

WHAT'S ON YOUR PLATE?

INDIGENIZING FOOD LITERACY

By Lajah Warren

Food literacy is complex. Better yet, indigenous food literacy becomes that much more complex due to the strong connection between indigenous peoples and the land. Being an indigenous youth, my journey to understanding my roots has been complicated. However, I always knew that understanding food was the first place for me to start. Through talking with Janelle Hatch, the head of CRFAIR's food literacy working group, I was able to learn a new perspective on indigenous food literacy.



Artwork by John Warren

WHAT IS IT?

When asked about what food literacy means, Janelle explains how broad the term really is. In general, she explains how food literacy not only relates to our understanding of skills and knowledge of where our foods come from, but it echoes the multifaceted relationship around food and our economy, environment, society, and culture. Specifically, how that all interplays when people make food related decisions. Indigenous food literacy factors in our traditional relationships with the land and our ecosystems. Essentially, food literacy invites individuals to look into how they are equally apart of the ecosystem around them. As well, food systems highlight the relationship of soil, to seeds, to plate, to waste; recognizing the circulatory system that encompasses our world of food. Through her work, she has opened up her eyes to the different perspectives on foods and plants within indigenous context in Victoria.

The factors that can increase the success of food literacy programs in indigenous communities, Janelle, says, are youth engagement and constantly asking for feedback. She believes in planting the seed of food literacy within young people's minds early on and thinking about the programs in terms of continuous quality improvement. By doing this, she encourages people to find ways to build feedback loops throughout programs. Particularly, she sees a need to elevate the voice of youth when it comes to food literacy and actively listen to them.



With indigenous peoples, it is more about the land and the many barriers that stand in their way from accessing what they use for a traditional diet. She says, "I think there is a lot of people where if food insecurity was taken care of, that would relieve a lot of mental anguish." Essentially, she states that when you sever the connection to individuals and healthy, culturally appropriate foods, individuals often suffer. Another area that makes indigenous food literacy more complex, she mentions, is due to many indigenous peoples taking on the settlers' ways of eating due to necessity. This reflects the many barriers that our communities face from accessing culturally appropriate nutrition. "So many people are food insecure whether that is because they can't afford good food or because they are concerned that they can't access the food," she says.

HOW CAN WE USE OUR UNDERSTANDING OF INDIGENOUS FOOD SYSTEMS TO BETTER STRIVE TOWARDS TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION?

When asked about how food security projects honor traditional hunting, fishing, trapping, gathering, and conservation practices of Indigenous peoples, Janelle's response can be rounded into one simple word; awareness. She explains how it begins with each of us following our own path to reconciliation and how our paths relate to food and the land. Each person can start by increasing their inner journey towards reconciliation. Following this, she believes that we can honour these practices by looking at our systems and structures from an outside perspective. She says, "this is something that will be difficult, and uncomfortable, but is necessary." Many of her networks having begun talking about these concerns and discussing how we can walk this path together with first peoples. "I think it's about looking at our structures that we have in place, stepping outside of them, looking at it from different viewpoints and how we can change things to better honor how we do things with our food and land," she says. Through her community work, she sees such a connection with food and land within indigenous communities. She says, "food is such a good opening way to take our first step together down what hopefully will be a different path than what we have take in the past... I think it's about that openness of listening and learning about having tough conversations and being able to withstand that discomfort for as long as it takes". Ultimately, she believes it is about honouring people and whether they want to make that connection to their culture and food.

With that said, I want to share with you one of the final things that Janelle has left me with. Through our discussion, she said that with more voices heard, comes more positive action. Thus, I invite you to do what is necessary to understand food in relation to your culture. I encourage you to go even further to share what values you hold with food and land. By opening this dialogue, we open doors and opportunities for others to follow their path to culturally appropriate food exploration as well. With that said, what positive actions will your conversations cultivate?

