

## **Biscuits and Buffalo: Squashing Myths about Food in Indian Country**

**Cindy Ott**

“Buffalo and Biscuits” explores the food history of the northern Plains, especially the Crow reservation, from the 1880s to the present to help bring to light the dynamics and mechanisms by which American Indians have reconciled their own experiences in a modern globalized world with the persistently romantic expectations of what it means to be Indian. Food is a particularly powerful lens to explore issues of Indian identity and heritage because it is the site of some of the most persistent and intractable myths that have popularly defined who Indians are. Through the lens of food history, I examine Indians' and non-Indians' shared links to the market economy, to the natural environment, and to each other over time to debunk persistent stereotypes that pit Indians against non-Indians in ahistorical and problematic ways.

In the American Studies tradition, I am interested in analyzing historical questions from across disciplines. Like all of my work, “Buffalo and Biscuits” is rooted in history and memory, cultural studies, the environment, and the visual and material world. As a form of heritage studies, this book explores the ways Plains Indians have relied on food to perpetuate a sense of cultural identity in ways that upset common expectations. For example, one of the useful discoveries in studying Crow foodways is that they have historically made food a prime motivation for environmental protection and preservation. From the desire in the 1930s to set aside the Big Horn Mountains so people have a place to go to pick berries and hunt elk and deer, to the creation of the Buffalo Pasture as a wildlife preserve to provide a source of buffalo to eat, and to the local herbalist Alma Snell's preservation of edible wild plants and habitats, Crows turn mainstream wildlife management policies on their head. Instead of divorcing human history from wild places with policies and visitor programs that picture National Parks as isolated oases, Crows have sought, with mixed success, to preserve nature on the reservation as a way to maintain old working relationships between themselves and the natural world around them.

Conversely, I will tell the story of how Crow Indians turned to federal and state wildlife protection policies for guidance for their own conservation efforts. For example, Barry Real Bird went to Aldo Leopold for inspiration when he tried to establish a pheasant reserve on the Crow Reservation in the 1990s. In addition, as I argue, Indians have embraced the culinary traditions of their non-Indian neighbors in ways that support instead of undermine Crow culture. The story of reservation gardens revises old beliefs of the destructive nature of boarding school and missionary cooking and gardening classes. Both the competitive nature of Crow gardeners in the early years of Crow Fair at the turn of the twentieth century and rise of community gardens today prove how Indians have relied on gardening to bolster their community under difficult circumstances. These stories are just a few examples of the ways I will combine cultural and environmental history in "Squashing Myths."