

SECTIONS

Food & Drink

Shannon Kuhn: 'Store Outside Your Door' looks at nutritional value of traditional Alaska foods

Shannon Kuhn | March 28, 2014

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Photo courtesy ANTHC

Dr. Gary Ferguson is on a lifelong journey to learn how to use plants as food and medicine.

Ferguson, who is Aleut, is a naturopathic doctor and the director of wellness and prevention programs for the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium. He is one of the leaders of the ANTHC initiative called "The Store Outside Your Door," an effort to educate people about the nutritional benefit of Alaska's traditional foods, and compel people to bring them back into their homes and kitchens.

Following the motto of "Hunt, Fish, Gather, Grow," the program encourages people to forage, farm, hunt, fish and preserve the food resources where they live.

There are now almost 40 **"The Store Outside Your Door" episodes on YouTube**. Around three minutes long, each video features people from different Alaska communities talking about their traditions. They often share a tasty recipe too -- from abalone and sea cucumber fried rice in Hydaburg to bearded seal oil (misigaq) in Barrow.

The "Gather, Grow" part of the tagline is what the team has been focusing on for the last year.

"We are working on growing that effort because elders have been telling us as we travel that they'd like to know more about their plants," Ferguson said.

Traditionally, Alaska Native people lived off of the land and the bounty surrounding them: berries, plants, caribou, deer, moose, seal and whale. The team has found that many Alaska elders remember harvesting and using certain plants growing up, but fewer and fewer people know how to use them today. Over the past 200 years, much of that knowledge has been lost in the transition to a cash-based economy. Alaska imports over 90 percent of its food, and processed foods have disproportionately affected the health of Alaska Natives. Today, the top food and beverage items consumed in rural Alaska include soda, Hi-C, fruit juice, canned soup and milk. Heart disease, cancer, and diabetes are among the leading causes of death among Alaska Natives.

Ferguson and ANTHC are trying to capture traditional knowledge of local foods before it slips away. "The knowledge is still alive, it just needs to be rediscovered," Ferguson said.

Elders are viewed as the local experts in the community and a key part of any community's success. "A culture disconnected from their elders is going to be sick. This is a fundamental quality of wellness," Ferguson said.

Ferguson sees the power of "The Store Outside Your Door" program as its way of getting away from the "trauma-drama" of bad things happening and focusing on the good instead. "When you talk about food you can't help but celebrate," he said. "We aren't being preachy, but modeling healthy behaviors."

"The Store Outside Your Door" team is currently visiting the North Slope and Northwest Arctic to highlight the plants traditionally used by the Inupiaq. Ferguson will return to Barrow in April to present at the North Slope Borough's Health Summit.

Ferguson started making the connection between food and health when he was a child growing up in Sand Point, harvesting beach greens and eating seal oil. As an EMT in Cold Bay, he was surprised with a swell of losses that he felt were preventable. "So many emergencies aren't emergencies at all, they are lifestyle choices that can actually be kept in check."

His work with traditional plants as food and medicine is connected to his own roots and self-discovery. "It is my own journey of 'Store Outside my Door,'" he says.

Sand Point elder Nora Newman puts it best in the "Pidarki (Chiton) Salad with Ribbon Kelp" episode.

"When the tide is low, the table is set."

Shannon Kuhn lives in Anchorage, where she writes about food and culture.