



LOIS ELLEN FRANK

A Northern New Mexico farm grows heirloom varieties of corn, beans, squash and chiles.

# Back to diet basics

Native cultures stress smart choices, homegrown foods for healthy diets

BY EMILY DRABANSKI

For many pueblo people, staying in touch with their agricultural roots is not only healthy — it's essential to their well-being.

"If you want to get healthy you have to go to the corn," said two-time Grammy winner Robert Mirabal. "Farming gives you a connection to your own wellness. Growing corn is central to our religion."

The Taos Pueblo native finds farming holistic in that it contributes to his physical, emotional and spiritual health. "The spirit of agriculture is connected with our ancestors," Mirabal said. "Our religion and our dances are about bringing the rain for the corn, growing the corn and harvesting it. It is at the heart of what it means

to be a pueblo person.

"Farming teaches you whether you succeed or fail. It forces you to look (metaphorically) at your daily life, too," he added. "How do you nurture what is important to you? How do you save for the bad years when the crops might fail?"

Farming also helps Mirabal stay in shape. "I don't call it a workout, but it's how I keep fit," he said. "I need to get out in the sun. And I run to go operate the head gates. Weeding also takes a lot of physical energy and patience."

Mirabal primarily grows traditional white and blue corn at Tiwa Farms in Taos Pueblo. He enjoys experimenting to see what corn seeds will work the best. He's traded with other pueblo people and has tried out corn he received through trade with indigenous people



PHOTOS COURTESY OF NORMA NARANJO

Norma Naranjo and her husband, Hutch, grow corn on their farm at Santa Clara Pueblo.

in Peru.

“Different crops grow better in different locations,” he said. “In Taos, we’re known for our blue and white corn. I will often trade corn with people in other pueblos to get red beans and chile. Really, my interest is in growing corn, but I also crave red beans.”

Mirabal also protects original seed to the best of his ability. “I stay away from all GMO seeds,” he said, “so that they don’t cross-pollinate with heirloom seeds.”

In an effort to get more pueblo people farming last year, Mirabal teamed with Nelson Zink — a Taos town resident and co-founder, with Mirabal, of Tiwa Farms — to plow about 40 fields with a restored tractor. “But I would say that only 10 percent got a good crop.”

Last year’s drought made farming more difficult, but Mirabal sees the challenge as an opportunity to learn. “The hard years teach you to become more crafty. And with experience and practice, you’ll get a better crop.”

Mirabal and Zink also co-wrote *Believe in the Corn*, which offers tips on growing corn along with information on its significance to pueblo people.

In *Po’Pay Speaks*, his one-man show about the leader of the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, Mirabal summarizes the centrality of corn to

pueblo life: “Without corn there is no song. Without song there is no dance. Without dance there is no rain. Without rain there is no corn. If corn dies, we die.”

### Growing fresh foods

Norma Naranjo and her husband Eugene “Hutch” Naranjo have farmed together for about 25 years. They do most of their farming at Santa Clara Pueblo, her husband’s homeland, Naranjo said, but they also have an extensive garden at their Ohkay Owingeh home.

“My husband and I mainly grow the corn for chicos and blue corn on the farm,” Naranjo said, “but at home, we grow our own chile, tomatoes, squash and cucumbers. A lot of pueblo people buy our chicos (small dried corn kernels) for feast-day meals. We’re known for that.”

The couple take their blue-corn crop to be ground at a mill at Santa Ana Pueblo to make blue-corn flour.

“I like growing food because I know it’s clean and natural,” Norma said. “Most pueblo people don’t get licenses to be organic farmers. But most pueblo farmers grow everything without chemicals.

“We’re ranchers, too. We butcher our own (grain-fed) cattle and boil (the meat) for our stews.”

Hutch Naranjo builds hornos — the beehive-shaped adobe ovens so visible on pueblos in Northern New Mexico — and Norma caters and offers classes in horno baking and preparing traditional feast-day foods. On her website, [www.thefeastingplace.com](http://www.thefeastingplace.com), she writes: “Food is much more than just eating. Food is a necessity that brings families together. Back when most people raised their own food and had the time to cook, we were healthier people, physically, mentally and spiritually.”

### Making healthy choices and having fun

Jemez Pueblo is one of many that integrate wellness education into its traditional community. Anita Toya, a diabetes community liaison for about 15 years, shares her knowledge with tribal members in her native language of Towa.

Toya enjoys her day job as much as she does her after-hours work making pottery nativity sets and storyteller figurines. She understands that to teach people you need to respect their traditions — and, most importantly, “you have to make it fun.”

Toya attended a healthy cooking workshop led by Lois Ellen Frank at the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center in Albuquerque, and was excited when the tribe could bring the Native chef to the pueblo for a series of

classes last March.

“We met for six weeks, and we had a lot of fun,” Toya said. “I don’t expect people to become vegans, but we are showing people how to cook with less oil and without dairy products and meat. It’s important because people are learning how to prevent insulin resistance (that leads to type 2 diabetes) by cutting down on fats. “I can talk about that to the patients, but they really learn once you can show them how to make the meals.”

Toya advocates healthier cooking methods not only for diabetes, but also for prevention of other serious illnesses.

Frank, who started Red Mesa Cuisine, a Native American catering and food company, said she loves bringing the cooking classes to the pueblos. “Food and culture go hand in hand. I work with foods that are familiar. I don’t use recipes with tofu. I use corn and beans. I know how serious diabetes is for Native people and have my blood sugar tested regularly.”

People generally think it’s expensive to cook in a healthy way, Frank said, so she teaches them that commercial, processed foods often cost more than meals with simple ingredients. For an inexpensive snack, for instance, Frank recommends people get a popcorn popper that uses hot air to pop the kernels. “Then you can take a big bowl and add spices or nutritional yeast.” She suggests putting single servings in plastic sandwich bags that are convenient to take to school.

Frank also shows participants how to read labels.

“I pick up a 20-ounce size soda and ask them to read the label and tell me how much sugar and calories are in the bottle. They always quickly respond with what they see on the label. I tell them to look closer at the label. It just lists what is in one serving and that the 20-ounce soda actually has three

servings. That surprises most people. I also show kids how to make their own tasty, sugar-free sodas with club soda and fresh fruit.”

She recommends creating portions to fit into what she calls The Four Directions Plate. The plate, divided into quarters, includes vegetables, fruit, legumes and grains.

Frank, a photographer and author who recently completed her doctoral dissertation at The University of New Mexico, has done research on traditional foods, particularly corn.

“The ancestral foods of corn, beans and squash did not cause diabetes,” she said. Health problems exploded with the addition of unhealthy fats and processed foods. “The U.S. government gave (Native peoples) Spam, which is loaded with fat and sodium. It’s time to reclaim an ancestral diet.”

As an educator, Frank often offers simple, healthy substitutes for staple ingredients. The Jemez Pueblo class made bread pudding using whole-wheat bread instead of the usual white bread. She also demonstrated how to thicken sauces without meat by using a blender. “People want the nonmeat stew to have the consistency of stew, not soup,” she said.

### Promoting fitness

Teaching fitness is also part of pueblo wellness initiatives. At Jemez Pueblo, Valerie Pecos, a health-education specialist who teaches kids from kindergarten to high school about a variety of health topics, advocates getting people moving.

“We do fitness testing in the schools twice per year. And those students who fail the test in the spring (usually because of obesity) are brought in for a special summer program,” Pecos said. Students go to nutrition classes,

but they also learn about fitness.

“We have about 30 kids, and we ride bikes from 9 to 11 a.m. every day around the pueblo. We ride about seven to 11 miles.” After a few weeks, she lets other youngsters join the bike ride. “We have some kids who want to come back and ride with us.”

Pecos also encourages biking for adults. She leads an adult bike club of about 15 members that pedal through the pueblo after 5 p.m. in the spring, summer and fall. When it gets dark earlier, several members ride three times a week during the noon hour. During the coldest months, they take a break, and Pecos encourages folks to use the pueblo’s fitness center.

“With some of the older adults, we had to show them a little bit about bike riding, but they find that it comes back quickly,” Pecos said. “We also have fun runs and walks at the pueblo. And it’s great to see grandparents walking along with the grandchildren.”



- Many pueblos offer health and wellness programs. Contact the individual pueblo governor’s offices for information.
- For more information about Tiwa Farms, visit <http://tiwafarms.blogspot.com/>. For more about Robert Mirabal, or to order a copy of *Believe in the Corn*, go to [www.Mirabal.com](http://www.Mirabal.com).
- For more information about Norma Naranjo’s catering company or cooking classes, go to [www.thefeastingplace.com](http://www.thefeastingplace.com).
- For information on catering or cooking classes taught by Lois Ellen Frank and Diné chef Walter Whitewater go to [www.redmesacuisine.com](http://www.redmesacuisine.com).
- \*To find locations and schedules for farmers’ markets go to [http://farmersmarketsnm.org/Farmers\\_Markets/Market\\_Locations](http://farmersmarketsnm.org/Farmers_Markets/Market_Locations).



There are two ways to turn corn into chicos. The first is to husk the ears and put them into an adobe horno oven to dry.



The second way to make chicos is to boil the ears then dry them on a rack. Pueblo people buy the Naranjo’s dried corn for feast day meals. “We’re known for that,” Norma Naranjo said.