

Grand Cruising, Cooking, Eating, *with an* Indigenous Flavour



A photograph of a blue and yellow riverboat named 'Grand River Belle' on a river. The boat has a white canopy with 'GRAND RIVER BELLE' written in blue letters. Several people are on board, and orange life preservers are visible along the railing. The background is a dense line of green trees under a blue sky with white clouds.

BY MIKE DAVIS

▲ Grand River Belle is one of the Grand River Dinner Cruises fleet.

Last summer, Grand River Cruises hosted a series of talks on the river, partnered by Six Nations Tourism. One of the talks was on Haudenosaunee foods given by Aicha Smith-Belghaba, an Indigenous chef with the gourmet culinary business Esha's Eats, and held on the Grand River Queen river boat. The day involved Haudenosaunee teachings, history of native foods, cooking stations, a fabulous meal that guests helped to cook, and a relaxing boat ride back to port to finish the day.

On one of the river talks, co-owner of Grand River Dinner Cruises, Blain Albin, outlined the day's itinerary at the boat launch near Caledonia on the Grand River. The Grand River Queen would travel downriver to Caledonia, then upriver to Chiefswood Park near Ohsweken and back to dock. Both Caledonia and Ohsweken are west of the Niagara Escarpment, and southwest of Hamilton. On board would be an introductory talk, a prayer, cooking the food, then enjoying the meal and more discussion.

Jodie Johnson of Six Nations Tourism (SNT) introduced the Haudenosaunee culture and gave a thanksgiving prayer in Native language. With roots in the Mohawk Wolf Clan and the country of Algeria, chef Aicha then explained the full breadth of the day's cooking and meal preparation. A very good storyteller, she gave an interesting lecture on culture, history and food. Cooking stations were set up with portable one-element stoves.

Indigenous Menu

There were three stations for preparing the food: the Three Sisters side dish, two for Sweetgrass Sweet Tea and one for Blueberry Sweetgrass barbecue sauce. The Three Sisters dish consists of corn, beans and squash. Sweetgrass Sweet Tea is made from wild Sweetgrass and the barbecue sauce combined blueberries and Sweetgrass flavour. Aicha put the guests to work at each station, chopping ingredients, mixing food, and cooking it on pans on the stoves.

"I enjoyed being part of the cooking experience," said Debra Seabok of Hamilton. "I liked the hands-on quality."



▲ Jodie Johnson of Six Nations Tourism and Blain Albin, co-owner of Grand River Dinner Cruises, at the dock.



▲ Aicha discussing the significance of corn.



An abridged version of a story told by Aicha:

How I like to do these workshops is I think about our traditional way of living in longhouses, how we all had our own roles and responsibilities, and it wasn't just for an individual family, it was for the collective benefit of our community. That's what we are doing today.

The Sky Mother came down to earth and created this land. The three sisters, Corn, Beans and Squash were sacred; the seeds came from the dirt from the Skyworld. They are sacred. So is all plant life, animal life, water, the air, the sun, the moon, all that is part of our system. Everything has a spirit that has to be respected and cared for. We are all connected and grow together. With the three sisters, the corn grows tall, the beans climb the corn, then the squash covers the ground and helps mitigate weeds and keep moisture in. The beans and squash replenish the soil, because the corn takes so much out. It is a representation of our culture, because we all do better when we are working together. If we are separate, things are harder. I want to bring everyone together to share the meal, to cook the meal.

Nixtamalization of corn is a process whereby lye-water solution is used to chemically change the corn to allow the nutrients to become more bioavailable to our bodies. Traditionally lye came from wood ash, which imparts calcium into the corn. Traditionally there were no Eurasian animals, such as cows and goats to milk, so calcium was from other sources, being plants and the

lying process. This super ancient way is still done today.

The corn that the Six Nations grow and use today is from heirloom seeds. Throughout colonization, food was used as a weapon. Colonizers burnt crops and orchards so they wouldn't have any food. They went beyond that and worked at destroying the seeds as well. So people would hide the seeds, risking their lives to protect their way of life. They were willing to sacrifice themselves for our future. Our food is not just something that we eat, it's very spiritual, and it's very sacred. Just like language, art, dance, singing, food is just important. It is the essence of Haudenosaunee culture and throughout the colonization and genocide, these things were strategically taken away to break people. Having all these things back is how we heal ourselves and move forward in a better way. In today's society there is a lot of separation from people, from place, from language, from each other, from land, from water. That is why we are able to destroy things because there is so much disconnection. My goal is always to connect people with each other, with food and with understanding. Food is healing and food is fun.



▲ Preparing the Three Sisters side dish, using Lyed Corn. Lyed Corn can be bought at Route 54 Variety & Gas in Six Nations.



▲ Blueberry Sweetgrass Barbecue sauce being prepared.



◀ The first course was Berry Caprese Salad.



◀ Grilled Turkey with Blueberry Sweetgrass Barbecue sauce, Wild Rice Medley and Three Sisters Side Dish.



Some parts of the meal had been prepared earlier by others, specifically berry Caprese salad, grilled turkey, wild rice, and chocolate chili raspberry tart for dessert. All the dishes worked together to give delicious enjoyment.

“I thought it was great,” said Brent Caspi of London. “A great learning experience. Food was matched to the culture. I want to explore more into natural food.”



▲ Guests being introduced to the main course by Aicha.

Six Nations Options

On the return to port, Jodie talked about the many Six Nations tourism options. SNT rents out 16 cabins on the Chiefswood park lands, offers kayak and Voyageur Canoe rentals, and provides native cultural experiences. Jodie continued with the history of some of the now-Six Nations Haudenosaunee peoples moving from upstate

New York, and described Mohawk chief Joseph Brant's interactions with Governor Sir Frederick Haldimand concerning original territory granted to the Six Nations.

The day had perfect sunny weather. From the boat's outside promenade, guests could experience the sights and sounds of the river with minimal engine noise. The water was calm, birds sang,



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▲ Kayakers on the Grand River using the Six Nations Tourism rental boats.



◀ Chocolate Chili Raspberry Tart.



◀ Captain Eva Smith at the helm.

and turtles basked on logs. It resembled Huckleberry Finn's time floating on a raft as the world drifts by, while fellow foodie graduates chatted with each other. It was a day very well spent.

"There was fantastic food, great stories, lots of good learning," said Lisa Abbott of Mississauga.

"I loved it," said Marilyn Hill of Ohswekin.

"Grand River Cruises' 2026 season will be running May 20 to October 9, offering

casual, dinner and educational options," says Dana Johnson, manager. "There are three dinner cruise boats with a maximum capacity of 49 passengers and all boats have an enclosed dining room, a promenade deck with seating that surrounds the dining area and washroom facilities that are wheelchair accessible." **NEV**

For more details, see grandrivercruises.ca/river-talks or call 800-847-3321.

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