Tribe's chefs go beyond traditions

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By Mara Zepeda, Globe Correspondent | July 25, 2007

MASHPEE -- On this Sunday afternoon at the Mashpee Wampanoag Pow Wow, a bustling staff of relatives and "pow wow kids looking for work," as Sherry Pocknett calls them, congregate, awaiting instructions. They're in an airy, shaded outdoor kitchen, outfitted with two grills, a stove, refrigerator, and hand-woven baskets brimming with corn, squash, peppers, and kale. Pocknett, a Wampanoag chef, is preparing the cooking of her tribe.

Mention Wampanoag foodways, and clambakes and Thanksgiving spring to mind. But the Wampanoag culinary contributions extend beyond these traditions. Pocknett, 47, whose tribe won federal recognition last winter, is determined to preserve the cuisine. She started Sly Fox's Den, a food stand named after her father, which she takes around the country, touring pow wows and bazaars sponsored by Cultural Survival, a Cambridge-based organization that promotes indigenous cultures.

In Mashpee, Pocknett's daughter Jade, 18, sets out coolers of strawberry lemonade and iced sassafras tea. People find the sassafras intriguing. "Where do you buy this?" a customer asks. "We pick it," Pocknett replies, pointing to the knotty upright branches simmering away, releasing an earthy incense over stands serving hamburgers, hot dogs, and fried clams.

Pocknett had an early start in the kitchen. Noticing the hungry crowds roaming the annual pow wow, she started her own food stand at 13, preparing "fry bread" with a cousin, using their great-grandmother's recipe. The girls drenched the discs in jam, offered sassafras tea, and turned a tidy profit. "We spent all of the money before the day's end on crafts and jewelry," recalls Pocknett.

She comes from a long line of cooks. Her mother, Bernadine, has handed down her family recipes and, as many relatives can attest, some are impossible to replicate. "Native people bring up their children knowing how to change diapers, wash dishes," she says, and assume a role in the kitchen. "They were peeling potatoes at 6 years old," Bernadine recalls. Her husband, once the tribe's chief, taught the children to hunt and fish. Pocknett can skin a deer with a pocket knife, and often calls upon her fishing skills to procure local ingredients from turtle to eel for her business.

Her uncle Earl Mills Sr. is a co author of the "Cape Cod Wampanoag Cookbook," and started The Flume, which for 34 years was the only restaurant on Cape Cod that offered Wampanoag cuisine . Pocknett spent 12 years at the Flume, which closed in 2003. "To cook you have to have a taste, and that's what I acquired from my uncle over the years," she says. She listened and paid attention, even though at times he wondered if she truly was.

By lunchtime at the powwow, the crowd is in full swing. The sassafras is overwhelmed by the intoxicating scent of a rich, heady turtle soup. Pocknett adjusts the broth, whips up a batch of corn cakes, rips off dough for fry bread, and oversees frogs' legs in hot oil. A gathering of relatives collects behind the kitchen, the children wearing colorful regalia for the traditional dance competitions that occur throughout the day. A hair-braiding line of girls, sipping wild blueberry drinks, forms on a bench. Vernon, Pocknett's bespectacled 10-year-old nephew, outfitted in a fox skin headdress, discloses that this may be his last year of competing. "I'm really more into drumming," he explains as he shucks corn.

Customers order smoked bluefish and mussels, wild salmon, quail, venison, and buffalo (the game is made into kebabs and sausage). Some potential diners approach the stand with furrowed brows. "Is this *really* deer?" one asks. Another tells his young son, "Today, you will try your first frog legs!" The boy looks alarmed; 15 minutes later he's licking his fingers.

Respect and seasonality are central to Wampanoag culinary culture. Linda Coombs, associate director of the Wampanoag Indigenous Program at Plimoth Plantation, says, "The idea that something is a gift from the land is an attitude that keeps us from being complacent and flippant. We don't think of [food] as something that's just there to be taken and, as a result, we have a whole different mindset." Pocknett adds, "We were taught to boil an extra potato in case company comes, and there was always enough for one more person."

At 7 p.m., four generations of Pocknetts populate the kitchen. Sherry is chopping squash for jag, a wild rice dish introduced by Portuguese sailors. Bernadine chats with her, recounting this morning's breakfast of baked beans, piccalilli, fried egg, and toast with homemade peach preserves. Jade has taken over the grill, whipping out orders 11 hours after her day began. Her barefoot 6-year-old cousin Jadah, in a calfskin dress with rainbow ribbons in her hair, strains to reach into the cooler for another drink of strawberry lemonade.

A single mother with three children, Pocknett supplements her catering business by cooking in the cafeteria of a nursing home. She wants to follow in her Uncle Earl's footsteps and open her own restaurant. "Money is the only obstacle," she says. "When I do open my own place it will be named Sassafras or Sassafras Tree. It will serve very simple, good food. And it will be an instant success -- I promise you that." ■

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