

# Eating Caribou, Eating Sovereignty

Tiffany Ayalik

As told to Jessica Davey-Quantick

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Tiffany Ayalik travelled with her production team across the NWT to learn about wild food, its cultural significance and the people who harvest it as part of the television series Wild Kitchen. Born in Yellowknife with family ties to Kugluktuk, she is an Inuk performer, musician and storyteller, who encounters caribou in many different ways—including on her plate.

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## WHAT IS FOOD SOVEREIGNTY?

“Food sovereignty and accessibility is a topic that I’m quite passionate about and have been very involved with even before I knew what the terms food sovereignty meant. Coming from a very active hunting family, and culturally being Inuk, our relationship to food was definitely directly linked to our survival. [Food sovereignty means] recognizing the inherent political choices, whether we’re conscious of them or not, these issues are connected to. Who has food, who doesn’t have food? Who is preparing and gathering or hunting or growing that food? Things that we do every day that we don’t necessarily think about if we’re in a more privileged position and how can we make sure that everyone is getting enough to eat?”

“Sharing food and sharing abundance is definitely an Inuit value, and making sure that sharing what you have with the community, especially with people who don’t have access to food. I think that especially given the high cost of groceries and you know, not having the freshest things shipped up to the Arctic, you know the best food is what is local. And I always joke about before the 100 mile diet was trendy, that’s how most people ate in the North!”

“Caribou has been an integral part of my diet, of my family’s diet. Especially now that I’m a city Inuk living in Vancouver I definitely don’t have access to the traditional foods that I want but can still support and see the importance of helping people maintain that and supporting hunters as best I can.”

“Having access to traditional foods is not only a way to feed yourself but Inuit are so brilliant in their ability to have teachings and knowledge, not just about the animal themselves but everything that’s connected to that food item. Understanding that culturally, traditionally there were many Inuit groups that would say you can’t return to a hunting area or a camping area if you could see any signs of human activity to give the land enough time to regenerate and heal, even from a very modest footprint.”

“We were the first herd monitors. We were the first census keepers. Part of the system. And I think it’s a very western notion to separate humans from nature. We are a part of nature, so to have this idea that somehow we are separate allows us to do all sorts of horrible things because we don’t look at ourselves as part of the system when we really really are.”

“Looking at all of things, for example a caribou can offer and does offer to an Inuit family: that’s a food source, that’s a clothing source, that’s a classroom, that’s teaching people how to sew, that’s teaching people how to make tools. 50 different things it gets used for, and all the traditional legends caribou stars in, all of the songs that are about caribou. It’s not just a food thing you know: when you look at it holistically, it’s a huge sort of cornerstone of our people. Especially for communities like Baker Lake who are landlocked communities, traditionally a huge source of their food is coming from caribou because they’re not ocean people, they’re inland. So just the concentric rings of influence and the importance that the caribou has for us is just sort of never ending.”

“So I think broadly food sovereignty means a person’s or a community’s right or ability to access culturally relevant and healthy food on a daily basis. So if somebody is food insecure, it means that they don’t have access to reliable, healthy, culturally relevant sources of food for them and their communities.”

## **WHY IS WILD GAME LIKE CARIBOU SO IMPORTANT, IN 2023? SOUTHERNERS SOMETIMES WONDER WHY NORTHERNERS CAN’T JUST SWITCH TO FARMED MEAT, LIKE BEEF, OR PLANT BASED DIETS.**

“[Beef] is a pretty, I don’t know, diet coke substitute! That’s a very simplistic and reductive solution that in the long term isn’t better for our communities. The health toll, the carbon footprint, the economic toll, the cost of shipping- by the time beef gets up there, what’s the throw away rate? What has gone bad in the meantime, how safe is that meat? And I feel like that’s such a shortsighted and overly simplistic solution that people like to throw around. In the same breath people say ‘oh plant based diet’ and people don’t understand, especially if they’re coming from a urban context or a southern urban context, just telling a whole indigenous community, try and be plant based, how incredibly colonial that is.”

“That mentality is what I and many people call ‘colonial veganism’. That’s just the new shape, the new type of colonialism disguised as some sort of environmentalism or animal rights. It’s actually just furthering colonization of Indigenous peoples.”

## **IS EATING CARIBOU RESISTANCE?**

“Being allowed to have meaningful engagement in the management of caribou herds, in the decision making around how to harvest, in these non-tokenized roles: Inuit must continue to have a seat at the table for these conversations, while recognizing the millennia of conservation Inuit have been doing. And we are not the ones who are drilling for oil. We are not the ones who are doing destructive mining practices. We are not the ones who are blasting our ocean floor with sonar and wreaking havoc on marine life.”

“So to recognize that we were doing a pretty good job of herd management up until colonization and industrialization came to the Arctic, and there are many amazing Inuit hunters who are doing really amazing

work in that area. It just needs to continue and it needs to be listened to when we tell people and development and government what is best for our lands and our bellies and our kids and how we feed them.”

### HOW DO YOU LIKE TO EAT CARIBOU?

“Oh my goodness! My favourite way is called quaq. It’s just straight up frozen caribou dipped in China Lily soy sauce if you’re a traditionalist, or Kikkoman if you’re fancy. And there is nothing better than the pure taste of that. Every time I eat it I just feel like I’m going to cry because I miss having it as a regular part [of my diet]. Food is emotional! It’s nostalgic and it instantly transports you to various times in your life. So that’s my favourite straight up way to have it. Another way to have it is caribou dry meat, mipku. Dried caribou in the spring and fall before it’s too warm, and it’s nice and windy, with butter and salt. Nothing better. So those are my two favourite ways of having it.”

### HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT MORE MODERN TAKES LIKE CARIBOU AND KD?

“Amazing! I love a fusion. I think it’s so fun. We’re people living in 2023, and we have international palettes and ways of cross-pollination with other cultures, so I love it when traditional food can be reimaged into these spaces where it’s more accessible for other people. It’s just such a versatile food. It can be kind of hard to work with if you’re thinking it’s like beef. It definitely isn’t. The grain is a lot finer, so I think it’s more close to venison. And it’s super lean so it’s easy to burn, and it’s easy to make tough if you don’t know what you’re doing. So reach out to your grannies and your aunties who know what they’re doing and ask for some advice!”

### DO YOU HOPE FUTURE GENERATIONS GET TO ENJOY THESE RECIPES TOO?

“I hope that future generations will be able to enjoy the abundance of caribou that we did when we were younger. That by the time they have kids they’ll be well on their way to enjoying and imagining into this future for caribou, the massive healthy herd populations. And the ability to look back at the time we’re in with dwindling herd numbers and say ‘oh my goodness isn’t it amazing that we’ve brought it back’. So it’s less about the dishes and more about the beauty and the space where everyone is enjoying that abundance.”



**"TUK TUK STRUT"**

Tiffany Ayalik

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**Tiffany Ayalik** Tiffany Ayalik is a multidisciplinary artist from Yellowknife, NT, whose work focuses on storytelling through the mediums of performance, music and filmmaking. After receiving her Diploma in Acting from Red Deer College, she continued her studies at the University of Alberta, graduating with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in acting. Her theatre credits include *Zhaboonigan* in *The Rez Sisters* (The Belfry Theatre), *Sedna* in *The Legend of Sedna* (BAM Collective) and *Bobby* in *The Big League* (Manitoba Theatre for Young People), among others, and she sang as a cultural representative for the Northwest Territories at the 2010 Olympics. She has travelled across Canada and performed in Greenland, Iceland, Norway, Finland and in Europe. Ayalik also lends her vocal talents to the musical duo PIQSIQ and is a member of the Juno Award winning *Quantum Tangle*, whose album *Tiny Hands* won Indigenous Album of the Year in 2017. When she isn’t touring, performing or composing, Ayalik is a guest faculty member at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, where she works with musicians, dancers and storytellers.

## RECIPES

### DIANE BAILES' FRIED CARIBOU WITH GARLIC NOODLES (DELINE, NWT)

#### INGREDIENTS

- 1lb caribou
- 1 TBSP steak seasoning
- Flour
- Oil
- Salt and Pepper
- Spaghetti noodles
- Frozen or fresh peas
- ¼ cup softened butter
- 2 cloves garlic
- 1 TBSP parsley
- Parmesan cheese

#### METHOD

Cut caribou into stir fry strips. Add the steak seasoning and let marinate.

In a bowl, mix the flour with the salt and pepper. Add the caribou strips and coat well.

In a cast iron pan, heat oil on medium high. Add the caribou strips and cook in batches.

Meanwhile, fill a pot with salted water. Bring it to a boil and add spaghetti noodles. When they are al dente, drain and add a handful of fresh or frozen peas.

Fry the butter with the chopped garlic. Mix the noodles, the garlic butter, and the parsley. Top with caribou and serve sprinkled with parmesan.

*"Caribou is so important in our daily lives at all levels. Caribou has been a staple in my family's life growing up in Deline. I love cooking with wild games and mostly every popular recipe I use is caribou rather than beef. Of course my kids loved having drymeat when they were growing up! Now that I have my own family, me and my husband have given opportunities to our children. They all have been part of hunting caribou and have had their first hunts."*

## SALLY TAKOLIK'S CARIBOU SOUP (TALOYOAK, NUNAVUT)

### INGREDIENTS

*Author's note: "I don't usually measure while making stew so these are estimates."*

- Caribou, cubed
- Onions
- Carrots
- Celery
- 2TBSP soya sauce
- 1 TBSP Maggi seasoning
- ¼ cup flour
- Beef OXO stock cubes
- Barley or Fusili pasta

### METHOD

In a pot, fry the caribou with the onions, carrots, and celery. Add soya sauce, Maggi season, and any other seasonings to taste. Add the flour.

Add water to the pot with the meat. Add Beef Oxo according to the directions.

Add in the Fusili pasta or barley. Boil and simmer about an hour, or longer if you want the meat to be nice and tender.

When soup is done, add in 4-5 TBSP of butter for more flavour.

Serve with bannock.

*"I grew up eating caribou, and love it. You can feed many people with the caribou soup."*