more areas like this one, and that they should make one big change: urban nature reserves should be places where people cultivate wild plants and harvest them in a sustainable way.

“This is more like a museum,” he reflects, “where you see all this beautiful stuff, but you don’t get to use any of it.” He sees a network of gardens like the Eloise Butler Wildflower Garden, constantly pushing out food and medicine. Sherman notes that many of these plants thrive with human interaction. “You could have areas like this where people come in and harvest for the community.”

He believes that we have yet to grasp what we *could* do with our landscape—that for too long, our attitude toward nature has been one of extractive exchange. “The model is you can eat if you have money, but it doesn’t have to be like that,” he insists. “With this one little garden here, you could create a huge pantry with all the food you would harvest and preserve and put away.” Sherman sees us building more gardens of every size for shared use, with much greater plant diversity than the monocultural farms that grow our food now.

At this point I’m really getting Sherman’s appeal—why his vision has connected with so many people, why he gets so much ink in the *New York Times* and airplay on *NPR*, why TED is just the most recent media entity to eagerly shine its spotlight on him, and why he’s become a renowned chef without having opened his own restaurant. Sean Sherman is a visionary. He sees a disappointing world and imagines how it could be better.

Sherman’s idea sounds gigantic, even overwhelming; the future of food can be different if we learn (and re-learn) ingredients and techniques used by Indigenous people in the past, the memory of which is obscured by an ongoing post-colonial repression. The first step is imagining a cuisine that removes what he calls colonial ingredients—European foodstuffs like refined sugar and flour, or pigs and chickens. But this act of negation is not enough. In Sherman’s vision, stripping out these interloping ingredients must occur alongside a comprehensive investigation of the ways his Indigenous ancestors cooked with plants and animals native to the areas in which they lived, and within a commitment to innovating new techniques to do the same.

Perhaps an idea this big, shaped by such deep and multigenerational trauma, could only be the result of a visionary experience. Sherman’s came on a beach in San Pancho, Mexico, a town just north of Puerto Vallarta on the Pacific Ocean. He had recently divorced his wife of almost eight years, a “blond-haired, blue-eyed Minnesota gal” he met when he was a line cook and she was a server at an upscale restaurant in St. Paul. “We should have never gotten married,” he says. “I mean, we hit it off. We were both a little wild, and the restaurant business was rough.” He shrugs. “It wasn’t a good mix.”

He burned himself out quickly, trying to support his young son after the divorce by working too many corporate executive chef gigs at once. “I



was like *screw this*,” Sherman remembers. “And I bought a one-way ticket to Mexico.” For four months he bummed around San Pancho, reading books on the beach, trying to figure out his next move.

“I was just chilling,” he says, “watching these Huichol Indians sell their wares every day.” He started researching the Huichol, a tribe indigenous to the central mountains of Mexico, and he saw similarities between their beautiful beadwork and the intricate handcrafts he remembered from his Lakota youth.

“And they had similar ceremonies where they were doing sweats,” he says. “And even their mannerisms just seemed familiar from growing up on reservation, you know?” Sherman’s brain lit up as he found inspiration in these cultural connections.

“We’re all just kind of Indigenous cousins when it comes down to it,” he says. “I started thinking about the food and migration and the history of people and all of a sudden I just came to the realization that I can name hundreds of European recipes off the top of my head. I learned all sorts of history about Japan, and all sorts of history of Singapore. I knew French history so well, I knew Italian history so well—especially when it came to food—and I knew very little of my own.” He wondered, “What were my Lakota ancestors eating? Who were they trading with? What were they growing? What were they foraging?” He wanted to know all of it. “I just realized I should be focusing on foods of my own ancestry instead of rehashing a bunch of European recipes.”

Sherman grew up enrolled in the Oglala Sioux tribe on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. There, on his grandma and grandpa’s ranch, “We were outside all the time, a bunch of feral little kids.”

Growing up on the reservation meant oscillating between Native cultural expression and colonial repression, between traditional and industrial foodways.

“We were kind of hybrid cowboys and Indians,” he says. “We wore cowboy hats and boots and rode horses and mended fences, but we also had powwows and ceremony and sweats and that sort of stuff.”

And like so many other families on the reservation, Sherman’s was enrolled in the U.S. government’s commodity food program—meaning canned vegetables and government cheese. But Sherman also ate his grandmother’s traditional cooking—she made *timpsula*, a type of wild prairie turnip soup, and *taniga*, a stew made from buffalo intestines, as well as medicinal staples like cedar tea. Sherman’s grandfather, a skilled and enthusiastic hunter of wild game (deer, elk, antelope, pheasant, prairie chicken, rabbit), provided the meat for many of those meals.

Sherman’s mom Joann Conroy is an ELCA Lutheran minister in St. Paul (she was the first woman to be ordained as a minister in South Dakota’s Lutheran synod). When I reach her by phone, it’s immediately clear that her son’s easy chuckle is her own. Joann reminisces about her parents’ involvement in Sherman’s early development.

“He spent a lot of time with his grandparents,” she remembers. “Whenever they butchered and cooked outside on the ranch, he was always around to watch this process of preparing food.” And her father, Sean’s grandpa, was a master storyteller.

“His grandpa would teach [the kids] in the oral tradition,” she says. “He would tell them stories and teach them about the land.” And

Joann says that Sean’s paternal grandparents were also very involved back then.

“His dad’s mother was a teacher by vocation, so that’s what she would do—she would teach him things, about the traditions of our people.”

Joann believes his grandparents had a profound effect on the way Sean thinks.

“I think what that did was for Sean and his sister, they became very analytical,” she says of Sean and her youngest daughter, Kelly, who is working toward a PhD in syncretic religion. “They began to look at things in a deeper way.”

When Sean was eight, his parents divorced. His mother moved to Spearfish, South Dakota to finish her undergraduate degree at Black Hills State, with her kids in tow. Sean remembers being lonely and unsure of himself, feeling most comfortable tagging along with his mother to the college library. “I didn’t know anybody back then,” he says. “I had a really thick rez accent.” Joann opened an art gallery in Spearfish, and would occasionally show pieces at a Black Hills resort. Sean took an interest in the resort’s kitchen. He was too young to actually work, but the chefs took a shine to the little boy, teaching him how to set tables and wash dishes and sending him out to take the orders of tourists in the French language he was learning at school.

“He loved those chefs,” Joann says. “I think that’s when he really started paying attention to the teaching of those chefs in the kitchen.” Soon after, Sean landed his first real restaurant job at the age of thirteen—bussing tables and prepping food at The Sluice, a mining-themed steakhouse. He had a knack for it. “I was smart for my age, and I had a strong work ethic,” he says.

When I reach Sean’s dad Gerald, a retired microfinancing banker, he’s running errands in his truck somewhere outside of Bear Creek, a mining town in Southern Montana where his wife’s family owns a ranch. Gerald is impressed by his son’s

activism. “It’s really interesting to see,” he says. “Because he was kind of quiet when he was younger—kind of hung back a lot.”

Gerald believes that Sean came into his own as a leader once he found something that he cared deeply about. “And it’s not just the food,” Gerald says. “It’s relating all of it to colonized people.”

When I ask Gerald if Sean grew up in a particularly political or ideological household, he says he did not. “When he was little, we lived in Denver for the first year of his life, and when we came back it was the height of the Wounded Knee occupation, so the height of AIM [American Indian Movement] activity,” he remembers. “We tended to stay away from it—I was probably more conservative back then.”

Gerald pauses. “I’m trying to think about how honest to be with you,” he says.

He doesn’t want to make Sean’s story about him, but Gerald tells me he’s a Vietnam vet and a drug addict and alcoholic who’s been in recovery for decades. “Alcohol was my drug of choice,” he says. By the time Gerald kicked his habit in ’81, Sean and his sister were already with their mother in Spearfish. After committing to sobriety, Gerald earned his degree and started working in community finance, eventually getting remarried and having four more kids.

“And I started learning about the history of the reservation in

college,” he says. “And it made me really angry, it just put a fire under me. And I started looking outwards.”

Gerald found a mentor in the Nobel Peace Prize-winning microfinancing innovator Muhammad Yunus. After studying with Yunus in Bangladesh, Gerald returned to Pine Ridge and founded the Lakota Fund, one of the most successful community development financial institutions in the country.

“My whole family are late bloomers,” he says. “But eventually, we all got involved in Native and Indigenous causes.”

After Sean’s epiphany in Mexico, he started working as a chef at Gerald and his new wife’s ranch. He began incorporating local ingredients and developing healthier recipes. Though Gerald now sits on the board of his son’s nonprofit (NATIFS, or North American Traditional Indigenous Food Systems), he is quick to defer any credit for his son’s decolonialist thought—first to Sean’s mother, who raised him by herself for the majority of his childhood, and to Sean.

“Sean is very self-taught and well read,” Gerald explains. All those years tagging along with his mother to the library paid off in a thirst for knowledge and a proficiency for independent study. “He’s able to speak about this decolonization idea, which is part of a larger movement,” he says. “Because it’s about decolonizing everything in this country—decolonizing wealth as well as decolonizing culture.”

Gerald obviously shares his son’s ambitious commitment to change, but he admires one of Sean’s virtues above all else, a trait he believes connects him to the great Lakota and Dakota leaders who came before him. “The best thing about Sean is he’s maintained his humility through this whole thing,” he says. “Which I think is very important and part of his tradition.”

Joann is just as proud of her son, and she also sees his connection to her ancestors. She says there are spiritual healers and medicine men going back for generations on both sides of her family, and their ability to heal has been essential to surviving their historic circumstances.

“We are descendants of the Crazy Horse clan,” she tells me. “My grandfather was in the Battle of the Greasy Grass.” It was in the aftermath of the Lakota victory over Custer at Little Big Horn—and their subsequent massacre at Wounded Knee—that the majority of the Lakota were forced onto reservations, irrevocably changing their way of life.

“The reservation lands were hard, poorly-producing lands,” Joann says. A people who had been hunter-gatherers for millennia were forced to adapt at gunpoint. Vast cultural knowledge was destroyed in wave after wave of physical and cultural dispossession. She feels like her father and his generation—he served in the Navy and fought in the Pacific Theater of World War II—suffered an incalculable amount of traumatic loss.

“My father tried to continue living his life as much as they could in the traditional ways, but a lot of things disappeared for a while, before coming back again for people to learn and know.” She sees her entire family as taking part in this restorative effort. “My daughter and my son and their families are very active out in the community and in Native society in different ways,” she says. “But if somebody would actually take a look at what we do individually, we are all lifting up our Native ancestors and our Native beliefs and teachings.”

The next time I see Sherman, it’s a month later. I’m meeting him in a space that houses his Indigenous Food Lab, right on Lake Street in South Minneapolis. It’s a commissary kitchen in the back of an old Sears building that’s been developed into an international food court called the Midtown Global Market. More than a dozen stalls offer everything from roasted goat to sushi, and I’m struck that the Market is pretty busy for an August weekday in the middle of a pandemic. Three kids in hijabs are masked up and walking

toward the taco joint in front of me.

Sherman’s stall is way off to the side in a less-trafficked area, in a space as big as a mall-sized McDonald’s. There’s a counter where four volunteers have set up an assembly line packing 300 meals, all to be disseminated to homeless encampments this afternoon. There are a couple young dudes in full chef whites monitoring a big vat of bison chili.

Sherman greets me wearing black chef scrubs and a Sioux Chef-branded mask. He guides me through the industrial kitchen, pointing out a stainless steel sink full of corn and homemade lye made from wood ash, nixtamalizing into one of the star ingredients in his grain bowls—fat kernels of hominy. We sit down at a conference table in a side room that will eventually be used to make videos for NATIFS class curriculum.

It’s hard to mark milestones when you’re running a full-on foodways M\*A\*S\*H unit. It’s been an insane year: Sherman laid off his entire catering staff in the spring when Covid-19 hit, then after George Floyd’s murder at the end of May, with the city still outraged, smoldering and broken, he hired them all back (and then some) for the massive grain bowl operation. And although he had just recently snuck in a TEDx Talk in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, the pandemic put his intense, eight-year-long Sioux Chef world tour on indefinite hiatus.

Sherman takes out his laptop to show me the latest version of the Powerpoint presentation he’s worked up over the years—basically the talk he’s given in an average of 26 states and six countries per year since the first meal he put together as the Sioux Chef: a springtime Ojibwe dinner for 22 people up in Bemidji, Minnesota in 2012.

“It was one of my first attempts at doing a full dinner like that,” he says. “Really being creative. Going out foraging, gathering a bunch of stuff that is in-season.” He remembers that fiddlehead ferns were just beginning to pop out. Sherman understood that using in-season, local ingredients was the foundational creed of the modern food movement, from Alice Waters’ organic, locally-sourced California cuisine at Chez Panisse to Sean Brock’s ode to Lowcountry fare at Husk. But Sherman intended to reach beyond the locavore and the farmer’s market, beyond Waters’ almond tart or Brock’s cornbread in cast iron.

“All the other food fads didn’t matter,” he says. “I had the Noma cookbook—and I loved what Rene Redzepi and those guys were doing, using all that culinary experience and shifting it to wild foods and flavors closer to him, making it truly Nordic, right? But this was way more important [to me]. Way more interesting.”

Sherman knew that his cuisine wouldn’t just be a commitment to something more authentic than the way we’ve been eating—it would be a critique of anything that had ever been presented as authentic in the U.S.

“To me there was so much reclamation that needed to happen,” he says. “People just need to be made aware of the land and the history, and their minds would be blown.”

People often cry at Sherman’s meals. “Between the food and having such a deep story to go along with the food,” he says. “It just constantly opens minds.”

I still hadn’t tried any of his food, but it was pretty easy to understand why Sherman’s cuisine blows people’s gourds—there might not be a juicier secret conspiracy theory than the pedagogical denial of the eradication of the Native on this continent.

“There’s so much bullshit in the history that we learned growing up,” he says. “Especially when it comes to understanding anything that has to do with Indigenous peoples.”

We’re both aware of the big lie of westward expansion, but it still can feel good hearing it spoken—it’s basically the opposite of casting a spell. “You grow up,” Sherman begins, “and they put this vision in your head that the U.S. was this big, wide open space with these huge fertile



plains and beautiful mountains and all ripe for the taking.”

This is what Sherman means when he invokes the word decolonization. It’s not that there’s something fundamentally wrong with European cuisine—Sherman doesn’t have anything against pizza (other than maybe the threat of diabetes).

“I always start by talking about colonialism and breaking it down just by definition, so people are on the same page when we’re talking about ‘decolonizing’ food,” he says. “This is a barbaric system of taking control over somebody else’s space, stripping it of anything you find valuable, and handing the people that were from there scraps.”

If we excavate and reincorporate the thousands of years of knowledge that’s been purged from our collective memory, Sherman ardently believes, a much richer food system is possible.

“Because we obviously have this very short history of the United States,” he says. “We’ve never dealt with our history of how we took over all this land from Indigenous peoples, how we utilized Indigenous peoples from Africa as forced labor to build a lot of wealth for people on top of that, families that still hold that wealth today.

“We have to understand this if we’re truly going to heal and evolve into something in the future,” he says. “We need more regionally based, local food systems, we need to have way more plant diversity, utilizing a lot of plants that are from these areas. We can do so much better.”

There’s snow on the ground when I meet Dana Thompson, Sherman’s partner in business and in life, in front of a construction trailer on the West River Parkway in downtown Minneapolis. From here we can look up at Owamni, a sleek modern jewel box of a restaurant balancing on the ruins of an old flour mill along the Mississippi River. Both Thompson and Kate Lamers, the Minneapolis Parks landscape architect, are wearing masks and puffy coats as an icy wind whips up off the 137-year-old Stone Arch Bridge. I can see the mist above St. Anthony Falls freezing over their shoulders.

Once we’re standing in the courtyard of the new restaurant, we’re shielded from the wind by a massive, grey-trunked cottonwood that’s been freed from the pile of rubble covering the old mill structure. The Park Board’s arborists say the tree is likely to survive, and looking at the stately old swamp thing, you can imagine her shading Owamni’s patio diners on a warm May evening. Thompson, who is of Dakota ancestry, explains that *owamni* is a Dakota word that refers to the whirlpool at the base of what used to be a much larger waterfall here on the upper Mississippi.

Breaking my daydream, she invites me to grok on the past. “The islands here were sacred places for Dakota women to come give birth,” Thompson says. Back then, these falls were nearly as impressive as Niagara’s. But a 19th-century miller attempted to tunnel in behind the falls, partially collapsing them. The ecological impact didn’t start or stop there, obviously—the mind reels contemplating the board-feet of virgin forest fed through the sawmills here as our wheat monoculture began to blanket the prairie. And the power of the falls gave rise to this canyon of now-redeveloped 19th-century mills which begat a sprawling Minnesota-based industry of processed flour packaged into sugary, salty, ready-to-bake goods marketed to a global population that resembles the Pillsbury doughboy more and more each day.

Not everything native was lost, however: Thompson says the word *owamni* is known to us because the local writer Paul Durand

recorded it, with the help of her Native grandfather Clem Felix, in Durand’s foundational atlas *Where the Waters Gather and the Rivers Meet*. Thompson’s brought the rare book along with her today, in fact. She gingerly opens it to the legend of Clouded Day, the first wife of a formidable Dakota warrior driven away by the warrior’s second marriage. One misty morning, Clouded Day climbed into a canoe to sing her own death song before perishing with her infant son in the whirlpool.

Until she met Sherman, Thompson says, she felt estranged from her own Dakota heritage. For her, Owamni is the culmination of a personal reconnection with her people and to this area that’s been a long time coming. And when their doors open this spring, she believes this 6,000-square foot, 70-seat restaurant will be a site of reconnection for an entire generation.

“Most restaurants, you go and eat at them,” she says. “This restaurant—people are going to come to be changed by it.”

Thompson’s background is in rock and roll: fronting bands, booking them, and eventually parlaying her skills into corporate marketing work. She had recently quit a marketing job when she met Sherman at a party at organic farmer Bruce Bacon’s iconic Garden Farme up in Ramsey, Minnesota on October 4, 2014. The date is seared into her brain, and the way she tells the story reminds me of Jon Landau’s conversion experience when he first saw Bruce Springsteen. Landau famously signed off from his rock critic gig at *Rolling Stone*—“I have seen rock and roll’s future and its name is Bruce Springsteen”—to manage the Boss. In the same way,

Thompson immediately fell in love with Sherman and his vision.

Thompson remembers Sherman was in a foul mood as he cooked dinner for a big group staying in tents on the farm that night. But as he served the meal, talking about his mission through each course, Thompson was having what she feels was a “spiritual experience.”

“I’m not exaggerating at all when I say that I felt like I was going to pass out,” she says, eyes widening at the memory. “I felt an electrical current running through my entire body—through my feet, through the end of my fingers, and the ends of my hair.”

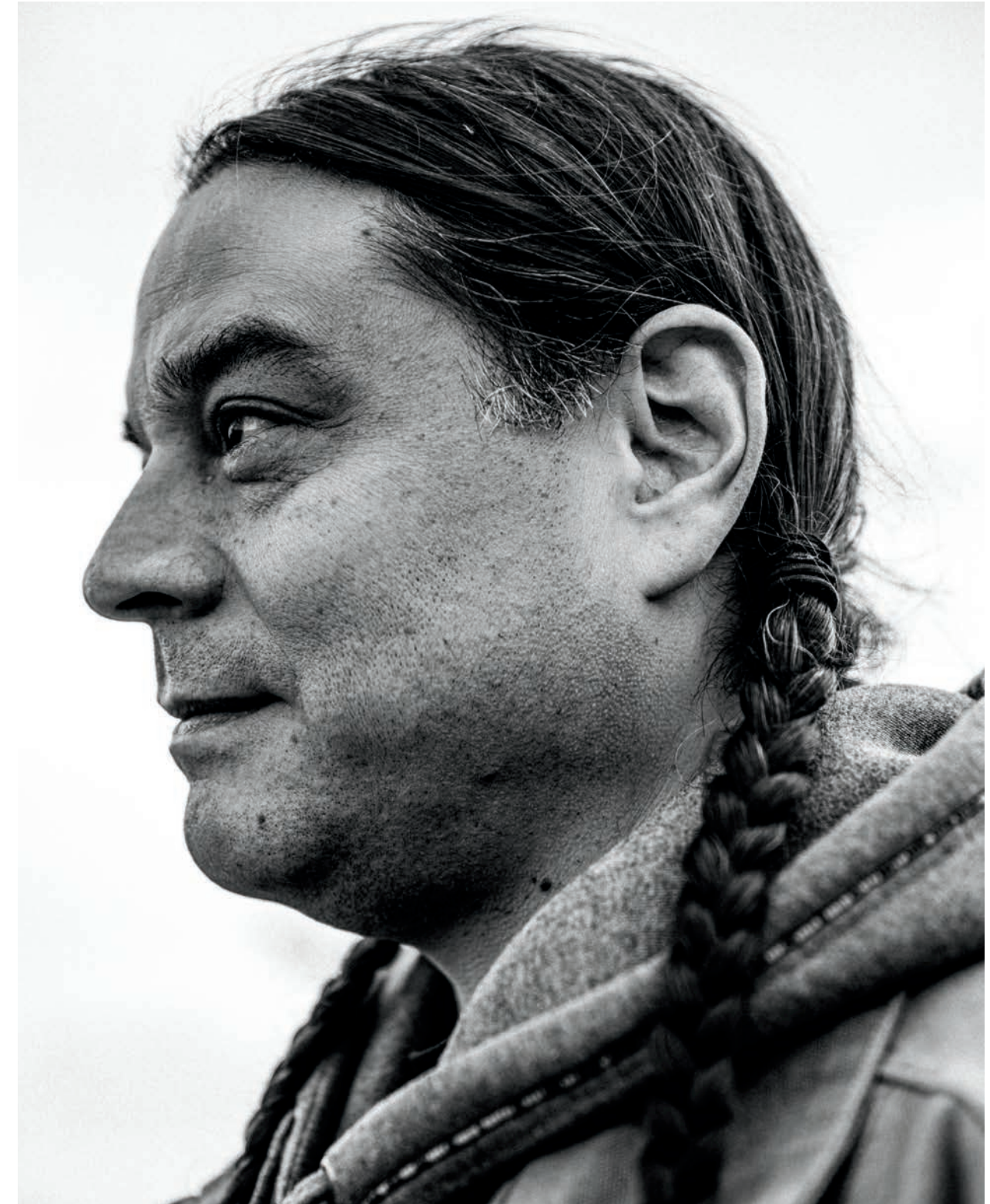
When she drifted back from “whatever ring of Saturn” she was on, her new life path was clear. She explained

to Sherman why he needed her help, how her administrative skills and her Native heritage would help realize his mission. She says he seemed incredibly relieved to bring her on—particularly as another person who could help figure out how to raise money. “Sean and I both come from poverty,” she says. “So we had to learn how to talk to rich people.”

Everybody I spoke to within the Sioux Chef organization broke it down like this: Sherman is the visionary, Thompson makes everything work. For his part, Sherman says, “when she became my manager it took a huge weight off of me—because in the beginning I was trying to do everything by myself.” By 2017, they had launched a wildly successful Kickstarter campaign, raising 50 percent beyond their goal of \$100,000, breaking a Kickstarter record for number of individual backers. Thompson helped Sherman sign his cookbook deal with University of Minnesota Press for *The Sioux Chef’s Indigenous Kitchen*. They hired a seasoned fundraiser with an agricultural trade policy background, who helped them get designated as a 401(c)3 non-profit. And in the fall of 2020, NATIFS hired an ethnobiologist to run its education program.

The couple has been learning every step of the way. Even when Sherman has had second thoughts about the restaurant project—nervous that Owamni will detract from the Indigenous Food Lab or in some way compromise his ability to spread the decolonization vision that, for him, is

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“These plants carry legends.” —Sean Sherman



so paramount—Thompson has always reassured him. Now he's confident that the pressure and media attention that will come with their first brick and mortar restaurant won't distract from their mission, but amplify it.

"And every step of the way, when we make a decision like this," Thompson notes, "Sean and I talk to our ancestors." They burn sweetgrass or sage, and they meditate on the choices before them. "It's not like a religion, it's an energy," she says. "It's trust exercise after trust exercise, and we have faith that the community is going to support us."

**O**n my last visit with Sean Sherman, I finally get to see him cook. I never made it to his food truck, Tatanka, while it existed, and I've never been lucky enough to be invited to a catered dinner or catch him at a conference. I came close once, at Ho Chunk Community Center in Baraboo, Wisconsin (the man gets around), but the food wasn't quite ready by the time I had to bolt. Now I'm tagging along on the photo shoot for this story just so I can get a taste.

Sherman leans over the studio stovetop in his Indigenous Food Lab, mouthing along with Joy Division's "Transmission," which is cranked on the kitchen stereo. He's searing a smoked pheasant breast, and he says *duh*, he knows pheasant was imported from China in the 19th century, but he grew up hunting the bird on the reservation, and this particular one was raised on a local Pequot Lakes poultry farm, so it's native enough to him. I ask him about a spoonful of something he just plopped in the pan.

"Oh, that's a little dandelion pesto," he says. "It's just dandelion and pepita and sunflower oil and salt." I quickly do the colonialist math—everything seems indigenous, except maybe that salt?

"Salt from around here comes from the Red River area," Sherman counters. The best Upper Midwestern salt is found in salt springs near the Minnesota-North Dakota border. "North Dakota is a giant ancient ocean bed," he says. "So there's a shit-ton of salt springs all over. Farmers and ranchers have been dynamiting them forever to keep them underground, but they keep popping up."

He continues as he cooks, telling me that in the 18th and 19th centuries, salt springs were prized by the U.S. government (salt is a commodity good, after all). Natives, ever resourceful, would season their food by finding salt in meat proteins and in the ash of plants.

Sherman spoons mint cedar tea sweetened with maple syrup into a pot of wild rice, removes the pheasant from the heat, and deglazes the pan with a little duck stock. He plates the breast on a bed of wild rice and hominy with calendula, dried *gete-okosomin* squash, and sunchoke flour.

Before eating it, I wonder if there's even a way for somebody to critique this food—itsself a critique of an entire colonial cuisine. Would some white guy ever have the balls to walk into Owamni and write a review, like "the rabbit was bland, and the *wojape* was one-dimensional...?"

Well, I'm a white guy, and I finally have a forkful Sherman's food in my mouth. The chew of the wild rice plays against the tender, earthy swell of the hominy, perfectly balanced against the smoked pheasant with subtle notes of maple and mint dancing on the edges of my palate, sweet and herbaceous. Somehow, seemingly for the first time, I am getting a pure taste of the woods I grew up in, the woods I've lived close to my entire life. Sherman's food is telling this place's story, while in the same breath existing as a condemnation of what happened here.

I'm starting to understand why Thompson referred to her first introduction to Sherman and his cooking as a spiritual experience. It's one that raises a thousand questions, puncturing my *Ratatouille*-esque reverie. Will others taste the history, the land, the atrocities and reclamations? Is decolonization only palatable when it's literally palatable? Is his food—whether because it's so good or because his mission is so obviously important—critic-proof, or at least somewhat insulated from the condescension of white foodies? Or worse, will it be

too enthusiastically lionized as the newest fad "ethnic cuisine," rather than a visionary overhaul of a colonized industry, appetite, and culture?

It's time to finish the photo shoot at nearby Powderhorn Park—the photographer, Bill Phelps, wants to grab some drone footage as Sherman forages the last of the wild bergamot before winter finishes it off. As we walk out of Midtown Global Market, Sherman tells me he's formed a bond with all his Market neighbors as the pandemic forces ever more people into the city's outdoor homeless population. More than 50,000 people, a tragically disproportionate number of them Native, are staring down a long hard winter. Sherman's been taking daily walks around the neighborhood to get warm soup into people's hands.

"As it gets colder, people get more thankful for warm soup," he says.

When I ask how he thinks it will feel cooking for the affluent at Owamni after months of feeding the thousands of folks living in tents in city parks like Powderhorn, Sherman is practical. He explains that when Owamni opens, the new downtown restaurant will be an engine for all the education and development happening on the non-profit side in midtown.

"You need something you can continuously generate capital with," he says. The restaurant's cash flow will support everything else the Sioux Chef is doing, and the Indigenous Food Lab will function as a commissary kitchen procuring, creating, and providing all the Indigenous specialty items—nixtamalized corn, dried squash, maple syrup, foraged wild rice, and boughs of cedar—needed to supply Owamni.

"This will balance us out so we're not just feeding the rich," he says. "We're going to be doing all this other work."

The nature of Owamni's unique sliding scale lease with the city—high when business is good, low when it's bad—will protect Sherman from too much risk, hopefully making business sustainable during the lean times (as times are likely to remain while we claw our way out of this pandemic). And he recognizes there's a grim silver lining to the reality that many of his downtown competitors will never reopen. He seems uniquely poised to capitalize on the expected goodwill of the public. He understands more than anybody that as soon as it opens, Owamni will be instantly considered an "important" restaurant, hopefully a model that more Indigenous chefs can build upon. And, if things go well, he'll have the financial room for experimentation and exploration at Owamni and the Indigenous Food Lab. But he truly sounds unworried about the possibility of negative reviews.

"One of the things that's worked for us is that there's nothing like us out there," he laughs. "So it's hard to say we're doing it wrong."

With that, Sherman returns his attention to the dry, waist-deep bergamot on the shore of Powderhorn Lake. He pulls some seeds from the top of the plant to show me. Bergamot or beebalm is of the mint family, and can be made into a refreshing, medicinal tea, but he cautions that these plants are well past their born-on date and, considering where they're growing—Minneapolis's most lived-in public park—aren't exactly uncontaminated specimens. He tosses the seeds away, and points out that for centuries, his ancestors understood the entire year—a calendar measured in phases of the moon—to hold just enough time to prepare for surviving our long, dark winters.

But what promise the spring holds.



*The title of this story comes from the poem "Perhaps the World Ends Here" by Joy Harjo*