

unity



Celebrating Food, Art & Culture

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From practical necessities to posh apparel

**INSIDE:**

Spirit, tradition imbue stunning works

Navajo chef's cookbook honors past, heralds future

*Unity is published in February (Black History Month), March (Women's History Month), May (Asian Pacific American Heritage Month), June (Pride Month), September (Hispanic Heritage Month) and November (Native American Heritage Month).*

# From practical necessities to posh apparel



Bobby Brower's clothing line, Arctic Luxe, is the first brand from Alaska represented at New York Fashion Week. Photo by Yves Brower

In 2005, Bobby Brower's mother brought home an incomplete parka for her to finish. The Alaska Native was intrigued by the possibilities: Her first-born, Nancy Itta, needed something warm to wear and her hometown's annual "Top of the World Baby Contest" was coming up.

Utqiagvik, Alaska, celebrates Fourth of July with the contest, a regalia competition for children under age 2. Children are clothed in traditional dress from Native Iñupiaq and judged on the craftspeople's sewing and design skills.

The idea of entering her daughter into the contest would propel Brower into becoming not only a skilled sewer but the savvy founder of a clothing line.

Like most students who grow up in the Iñupiaq culture, Brower was taught the technique of skin sewing. Her aunt, mother and grandmother showed her how to stitch together animal skins to make accessories and clothing needed to stay warm in the tundra. Temperatures reach negative 20 to 50 degrees in Utqiagvik, the northernmost community in the United States, during the winter months.

"It's survival to our people," Brower says. "Teachers start with little projects, like toys. When students get



Standing on the edge of the Arctic Ocean, clothing designer Bobby Brower, center, models one of the parkas she created. Brower is flanked by Heather Dingman, left, and Patricia Rice, who are also wearing Brower's designs. Photo by Yves Brower

to middle school level, they make a fur hat or mittens so they can go out hunting or to play outside. You'll only last for so long with regular mittens or gloves from the store."

Iñupiaq people fish, hunt and whale in the Arctic on flat land with no protection from the wind. Skin from beavers, sea otters and seals, as well as mouton sheepskin, line the mittens, hats and parkas. Mouton - made from lambskin hair - has been straightened, chemically treated and thermally set to produce a moisture-repellent finish.

"We're experts in keeping people warm," Brower says. "We'd make fur parkas and it was all about extreme warm gear. If you want to be traveling a long distance, you want a fur-lined hunting parka."

Although Brower saw the "Top of the World Baby Contest" as an opportunity to show off her talents, daughter Nancy didn't compete in the 2005 competition because Brower was still perfecting her sewing skills. She didn't feel ready, she says. However, Summer Itta, Brower's second child, competed in 2007 and 2008. Although Summer

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# Craftspeople help to preserve Cherokees' 'cultural DNA'



Billy Welch carves a mask at Hunting Boy Wood Carving. Photo courtesy of Blue Ridge Craft Trails

It's not unusual to see wood carver Billy Welch in the workshop adjacent to [Hunting Boy Wood Carving](#) in Robbinsville, a small town in Western North Carolina. Welch carves Cherokee clan masks with paulownia, a fast-growing hardwood tree not native to the United States but easily available in Robbinsville and surrounding areas. Sometimes he uses basswood, buckeye or cedar.

Welch learned to weave baskets from his grandmother and didn't start carving until after high school. He began with animals and then became passionate about the masks. "I like to do the masks more than anything," he says.

Welch grew up in the Snowbird area of the Qualla Boundary, territory held as a land trust by the U.S. government for the federally recognized Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, and is a member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. He's been an art teacher at Robbinsville High School for the past seven years.

The masks Welch creates represent the Seven Clans of the Cherokee: Bird, Blue, Deer, Long Hair, Paint, Wild Potato and Wolf. The colors on the masks correspond to each clan. "They're (the masks)



Billy Welch creates masks representing the Seven Clans of the Cherokee including Blue, pictured above. Photo courtesy of Blue Ridge Craft Trails



Mary Thompson cuts white oak for basket splints in Cherokee, North Carolina. Photo courtesy of Blue Ridge Craft Trails

representative of what you see, like a deer," he says. "Some of mine might be similar, but none the same."

Welch's store is one of 310 artist studios, galleries and arts organizations on the Blue Ridge Craft Trails, developed by the [Blue Ridge National Heritage Area](#). The trails connect visitors to artists and bring tourists to the region. "Our heritage area was established to preserve traditional and contemporary craft as a living tradition in Western North Carolina," explains Angie Chandler, executive director of the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area. "Craft is in our cultural DNA."

Cherokee native Mary Thompson is a featured basket weaver on the Blue Ridge Craft Trails. A member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, she specializes in making wall mats, and single- and double-weave baskets (two baskets, one within the other and woven together) using a type of grass found on riverbanks.

Thompson also creates Cherokee clothing, moccasins, pottery, shell carvings and accessories for baskets.

"I've been around it all my life," says Thompson. "I just picked it up."

# Spirit, tradition imbue stunning works

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The artists featured in this edition of *Unity* represent the traditional sense of being guided by the spirit world, and the importance of the spirit world to their work.



"Visionary" by Peter Boome

### PETER BOOME

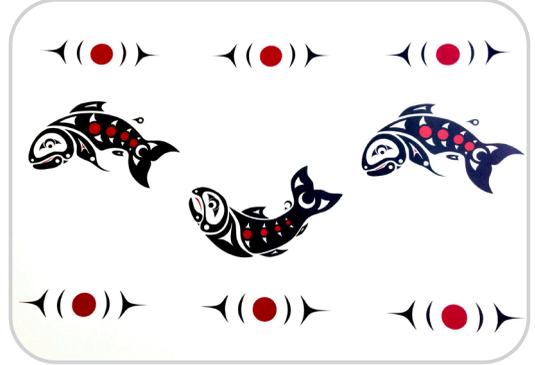
Coast Salish artist Peter Boome is a member of the Upper Skagit Tribe of Washington. He earned a liberal arts degree from Emerson State College in Olympia, Washington, and his J.D. from the University of Washington School of Law. Throughout his life, Boome says, he engaged in canoe journeys, potlatches (ceremonial feasts) and speaking with older Native American artists. All of these activities helped him to be a more integral part of his cultural community.

Boome works in various mediums specializing in printmaking of hand-pulled serigraphs. He says the subject matter of his work reflects his own life and experiences, and the design style and format are totally Coast Salish.

"Visionary" depicts a lone wolf looking over its shoulder. "In nature, lone wolves are instrumental in ensuring genetic and physical diversity of the species even though they are regarded in a negative manner," Boome explains.



"Titans" by Peter Boome



"Royalty" by Peter Boome

The thunderbird and a gray whale are preparing for battle in "Titans." This work represents stories of fierce battles between these two creatures that generated earthquakes and tsunamis.

"Royalty" portrays the traditional image of the king salmon. The design above and below the salmon depicts water.

"As an artist representing a distinct culture," says Boome, "there is a moral obligation to carry on the artistic tradition with the utmost care and respect. We must carry on this tradition by honoring the past, representing the present and laying the foundations for the future."



"Rainbow Dance" by Billy Rabbit

### BILLY RABBIT

Billy Rabbit is a citizen of the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma. He was born in Casper, Wyoming, where he says seeing the changing hues in the sky influenced his love of color. Although he was the only Cherokee student in his school, he was exposed



"Evening Breeze" by Billy Rabbit

to the culture of the Plains tribes. He had no formal training in art, aside from a two-week class in grade school. After high school, he was accepted to the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico, but enlisted in the Army to serve in the Vietnam War instead. Following the war, Rabbit began painting full time.

"The spirit world is alive and I envision that world as being full of amazing colors," says Rabbit, "and I have always loved color."

That love is especially evident in "Rainbow Dance," which features bright reds, oranges and yellows serving as a backdrop to the archetypal figures of Native American men dressed in traditional headdress.

Rabbit describes his "Evening Breeze" as "if you could see the wind, it might look like this."

"December Morning Mist" depicts a Plains warrior in his finest regalia. Behind him is the spirit of his ancestors who watch over him daily.



"December Morning Mist" by Billy Rabbit

"Art is a process of sharing one's thoughts and soul," says Rabbit, "and if it resonates with the viewer, I feel complete and spiritually fulfilled." Rabbit's work has been shown in numerous invitational exhibits including The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C. He also was one of 100 American artists who was invited by President Ronald Reagan to decorate a wooden egg for the annual Easter Egg Roll in 1981.

## CHRIS COOK

Chris Cook was born in the fishing community of Alert Bay, British Columbia, on Cormorant Island. He is a member of the Namgis tribe of the Kwakwaka'wakw Nation. In his youth, Cook was an avid sketch artist. Cook discovered metalwork in high school and developed a love for it. After graduation he studied silversmithing at Camosun College, Victoria British Columbia, and merged his love of art, culture and metal.



"The Hummingbird Song" by Chris Cook

Cook's jewelry combines Kwaguilth design with refined metalworking skills that allows him to be more versatile with his creations.

Cook says "The Hummingbird Song" came from his love for fabricating metal. The necklace's abalone shell historically represents wealth.

Cook states that "Medi-Alert Hummingbird" was not the first bracelet he created, but it certainly was his most challenging. "In creating pieces like this," he says, "I merge the old world of traditional images with new images such as the medical alert symbol."



"Medi-Alert Hummingbird" by Chris Cook

Cook's "Wolf Abalone" earrings are a tribute to a late teacher, whose clan was the wolf.



"Wolf Abalone" by Chris Cook

"My upbringing in my traditional culture was that of song, dance, language and history, and I knew I had to deepen my understanding of the art of my heritage," says Cook. "As I spent time with my traditional teachers, they began to share deeper aspects of our culture and heritage, which is reflected in my work."

# Navajo chef's cookbook honors past, heralds future



"What's authentic to me, a Navajo, may not be authentic to another Navajo," says Chef Freddie Bitsoie. Photo by Mark Woodward

When COVID-19 shut down museums and restaurants in March 2020, Freddie Bitsoie was the executive chef at the Mitsitam Native Foods Café in the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C. Bitsoie had been at the café operated by Restaurant Associates, a Compass Group-affiliated company, for five years when it closed to meet the federal regulations for the pandemic.

As a member of the Navajo Nation, Bitsoie was the first Native chef to work at the café. He developed recipes for the menu, surprising staff and guests with the dishes he created: They wondered if the dishes were truly Native. In the past, the menu included European foods with Native American ingredients. It took time for people to get used to Bitsoie's changes.

"The café had five stations," says Bitsoie. "Each station had its own identity, and they were all Native American dishes."

Although Bitsoie was born in Utah, he moved with his family to Arizona, New Mexico and Utah. They lived on and off the Navajo reservation. He settled in Gallup, New Mexico, in 1997, and the city remains his home base.

His path to cooking wasn't linear. Bitsoie first attended college to study art history and anthropology at the University of New Mexico.

When he was a junior, a professor asked if he realized all his papers were about food, from a cultural and historical perspective. After several weeks of conversations, Bitsoie left the university and enrolled at the former Scottsdale Culinary Institute in Arizona. He graduated in 2007 and interned at J.W. Marriott in Phoenix.

"It was the best \$8 an hour," he remembers. "I can't believe how wonderful it was working in a kitchen. It was so much fun."

Before joining the National Museum of the American Indian, Bitsoie launched his own company. For seven years, he lectured about Native American food at universities. He also trained staff at Native American casinos to help them cook better and control costs.

Bitsoie's cookbook, "New Native Kitchen: Celebrating Modern Recipes of the American Indian," was released in November 2021. He has spent 2022 traveling to book signings, literary festivals and release parties since the pandemic delayed Bitsoie's ability to promote the book when it was released. In November 2022, he will participate in events highlighting Native American Heritage Month.

Working at Mitsitam Native Foods Café helped him form ideas for his cookbook. He realized it would confuse people if he created a cookbook using words like "authentic" and "traditional."

"What's authentic to me, a Navajo, may not be authentic to another Navajo," he says. "People are so attached to how someone significant in their family cooked. I decided to write these recipes and make them modern."

The cookbook includes at least 130 recipes, all written by Bitsoie. It's arranged in courses: soups, salads, vegetable sides, sweets and proteins. Although desserts are not a Native American concept, Bitsoie includes bread puddings and smoothies in the sweets section, which are part of the culture. Protein recipes include bison and rabbit.

None of the recipes include dairy and only one uses flour. "It really does stay true to what Native American cuisine is," he says. "It's probably the first Native American book that talks about how Native American food is moving forward, rather than about preserving culture and ancestral knowledge."

Each recipe is accompanied with a story about how the dish was created. "There are anecdotes with each recipe about how each recipe was created," Bitsoie explains, "or how it relates to me or even how I acquired the ingredients."

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# Advocate of foraging, traditional foods

Twila Cassadore remembers the hurt she felt when other students made fun of the traditional foods she brought from home for lunch. It wasn't unusual for her to bring berries, fungi, nuts or roots, items found on the San Carlos Apache Reservation in Southeastern Arizona, where she and her family lived.

Students labeled her poor because she didn't have store-bought snacks. "I'd always thought it was normal until I went to school," says Cassadore. "I realized people didn't grow up the same way."

Cassadore's father was an electrician and her mother was a teacher. The family always cultivated a 1- to 2-acre garden and raised livestock. "They (parents) grew up foraging and harvesting," she says. "We planted a large majority of our food. We did a lot of hunting and fishing."

The experience at school changed Cassadore's mindset for 30 years. For most of her early adult life, she bought processed meals and purchased her food in grocery stores.

Fifteen years ago, Cassadore reconnected with foraging and growing her own food. She realized if she didn't teach others about traditional foods, all the skills she learned as a child - foraging and growing her own food and cooking with family members - would be lost. "It's my mission now to (reintroduce) a lot of our traditional food ways back into the community," Cassadore says.



Twila Cassadore, the Traditional Western Apache Diet Project's program director, trains educators and health care professionals on the San Carlos Apache Reservation about traditional foods. Photo by Zee Peralta

In 2013, she joined the Traditional Western Apache Diet Project, a program started by elders (wisdom-keepers) on the San Carlos Apache Reservation who were concerned about losing the ceremony, food, language, prayers and songs of their culture.

As the project's program assistant, Cassadore focuses on introducing traditional foods into the eating habits of the San Carlos Apache Tribe. She collaborates with the education, language, health and social departments as well as with farmers and cooperatives within the Apache region. Her message about foraging, hunting and growing food connects to the history of the land. These days she mostly trains others who can spread the information and message about traditional foods to a larger audience. "There's only one Twila," she says.

Cassadore is still mindful of the labels people put upon those who don't purchase their food from a store. But she's been pleased when students are surprised by what they find in nature and can eat. "Today, you are seeing more young people embracing the traditional foods," she says. "I see the expression on their faces. I tell them, 'It grows around us.'"

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# From practical necessities to posh apparel

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didn't win, the competition inspired Brower to continue learning to sew and practice designing parkas. By 2010, Brower's son, Noah Itta, placed third in "Top of the World" and received first place in the Native Baby Regalia Contest for World Eskimo-Indian Olympics in Fairbanks in 2010. "My skills really improved," Brower says.

With this win, Brower launched a clothing business called [Arctic Luxe](#), originally [Hallelujah Designs](#), in 2010. Now living in Anchorage with her four children, she sells her handmade parkas at pop-up shops, the Charlotte Jensen Native Arts Market in Anchorage and online. Her kids help with designing the parkas and working at the Saturday flea markets.

"I cut out all the pieces," Brower says. "I sew everything together. I handmade the ruffs (fur lining around the hood) on top of the parka and the trim on the bottom."

In 2021, Brower applied as an independent designer through [Flying Solo](#) to participate in New York Fashion Week in 2022. Flying Solo supports small business owners in the fashion industry by providing a venue to showcase their designs and give them the exposure they may not get on their own. Brower was chosen for a slot: She had a year to design and make parkas for the models to wear on the runway and fundraise for the expenses the weeklong event would entail.



Bobby Brower's creations include these Converse-style shoes. Photo courtesy of Bobby Brower

Arctic Luxe's presence, a company owned by an Alaskan Native, in NYFW is a big deal; Brower says she might be the first from her hometown to participate in the show. "It's overwhelming, but my kids see me working really hard," she says. "They see there are rewards for doing what you love and believe in."

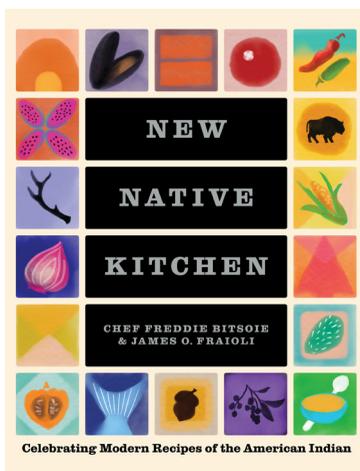
In February 2022, eight of Brower's handmade parkas were featured at an event space in SoHo during NYFW. Two parkas were sold and a men's seal-skin coat will be included in "[To Keep Them Warm: The Alaska Native Parka](#)" at the Museum of International Folk Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico, from May 21, 2023 through April 7, 2024. "The (NYFW) show helped me increase the value of my work," she says. "I risked it all to go there."

## Cookbook honors past, heralds future

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The dishes are meant to be accessible to all people, Native or not. Bitsoie added wine to some of the soups and stews, even though it's not a usual ingredient in Native American recipes. He wanted to attract a larger audience: The couple living in New York City who have never tried a Native dish or a Native family in the Midwest who want something that tastes like home, but even better, he says.

"New Native Kitchen" is available online at Abrams, Amazon, Barnes & Noble, IndieBound and Powells.



**On the cover:** Clothing designer and Alaska Native Bobby Brower. Photo by Yves Brower. Articles on pages 2, 3, 6 and 7 by Vanessa Infanzon. Article on pages 4 and 5 by Winona Addison.

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