

Flora Intro Podcast Transcript

Thomas Moore (host):

Hi, and welcome to Elders – Words of Wisdom, a podcast from the National Resource Center for Alaska Native Elders at UAA. On today's episode, I'm very excited to introduce Flora Deacon, an Alaska Native Traditional Foods chef who's going to be working with us to create recipes for our website and also help us produce videos and podcasts on various traditional foods, their cultural relevance and how to prepare them.

Flora is originally from Shageluk, Alaska but moved to Grayling with her family when she was nine.

For Flora, food has always been a passion.

Flora Deacon:

I've always loved food from the time I could remember. I was always interested in how to prepare food, but I was always wanting to know more.

Thomas Moore (host):

After her kids were grown, she decided to pursue her career in the culinary field. She applied to a school and was turned down, but that didn't stop her. She found a job working as a baker at the Grand Aleutian Hotel in Unalaska.

Flora Deacon:

I'd never worked in a professional kitchen before, I'd never even set foot in one. Not a clue what was going on in there, but I started doing really simple things like making muffins and really easy things.

Thomas Moore (host):

Flora worked part time on the weekends for six months until she decided to apply for culinary school again and this time, she got in.

Flora Deacon:

Everything was really new to me, but at the same time I loved it. I really felt that this was where I'm supposed to be.

Thomas Moore (host):

Flora graduated in 1999 and since she had little experience outside of culinary school, she took a job working seasonally on the North Slope.

Flora Deacon:

And I was building up my own skills as a cook. I really set out to make the pizza, make the best lasagna, make the best whatever it was and so I got really good at cooking food.

Thomas Moore (host):

Working seasonally became tiresome for Flora and while working in Adak, she got wind of an exciting opportunity.

Flora Deacon:

Actually, my roommate told me that they're looking for people for Antarctica and that really got me excited because I really wanted to go somewhere else. I wanted something new, what do they have down in Antarctica?

Thomas Moore (host):

After applying, she heard back a month or two later from the company asking her if she'd like the job. And she accepted.

Flora Deacon:

I just started to discover through that job, that there are people out there that really enjoy healthy food.

Thomas Moore (host):

After years of cooking in settings where healthy options didn't really exist, this new opportunity was very welcoming for Flora.

Flora Deacon:

People that really wanted to eat bread with nuts and whole grains. I made vegetable lasagna one time and it was all gone in a matter of minutes.

Thomas Moore (host):

Her experience in Antarctica changed the way she looked at food and she really liked cooking healthier. After three seasons, she returned to Alaska for good and started working at camps again.

Flora Deacon:

It was becoming increasingly hard for me to sacrifice my entire summer. Leave in May when things were just getting green and then coming back in August or September and it was Fall time, and I'd been working 12 hours a day and were no breaks, no day off or anything.

Thomas Moore (host):

Flora knew she wanted to cook healthier foods and even thought about teaching. In 2009, she connected with some researchers at the University of Alaska Fairbanks working on a nutrition project.

Flora Deacon:

Sarah, who was the project manager, looked at me and said, "we're looking for a chef" and I said, 'holy cow', because she hired me pretty much on the spot. So, I started traveling to Fairbanks from, this was Fall of '09 to when the grant ran out in May of 2013. These students would come from all over Alaska and I would create the menu, and I would go shopping. I would have class once in a while on traditional food or how to prepare something that I wanted to show them.

Thomas Moore (host):

It was that time at UAF that strengthened Flora's view on food.

Flora Deacon:

I mean, working in Antarctica sort of got the ball rolling but this program really changed. I did not want to go back to cooking for people anymore. I wanted to just teach.

Thomas Moore (host):

Flora began putting herself out there, managing to get contracts across the state like at Dillingham Hospital and with ANTHC working on their "Store Outside Your Day" video series, where she went to various villages and prepared meals based on their traditional foods.

Flora Deacon:

I'm fully entrenched now in this healthy way of looking at food and adapting recipes.

Thomas Moore (host):

As Flora's relationship with food evolved, her resolve strengthened. She started to understand how important traditional foods could be for physical and mental wellness.

Flora Deacon:

It's a savior. The native people really should go back to their traditional food. You can even see evidence of that. If you look at pictures of different native people back in the '50's maybe even the 60's, and you see their teeth. They have the straightest, whitest teeth and then of course that changes as time goes on, because their diets have started to go away from traditional food.

Thomas Moore (host):

The changes in diet also brought other health issues such as earlier development of diabetes, along with obesity, heart disease, and strokes.

Flora Deacon:

So, I'm looking at traditional food like, it's going to save you. It really will.

Thomas Moore (host):

Along with general benefits for all Alaska Native people, Flora noticed, too how important traditional foods are for elders.

Flora Deacon:

It's like a sense of self. They relate to it -- it brings them comfort. It's like home.

Thomas Moore (host):

One of our goals here at the NRC-ANE is to provide tools for elders and caretakers that assist them in implementing more traditional foods into meal plans and programs.

Flora Deacon:

I would really like to see more people preparing our traditional food for the elders, because I understand where they're coming from. They're pretty much stuck in the nursing homes and they have to eat whatever's put in front of them. They may not get very many visitors because their families are probably not living in Anchorage and so all they have to look forward to is the food that is given them. If they were given food that, they knew that this stew was made of moose meat, that would definitely comfort them and I'm sure it would just make them happy.

Thomas Moore (host):

Flora has found her footing as a traditional food chef in Alaska and if it's not clear, she's settled on what her ultimate goal is.

Flora Deacon:

I teach people to cook and I teach them to cook traditional food and it's to help them be more healthy.

Thomas Moore (host):

Thanks to Flora Deacon for chatting with me for this episode. The NRC-ANE is very excited to be working with her on our traditional food series which will include recipe development, podcasts, and food prep videos, all coming in the near future. We hope you enjoyed this episode – stay up to date with NRC-ANE news by going to our website or following us on Facebook and Instagram. Until next episode, I'm Thomas Moore, thanks for listening and I hope you have a great day!