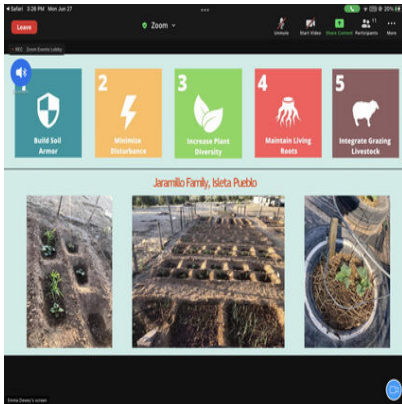


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Keeping the culture in agriculture



By [Alex Fethiere](#)



Courtesy of Alex Féthière

Center of Southwest Culture's Emma Q Dewey shares farm production techniques developed on unceded Tewa territory in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

I've never used Zoom intensively, so when I attended Tuesday's "Keeping the Culture in AgriCulture: First Annual Food Sovereignty Symposium" hosted by Tahoma Peak Solutions, I was trepidatious about the screen experience as much as I was excited about the program.

As a recovering desk jockey, I can be very irritated by unprofessional or clunky UIs ("user experiences.") Nothing of the sort took place over the four hours of webinar that I enjoyed. Even presenters who claimed not to enjoy technology handled it capably, and everyone's internet performed like a champ.

My internet even held out well enough for me to take the tablet planting. I listened to the presenters as I got some okra in the hot ground.

Most of the nationwide attendees seemed to have a tribal affiliation. I only declared that I write about regenerative agriculture and permaculture for this newspaper.

Helping Native people figure out how to launch a food or agriculture business in Indian Country is an urgent order. What the pandemic has done to supply chains has opened a rift between farm and table that gasoline prices have only widened.

Climate change has been a steady drone at the foundation of the disaster orchestra. Traditional solutions like prescribed burns were touched on as part of a cycle, when A-dae Briones of First Nations Development Institute said, "When you don't invite fire to eat at the table with you, it will build up and come with a vengeance."

Briones, First Nations' director of programs - Native Agriculture and Food Systems Initiative, explored differences between an indigenous food system and a mainstream food system, as well as the development of a tribal food economy. "In traditional food economies you should have zero waste," she observed, adding that burying bones is not waste. I'm sure she meant burying them yourself - landfilling is not comparable and, I would argue, is waste.

She discussed community dynamics and traditions around food and how they could be extrapolated to business, institutions and government, and struck a common chord with the presenter following her, Dana Thompson.

Thompson, the co-owner, chief operating officer and executive director of The Sioux Chef/Owamni/NATIFS, shared the obstacles her Minnesota restaurant, Owamni by The Sioux Chef, encountered at the beginning of the pandemic. The bank decided it would not proceed with an already-approved loan because it wouldn't invest in a restaurant during a pandemic.

Undeterred, Owamni recalibrated and went on to win a James Beard award for Best New Restaurant in 2022. Thompson spoke from a point of great struggle and success, and brought practical knowledge of operating a service business with a staff and menu rooted in its community: ingredients draw heavily from indigenous traditions, and the staff composition is more than 75% Native.

Spring Alaska, indigenous agriculturalist and owner of Oregon's Sakari Farms, talked about the patient development of her business, as well as the nitty-gritty of fees and fines, "and some worse Fs" in keeping your place profitable. Nobody at this webinar sung the praises of capitalism, but all seemed steely-eyed about the necessity to make money without compromising.

That was refreshing, like when Phil Rigdon, the superintendent of Yakama Nation's Natural Resources Department, mentioned the challenges of distributing reservation-grown produce to casino restaurants. After the lunch break, a resource conservationist from the NRCS and King County's Local Food Economy manager brought a slew of resources for tribes and underserved groups starting businesses and farms.

These presenters were long on logistics and I'm sure I missed some good info. Good thing everything was recorded. At the time of this writing, Tahoma Peak Solutions is producing the archive for all to enjoy, so check tahomapeak.com for links - the Food Sovereignty Symposium is under the "Our Work" tab.

P.S.: Free giant sequoias and coastal redwoods up to 6' tall will be available again in fall from Michigan's Archangel Ancient Tree Archive, via Dave Pearsall in McCleary. Email me at the below address to get on the list. Pick-ups will receive preference.

■ *Alex Féthière has lived on Harstine Island long enough to forget New York City, where he built community gardens and double-dug his suburban sod into a victory garden. He can be reached at onlandist@gmail.com.*

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