

Eating While Indigenous: How Andi Murphy of Toasted Sister Is Making Food Sovereignty Accessible



BY TATÉ WALKER

Published Nov 16, 2021

<https://www.thekitchn.com/eating-while-indigenous-how-andi-murphy-of-toasted-sister-is-making-food-sovereignty-accessible-23230047>



Few things in Andi Murphy's New Mexico kitchen aren't black. She painted the cupboards black. Black dishes and cookware. Black soap dispenser. Black apron. Black grout peeks out from between white tile backsplash. You'd think that would be too dark a space for a chef to work in, but Murphy's overhead lights — two bulbs emitting 4,000 lumens apiece — reflect off the kitchen surfaces for a crisp, goth gastronome vibe.

Credit: Jenny Irene Miller

"It makes me feel good," the 32-year-old Diné storyteller says about her favorite color. She talks about her black walls, her black couches, and her new black bedroom set. Her wardrobe often (always?) features the color, which she pairs with thick, black eyeliner and dark-rimmed glasses. "It's clean. It's always been my aesthetic."

Like the bulbs illuminating her kitchen workspace, Murphy's obvious passion for everything from journalism to soap-making to her not-black cats — Carrot and Lucifur — brightens up whatever she's focused on at the moment. Nowhere is this more evident than watching her prepare, cook, and present a meal full of bold colors that stand out beautifully against black cutting boards and plates.

If you thought nothing could compete with Murphy's love of black, think again. In Murphy's kitchen, palate overtakes palette any day.

"It's the best and strongest relationship I've ever had in my whole life," Murphy says of food and cooking.

"One time I was in a conversation, and I just started getting excited about food, and someone in my family said in a negative way, 'You're so obsessed with food,' like in a disgusted way. And, I mean," Murphy trails off for a second, then continues. "The only reason why thousands of people across the world know my name now is because of food. It's everything to me."



This isn't histrionics, folks. Murphy is a bona fide celebrity of the Indigenous food world, mostly due to her wildly popular and award-winning podcast, Toasted Sister. A radio broadcast journalist by trade with daily newspaper reporting and photojournalism skills on her long resumé, Murphy launched Toasted Sister in 2017 to spotlight the Indigenous chefs, seed savers, ingredients, recipes, restaurants, and all things culinary that other outlets couldn't or didn't want to cover.

Credit: Jenny Irene Miller

What started as a hobby now reaches a global audience. Having what mainstream media might consider a niche podcast, combined with her knowledge of Indigenous foods and cooking, has led to many opportunities and accolades: presentations at Yale, mentions in the *New York Times*, enviable fellowships with Civil Eats, and having her work assigned to college students at Southern Oregon University.

It might surprise you, then, that Murphy's history with what's considered Indigenous food is a recent development. Like a lot of Indigenous people living in the United States and raised by parents and relatives forced to attend

government- and church-run boarding schools for Native American children, Murphy and her sister weren't raised in what one might consider a traditional Navajo atmosphere — especially when it comes to food.

Murphy lets out a short, sharp laugh of air when asked about any early experiences with things like wild harvesting, hunting and butchering, or memories of ceremonial dishes. While she experienced things like kneel down bread, mutton, and Indian tacos at parades and gatherings, the childhood foods Murphy holds close were dishes her working-class parents could make cheaply and quickly, while still filling their daughters' bellies — things like spaghetti, baked chicken, and rice.

"I didn't grow up with my grandma in a hogan and raising sheep on the land," Murphy says dryly. "Sometimes people expect that kind of story from me ... but I'm not going to try to Navajo myself up for an interview — or anyone. That's not really me."

"My background with food and that connection with poverty gives me a different perspective," Murphy says. "That influences my work today. I try not to talk down to other people's food."

Her grandmother, Oleta Murphy, worked in the cafeteria where Murphy and her sister attended boarding school in Crownpoint, New Mexico. Murphy recalls her grandmother making fresh bread, biscuits, and pancakes for students.

"She worked there the whole time we went to school," Murphy recalls. "Me and my sister would watch my grandma talk to the school's picky eaters, try to get them to eat vegetables and different varieties of food. We hated seeing food go into the trash and wasted, because we knew our grandma was back there making it for us."

This early appreciation for food became a full-blown devotion about 10 years ago after an unexpected restaurant review assignment for the newspaper Murphy worked for in Las Cruces, New Mexico.

"My passion for food really started when I was deep into writing about food," Murphy says, adding that she learned how to cook — we're talking mainstream/non-Indigenous food here — mostly by watching others do it on TV. "I felt like I needed to learn more about different flavors and cultures and

cooking techniques and learning about the people behind the plate. Then, of course, that led to learning about the issues those people are dealing with.”

Incorporating Indigenous food into the storytelling mix was a natural progression. Murphy figured that if she was interested in learning more about traditional ingredients, Native chefs, and contemporary pairings, others would be, too.

Murphy has grown the Toasted Sister brand by introducing zines, T-shirts, stickers, linocut art, and artisanal soap. Murphy is also a producer with Native America Calling, a live, weekday, call-in radio show where she hosts a new program called The Menu, to talk all things Indigenous food and food sovereignty.

“There was that basic definition of food sovereignty: The ability of a community to feed itself. But I don’t think any tribe really has that,” Murphy explains. “With the work I’ve done I’ve come to know a couple of different ways that food sovereignty happens.”

Murphy approaches food sovereignty through a five-pillar approach.

1. Tribal protection of natural resources.
2. Grassroots and nonprofit advocacy and education.
3. Mainstream marketing and awareness via Indigenous chefs.
4. Indigenous entrepreneurs developing business models to produce, package, and sell Indigenous foods and related products.
5. Individuals bringing different aspects of Indigenous food sovereignty directly into their kitchens.

While these pillars aren’t silos, and each is as important as the next in the overall success of Indigenous food sovereignty, Murphy’s focus is on the cook and kitchen.

“There’s really no point to any of it if individuals aren’t bringing the food into their homes or don’t have the skills or tools needed to cook these foods in ways that are delicious to them or beneficial to producers, like local tribes and Indigenous farmers,” Murphy says.

This is where Murphy truly shines: making Indigenous food knowledge accessible.

"It's tough when someone's like, 'I foraged these mushrooms during peak season, and if you don't have them, you'll have to wait until next year,'" says Murphy, who tries to be intentional about the kind of ingredients used during her live cooking demos to ensure most are generic enough for a neighborhood grocery store. Hey — not everyone can cut fresh microgreens.

"I'm an urban Native. I don't know everything about wild plants. I come at food in very basic way to hopefully inspire people to try new ingredients and flavors and cooking techniques."

Intimidating or overwhelming the average person with over-the-top recipes or hard-to-find ingredients doesn't benefit anyone, Murphy explains.

"Individuals have to be hungry for it. They have to crave it and bring it into their own kitchens," she says. "Food sovereignty and big shit like that doesn't mean anything if people can't keep it in their own pantries, make it tasty, and want to put it in their own mouths."

An even bigger issue is that many Native people can't afford or easily acquire basic food products, let alone Indigenous ingredients and the know-how to cook with them.

In the United States, estimates show one in four Native people experience food insecurity at any given time, compared to one in eight Americans overall, according to a [2017 report](#) by the Partnership with Native Americans and Northern Plains Reservation Aid. Native families are 400 percent more likely to report being food insecure.

"My background with food and that connection with poverty gives me a different perspective," Murphy says. "That influences my work today. I try not to talk down to other people's food."

A recent online fundraising effort spearheaded by Murphy met and nearly doubled its goal within a few hours of being posted. The campaign will allow Murphy and two other Indigenous chefs — Ray Naranjo (Santa Clara Pueblo/Odawa) and Ryan Taylor (Ohkay Owingeh) — to purchase and cook an Indigenous feast for up to 80 people to eat for free at the Albuquerque Indian Center on November 19.

"Food connects us. Food is the first thing you're introduced to within other cultures, because it's a common thread among us all," says Naranjo, who met

Murphy at an Indigenous food event in Taos, New Mexico, about 10 years ago. He says the event allows the three chefs to give back to the community. "Food is identity. It's survival. It's the fruits of our labors, whether it's food meant to be eaten right away or meant for the long haul."

For Murphy, the long haul includes growing *Toasted Sister*, including starting a scholarship for New Mexico's Indigenous students leaving their home for the first time to attend college. It also includes learning to make new foods. During the pandemic, for instance, Murphy taught herself to make dark chocolate macarons with chocolate ganache filling. She called them "Black as Night Macarons."

You can follow Murphy and her endeavors via her podcast at toastedsisterpodcast.com, and support her Patreon at www.patreon.com/Toastedsisterpodcast.

This piece was edited by guest editor Jennifer Brandt.

Taté Walker CONTRIBUTOR

Taté Walker (they/them) is a Lakota citizen of the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe of South Dakota. They are a Two Spirit feminist, Indigenous rights activist, and a published and award-winning storyteller for outlets like "The Nation," "Everyday Feminism," "Native Peoples" magazine, and "Indian Country Today," and "ANMLY." They are also featured in several anthologies, including *FIERCE: Essays by and about Dauntless Women*, *South Dakota in Poems*, and *W.W. Norton's Everyone's an Author*. Their first full-length poetry book, *The Trickster Riots*, is set to publish in 2022. Taté uses their 15+ years of experience working for daily newspapers, social justice organizations, and tribal education systems to organize students and professionals around issues of critical cultural competency, anti-racism/anti-bias, and inclusive community building.

Kitchn is © 1994-2022 Apartment Therapy, LLC