

GOOD OLD AMERICAN COOKING — THE WAY THE NATIVE AMERICANS USED TO MAKE

By AMANDA BOWER
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Don't feel like cooking tonight? In just about any medium-sized town in the United States, you can go out for dinner and experience the cuisines of the world: Chinese, Mexican, Italian, Thai, French. But where would you go for something quintessentially American? Say, a meal of sage-rubbed bison ribs, slow-cooked in the oven and then finished on the grill, with a blueberry barbecue sauce that you'll want to slurp up with a spoon; a place that serves fry bread — a puffy piece of flash-fried heaven — and hominy salsa.



Bison ribs at Tocabe restaurant

In all of the United States, there are just a handful of places that do this, even though it is food that has been here long before hot dogs and apple pies, and long before immigrant cultures joined the melting pot. It is Native American cuisine.

For years, unless you lived on or near a reservation — or happened to be visiting the cafe at the National Museum of the American Indian — you were unlikely to be able to go out for Native American food. But now, residents of Denver, Colorado, are able to feast on Indian tacos, green chile stew, wojapi (a thick berry dessert) and more, thanks to Osage Indian Ben Jacobs and his restaurant Tocabe: an American Indian Eatery.

"I want native food to be much more in the public eye," says Jacobs, 28. "Feasting is a big part of our culture, and eating together is important to us, just like for many other cultures." Judging by Tocabe's success, Jacobs is getting his wish for many more Americans to experience indigenous eats.

Less than three years after opening the restaurant, Jacobs and his business partner Matthew Chandra have already bought back the 20% share in the business they gave to the owners of their building, and are negotiating to open a second location. They have more than doubled their workforce and are still hiring. They get calls every week from people all over the country, who have heard about Tocabe's success and want advice on opening their own Native American restaurants. Business has

quadrupled in the past month, ever since the Food Network's Guy Fieri profiled Tocabe on his show *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*. (To celebrate the first airing of the episode, a friend of Jacobs' made him a T-shirt that read "Diners, Drive-Ins and Tribes.")

Jacobs was just 23 years old when he took Chandra, his best friend from college, to visit family in Oklahoma. Chandra fell in love with fry bread and other food served at a pow-wow, and together they decided to put their career plans on hold — Jacobs was planning on using his history degree to make documentaries about Native Americans, and Chandra had a degree in digital media — and open a restaurant back in Denver. They spent two years honing Jacobs' grandmother's and mother's recipes before opening Tocabe, at the age of 25 and 26 respectively. (Family is at the heart of the operation. "Tocabe" is an Osage word for "blue," the favorite color of Jacobs' mom.)

It's a fast-casual restaurant, where patrons order the base of their meal at the counter — there are tacos filled with bison or chicken and flavored with Native American sauces, served on frybread, stuffed frybread, a "medicine wheel" of colored corn chips and nacho-style toppings, salads, ribs, and a variety of soups — and then choose from the beans, meats and six different kinds of homemade salsa. (This assembly-line system is not unlike that of another restaurant that got its start in Denver, and now boasts more than 1,000 locations: Chipotle Mexican Grill.) Much of Tocabe's success lies in its closely guarded fry bread recipe, which puffs up and is fully cooked in just 20 seconds, instead of the usual four or five minutes. This means that it absorbs about a tablespoon of canola and corn oil compared to traditional fry bread, which is cooked in lard and absorbs, well, a lot more.

Tocabe's food is fresh and, despite its complex flavor combinations, decidedly unfussy. It is also, as one customer described it, "craveable." Fry bread is difficult to make at home — this reporter has tried twice since visiting Tocabe — and Jacobs is repeatedly asked to give up his recipe, as well as that for his chicken marinade, barbecue sauce and salsas. Now that his food is gaining in popularity, he's starting to require employees to sign non-disclosure agreements before they can work in the kitchen. The only recipe he'll relinquish to the public is that for his green chile stew.

But Jacobs and Chandra aren't just offering authentic, home-made food. They have already provided three college scholarships for Native American students, and bought uniforms for the Denver Indian Center youth basketball team. They regularly donate food and restaurant space for cultural events, and are committed to cultivating among their patrons an awareness of Native American food and culture in the 21st century. That last part — the 21st century — is important. Every day, those who work at Tocabe are asked if they are "real" Indians (and, if so, where are the pigtails?). All the staff are encouraged to talk about their culture and answer questions from interested — if somewhat ignorant — patrons. Why are there no dreamcatchers and headdresses on display? (The decor is much more subtle, and based on Jacobs' family photos of Oklahoma: the wallpaper is reminiscent of prairie grass; the red chairs are the same color as the benches used at dances; the waves of plexiglass suspended from the ceiling evoke the wind.) Why is there no flute music playing in the background? (The restaurant recently hosted a Native hip-hop night; Jacobs and Chandra say they would go crazy if they had to listen to traditional music all day.)

"We live in the modern era too," says Jacobs. "I think sometimes we are pigeonholed into the long-hair-and-war-paint stereotype. We are trying to show that we can stay traditional in many aspects of our lives, but be just as contemporary as the rest of people in others."