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Indigenous language translation by Sunny Dooley.

Céline Gounder: Reagan Wytsalucy didn't know if she would find what she was looking for. She and her husband were walking along the top of a mesa in northwest New Mexico. All they had to go off of was a faint memory her husband had from when he was a kid. Growing up, his family had a ranch near Zuni Pueblo.

Reagan Wytsalucy: He was riding his horse up at their cattle ranch, and he was just kind of exploring the area. And he came across this walkway entrance down off of the top of the mesa.

Céline Gounder: Reagan's husband was curious. He followed the crevice down — on foot — stepping carefully on a path into the mouth of a canyon hidden under the edge of the mesa. He couldn't believe what he saw. A secret orchard. It was full of peach trees.

Reagan Wytsalucy: When he went down there, they were actually blooming at the time.

Céline Gounder: Their branches were covered in small violet and pink flowers.

Reagan Wytsalucy: There were maybe, like, 40 trees.

Céline Gounder: But these weren't like other peach trees. The trees were round and bushy, like a shrub. Their bark worn smooth by the wind and the sand blowing in the canyon. These were Southwest peaches ...

Reagan Wytsalucy: The peaches are white-fleshed. They are very small, like an apricot. I would say it's very sweet. It's juicy. I kind of would say that they tasted almost like a musk melon flavor.

Céline Gounder: The Southwest peach is hard to find these days. But there is a long history of Native people farming peaches in this region. The Zuni and Hopi had orchards. So did Reagan's ancestors, the Diné.

Reagan Wytsalucy: We didn't just have corn, beans and squash; we had a lot of fruit crops as well. There's peaches. There's apricots. There's wild plums. There's just an abundance of different food crops that we actually utilized in our diet that aren't recognized.

Céline Gounder: When Reagan and her husband were searching for the lost orchard, she was a master's student at Utah State University. She was studying the history and genetics of the peach. Her goal was to find the few wild trees left and rekindle interest in the fruit. She hoped the Southwest peach could one day find its way back into Native kitchens.

But that day on the mesa, finding the orchard seemed like a long shot.

Reagan Wytsalucy: So, we went — and I actually had two of my advisers with me at the time — and we just kept walking back and forth along the mesa cliff trying to find the one way down into that area where the orchard was.

Céline Gounder: Hours passed.

Reagan Wytsalucy: We were looking and we kept walking, and then I hear my husband say, “I found it!”

Céline Gounder: The stone pathway was rugged. It had been washed out years ago. But it was still there.

Reagan Wytsalucy: And so we went and we walked down and ... there were only two trees left from what he remembered when he was 8. The excitement that I felt was just ... overbearing. That, you know, this is almost a pathway that I feel has been divinely guided.

Céline Gounder: The Southwest peach isn't the only Indigenous food disappearing. Native foodways of hunting, fishing, gathering, and farming have been under threat since the arrival of Europeans. Forced relocations and, later, highly processed foods fundamentally reshaped the diet of many Indigenous people.

The impact is real. Declines in Native farming and ranching have contributed to more sedentary lifestyles. And a lack of access to fresh, healthy foods all contribute to obesity and other food-related health issues. By contrast, the peach tells a story of resilience. There may only have been a few trees left in that orchard ... but they were still standing.

Reagan Wytsalucy: So it's almost just a way of saying, you know, we're still here as a people. Despite everything that's occurred, we are still here.

Céline Gounder: In this episode, we're going to hear how colonization transformed Native foodways in the United States.

Martin Reinhardt: We were seen as the enemy, and so we were fed like prisoners of war.

Céline Gounder: And how Reagan and others are reclaiming their food traditions to improve the health of their communities.

Reagan Wytsalucy: It's not just about the peaches. It's about restoring the people, restoring the memory, restoring the family connections that have been lost.

Céline Gounder: I'm Dr. Céline Gounder and this is *American Diagnosis*.

[*Music out*]

Céline Gounder: Reagan Wytsalucy, the Diné Native foods expert, is from Gallup, New Mexico. It's just outside the Navajo Nation.

Reagan Wytsalucy: My clans are Naakai Dine'é, which is the Mexican Clan, and I was born for Tséńíjikiní, which is the Honeycomb Clan People, or Cliff Dwelling People. My paternal grandfather on my mother's side is Bilagáana or, in other terms, white or Anglo. And then my paternal grandfather on my father's side is from the Tódich'ii'nii Clan, which is one of the four first clans of the Navajo people, and it's the Bitter Water Clan.

NARRATION: Reagan's father is Roy Talker.

Roy Talker: My name is Roy Talker and I was born for Kinłichii'nii, for Tsé nįjikiní and Naaneesht'ézhi Tábaahí. They're my grandfather on my mom's side and Tódich'ii'nii is on my dad's side.

In translation, I was born as a Red House, born for the Black Street People or the Honeycomb People. My mom's side were Zuni Edgewater, and my dad's side is the Bitter Water Clan.

Céline Gounder: Roy grew up on the Navajo Nation. He remembers hunting rabbits and eating foods like squash, corn, beans, and the Southwest peach.

Roy Talker: When I was growing up we didn't have a whole lot of sweets, and so it was like a treat to us.

Céline Gounder: At 6 years old, Roy remembers sneaking down into the canyons to pick the fruit off the trees.

Roy Talker: It was nice to have a pocket full of either apples, peaches, plums, or, you know, stuff like that in your pocket, so you can munch on it.

Céline Gounder: The peaches were eaten fresh or boiled. If there was a big harvest they would preserve the peaches by drying them in the sun.

Roy Talker: They would take a couple of handfuls and put it in water, rehydrate it, cook it, and that's the way we ate it.

Céline Gounder: Roy traces their family's connection to the peach back to the 1860s ... a time when the very existence of the Diné people was under threat.

In 1860s, the U.S. military was at war with the Diné and other tribes in the region. The U.S. military intentionally targeted their food sources. It was a scorched-earth campaign.

Reagan Wytsalucy: So all of their annual crops or vegetable plants, everything that they had, their livestock, a lot of it was getting slaughtered. And among that was also the fruit orchards in Canyon de Chelly.

Céline Gounder: Canyon de Chelly was a Diné stronghold. But it was also the breadbasket of the region. If the U.S. military could decimate the area, they could force the Diné, and other tribes, to surrender.

Roy Talker: They say that there were over a thousand peach trees down in there.

Céline Gounder: According to a first-person account of the attack by a U.S. captain, more than 4,000 trees were destroyed. Many were forced to flee. A Diné headman named Hoskinini led a group north, near Navajo Mountain, Utah.

Roy Talker: There are stories based on him where people say that he was actually the one that planted the orchard down in the canyon.

Céline Gounder: Roy and Reagan trace their roots — and their connection to the peach — back to Hoskinini.

Reagan Wytsalucy: They were able to escape and go up to the top, and then come back down at night and get their food supply to continue to hide out and harvest fruit off the trees.

Céline Gounder: Many did not escape. With food supplies decimated, many Diné had no choice but to surrender. They were rounded up and force-marched some 400 miles in the middle of winter to Fort Sumner, New Mexico. They and other Indigenous people were held in an internment camp at Bosque Redondo. It became known as “The Long Walk.”

Conditions were brutal at Bosque Redondo. Cut off from their crops and livestock, malnutrition and starvation were constant threats.

Diné leaders signed the Treaty of Bosque Redondo with the U.S. government in 1868. The treaty ended open war between the two groups. But the price was high. During four years of internment at Bosque Redondo, some 2,500 Diné, Mescalero Apache, and other Indigenous people held there died.

Part of the treaty allowed the Diné to return to their homeland. It established the reservation that became the Navajo Nation. But the home they returned to would not be as they left it. The Diné would replant their corn. Grow their flocks of sheep. Tend to the peaches. But those years of internment altered their diets as well.

Martin Reinhardt: And then, as part of that process, those things carried forward into this transitional diet that was really bad for Indigenous peoples.

Céline Gounder: This is Martin Reinhardt.

Martin Reinhardt: My name is Dr. Martin Reinhardt and I'm a professor of Native American studies at Northern Michigan University. I am Anishinaabe Ojibwe, a citizen of the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians here in Michigan.

Céline Gounder: The U.S. military's attacks on Diné foodways were not unique.

Martin Reinhardt: They would kill the buffalo. They would make it hard for us to find our fish or to access the fish. They would destroy our wild rice fields. They would cut down the maple trees.

Céline Gounder: The Diné were able to negotiate the return to their homeland. But many tribes could not.

Martin Reinhardt: They would remove Indigenous peoples from their traditional homelands, put them on reservations that were essentially like prisons. And then, if they were lucky enough to be fed, the federal government would provide, usually, things that have had a really ill effect on us.

Céline Gounder: Things like flour, white sugar, salt, and lard.

Martin Reinhardt: The original idea was that they would give us the scraps, you know, the bulk food scraps from the military. We were seen as the enemy. And so we were fed like prisoners of war.

Céline Gounder: Tribes that were able to negotiate treaties with the U.S. government often included provisions guaranteeing food rations.

These treaty obligations from the 1800s have a legacy that reaches all the way to the 1970s. The Food Stamp Act of 1977 established the current system of food support to Native people. Bulk foods like canned meat and vegetables and other mostly processed foods were distributed to participating tribes. These were known as commodity foods.

Martin remembers eating meals made with commodity foods — or “commods” — as a kid.

Martin Reinhardt: You know, commodity day was an exciting day. On the day you got commods you had more choice, and we would make foods that we weren't able to make since last month.

Céline Gounder: One of the first commodity food items to go, he says, was the commodity cheese.

Martin Reinhardt: A lot of people jokingly call it "Indian gold." It's just the best macaroni and cheese you've ever had in your life, the best grilled cheese you've ever had in your life. The best bologna-and-cheese sandwiches you've ever had in your life.

Céline Gounder: Martin was less wild about other things in the commods box.

Martin Reinhardt: We had "mystery meat." So the mystery meat was kind of like Spam, and it just said "meat" on the can. Sometimes you got canned chicken or canned pork or canned beef. But, you know,

you never knew what it was when it was just "meat." Right? *[laughs]* But, you know, yeah — we found ways to make it taste good.

Céline Gounder: For some, commodity food represents a conflicted history. One of pain but also perseverance.

Martin Reinhardt: It was food that kept us alive. And I don't know how healthy we were. Probably not as healthy as we could have been. But we did what we had to do to stay alive and to make it taste good.

Céline Gounder: Since Martin was a kid, there have been improvements to the commodity food program. In 1996, a USDA program started to introduce more fresh fruits and vegetables. Processed items became available in reduced-fat and reduced-sodium versions. And no more mystery meat — canned meats were replaced with higher-quality frozen options.

The diversity of foods improved, too. In 2006, Congress approved funds to include foods that were more culturally relevant. Now, traditional foods like bison and blue corn are available.

Martin Reinhardt: That's really good to see, but they have a long way to go.

Céline Gounder: Despite these improvements, many tribal citizens struggle to access grocery stores or other sources of healthy foods. Besides commodity foods, the introduction of fast food to reservations also has played a major role in the health of Native communities.

Here's Roy Talker again.

Roy Talker: With McDonald's and stuff, back then, that was our food. I know some people that eat there breakfast, lunch, and dinner, you know?

Céline Gounder: Roy left the Navajo Nation when he was still a boy. He was sent to live with a Mormon family in Snowflake, Arizona. But he never forgot about the peach. He thought about studying agronomy when he graduated high school. But, he never did.

Roy Talker: Instead I went into a restaurant business.

Céline Gounder: Roy became a McDonald's franchise owner.

Roy Talker: When I got into McDonald's, I did it mainly for the money. I was making an investment.

Céline Gounder: Part of Roy's work with McDonald's was expanding the franchise's reach on the Navajo Nation. That work provided a good life for Roy's family, including his daughter, Reagan. But Roy feels conflicted about that now.

Roy Talker: I did that not realizing what kind of damage that I would do to my own people. I was only thinking about myself. Later on, I found out that diabetes was actually increasing on the reservation. And I'm looking back and I go, "I think I helped produce that."

Céline Gounder: Diabetes has been on the rise since Roy was a child. Since the 1970s, diabetes for American Indians and Alaska Natives is up over 30%. Today, it is the most common chronic health issue for Indigenous people. And that includes Roy.

Roy Talker: I've been living with the Type 2 diabetes for the last 30 years.

Céline Gounder: Here's Martin Reinhardt again.

Martin Reinhardt: It's been a real big concern of ours ... how our people have been impacted by the change in diet. It creates bad health conditions in our communities. Rampant obesity, heart disease, diabetes, and so that really has killed us.

Céline Gounder: The 19th-century treaties between tribes and the U.S. government helped make commodity food a staple in Native kitchens. But they often included another provision: the right to hunt, fish, and gather.

Martin grew up eating commodity foods, but he also grew up fishing and gathering local food with his family. When we return, we'll hear how Martin took control of his own diet and how Reagan and Roy are helping rejuvenate the Southwest peach. That's after the break.

[MIDROLL]

Céline Gounder: Martin grew up in the eastern end of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Just outside Sault Ste. Marie.

Martin Reinhardt: There's an island over there called Sugar Island. I always think of that as kind of *our* island. And that's where my grandmother was raised and where she would take us in the summers.

Céline Gounder: Martin's grandmother knew her way around the kitchen.

Martin Reinhardt: Oh my gosh, could she cook!

Céline Gounder: And she helped introduce Martin to Indigenous foods as a kid.

Martin Reinhardt: So she would take us gathering berries. We'd go out fishing.

Céline Gounder: Spearfishing is an important part of the Native foodways on the Great Lakes.

Martin Reinhardt: You know, one of the stories that I tell my students is about my brother and I were out spearing with my uncles one night near sugar Island.

Céline Gounder: At the time, Martin says, it was common for the U.S. Coast Guard to hassle Native people when they would fish in the waters.

Martin Reinhardt: From our perspective, we were just doing what we'd always done, and we knew it was our treaty rights, but it wasn't recognized by the feds.

Céline Gounder: Some Anishinaabe gave up traditional fishing as a result. Others refused to purchase fishing licenses.

Martin Reinhardt: It's very difficult for us to stomach that idea. To actually go out and get a state license was like turning your back on your culture. I think it was a point of pride. It was a point of standing up for your sovereignty. So people often would go out there and they would *not* get a hunting license, and they would get caught, and they might have to do some jail time.

Céline Gounder: Despite these threats, Martin's family continued to spearfish.

Martin Reinhardt: We were the little guys and our uncles, you know, they would hold the lights, steer the boat, or spear the fish. And our job was to keep an eye out for the Coast Guard.

Céline Gounder: If they saw Coast Guard, they would throw their equipment into the water. When they thought the coast was clear, it was Martin's job to fish it out again.

Martin Reinhardt: And I'll tell you what, it was a scary thing. Those waters are pretty dark and when you're little, it's pretty deep. And you're feeling around with your feet on the bottom of the water. Anyway, that was a pretty, a pretty cool time in my life to be part of that.

Céline Gounder: So when you came home with a boatload of fish, what did you do with all that fish when you got back?

Martin Reinhardt: We would bring them to my grandmother's house after we cleaned them. And she would prepare them and we would eat them that day. We would also share them. We knew that other people might need food. So if we had enough, we would distribute it. Sometimes it was just enough for a meal. But you know, if we had an abundance, we shared.

Céline Gounder: It's been nearly 20 years since Martin has gone spearfishing. But he led a project that tried to find ways Indigenous people can reconnect with the foodways that have been lost.

Martin Reinhardt: Yeah, the *Decolonizing Diet* project.

Céline Gounder: Northern Michigan University hosted events serving Indigenous foods as a way to start conversations between Native and non-Native students. It was called the First Nations Food Taster.

Martin Reinhardt: And in 2010, we had our First Nations Food Taster and as we were in the kitchen, preparing the food, the thought occurred to me, would my ancestors, who are Anishinaabe Ojibwe, would they recognize the foods that we now think of as "Indigenous," as something that they were familiar with? And it actually turned itself around, the question. And I asked myself, if I wanted to eat the foods my ancestors ate today, what would I have to know and do?

Céline Gounder: So what does it mean to have your diet decolonized?

Martin Reinhardt: Well, that's a great question. What we really mean when we say decolonizing is that we moved toward a point in time, when the original acts, these negative interactions occurred, the colonization, the oppression of Indigenous peoples and cultures. And we figure out, well, what happened? And how can we move toward healing that? And once we've healed that, how do we protect it?

Céline Gounder: Martin and a group of other volunteers decided that they would spend a year eating like their ancestors in the Great Lakes region. They came up with three rules to guide their diet.

[Music up]

First, the foods had to come from the Great Lakes water basin.

Martin Reinhardt: So the tributaries, the streams, the rivers, the lakes, that comprised the Great Lakes region.

Céline Gounder: The second was when the foods arrived in the region. Some were introduced by Indigenous people. Corn, for example, isn't native to the Great Lakes. Indigenous people brought it there. But Martin included it because it was common before the arrival of Europeans. Other foods had always been there.

Martin Reinhardt: So an example might be a Mallard duck. Mallard ducks were here on their own accord, regardless of human interaction or not.

And the third category that we do not include is anything that is considered a genetically modified organism or GMOs. And so that was our food criteria.

[Music out]

Céline Gounder: There were 25 participants in the study, including Martin. They asked each participant to make sure at least 25% of their daily diet was made up of Indigenous foods. They also asked them to increase their physical activity.

Martin Reinhardt: Because as Americans in modern-day society, we are so lethargic and we just, you know, we just don't do the kind of physical activity that our ancestors have had done.

Céline Gounder: Martin went all in. 100%. He didn't eat anything that wasn't on the Indigenous diet they developed.

Martin Reinhardt: Some of the most common foods that we consumed were wild rice, corn, maple products, sunflower, pumpkin, squash, berries, wild leeks. I had so many leeks during that year that the mosquitoes were leaving me alone, and so was my wife.

Céline Gounder: Anything for science, right?

Martin Reinhardt: I'm just kidding, by the way. She didn't. She didn't leave me alone. *[laughs]*

Céline Gounder: They also ate a lot of beans, venison, bison, and local fish. And there were definitely a few items most people in the U.S. would not find on their dinner plate.

Martin Reinhardt: Like beaver, grasshoppers, white pine bark, crab apples — crab apple sauce is one of the best things on the face of the Earth, by the way — uh, squirrel, porcupine.

Céline Gounder: After a year, Martin checked in with the participants.

Martin Reinhardt: The results of the Decolonizing Diet project were really cool.

[Music up]

Martin Reinhardt: So on a biological level, based on statistical analysis of our group data, we were able to report that the research participants experienced significant reductions in weight, and significant reductions in girth, and BMI.

Céline Gounder: That's body mass index. It's a measure of body fat based on someone's height and weight.

Martin Reinhardt: So some of the outcomes were noteworthy, but not statistically significant. But we'd had, uh, individual-level reductions in blood pressure, reductions in cholesterol, and reductions in blood glucose levels.

Céline Gounder: In the years since the study, Martin hasn't kept a strict Indigenous foods diet.

Martin Reinhardt: But we have made significant changes to our diet, my wife and I. And so on a daily basis, we try to average at least 25% in our diet Indigenous foods. So it's a process. It's not going from one extreme to the other. But just the process of trying to make ourselves healthier.

Céline Gounder: That healing goes beyond just dietary health. For Martin, gathering wild foods, the same foods his ancestors gathered, helps him connect with his Anishinaabe Ojibwe roots.

Martin Reinhardt: You get out in the woods and you're breathing that fresh air and the sun shining and you're walking through, and it's still kind of crisp out, but you can just feel the life coming up all around you. And you see all the leeks and the sister plants are out there. And then we're also hearing the sounds. The winds rustling the leaves, the birds come down, they flap their wings and, you know, all these things — it just creates this opportunity for us to be who we are as Indigenous people in relationship to our surroundings.

Céline Gounder: Back in New Mexico, after Reagan Wytalucy found the lost orchard in Zuni Pueblo, she spoke to elders there about the peaches.

Reagan Wytsalucy: The oldest elder that I interviewed, she said that the trees were already growing there and they never once planted a new tree. And so in the case that these trees are still in existence, and this elder that I spoke with in Zuni, she was 92 years old at the time.

Céline Gounder: For the village, the peach trees had always been there.

Reagan Wytsalucy: These trees are still productive today. They could be in the ground for 80 years, maybe even longer, and they're still having massive amounts of fruit being produced off of them.

Céline Gounder: Speaking with those elders, Reagan started to think about the fruit in a new way. There was a different ethos to how the trees were cared for. Conventional approaches to peach cultivation seek to maximize the size of the fruit and ease of harvest by pruning new branches. But the Zuni she spoke with did not thin out their trees.

Reagan Wytsalucy: Thinning is recognized as a cultural no-no because you are ending a life at the start of its success. And so instead of encouraging it and nurturing it, if you're starting to thin off the fruit, you're actually reducing the life of that tree and its prodigy at the same time.

Céline Gounder: This was a new approach from what she had learned at the university. The more she learned about these Indigenous approaches to farming, she became more interested in her own roots.

Reagan Wytsalucy: I probably wasn't exposed to any Navajo culture until I was about 15.

Céline Gounder: As an adult, her research into the Southwest peach has provided her a way to connect with her Diné identity.

Roy Talker: Knowing your culture, knowing your history, knowing who you are, makes you a real Diné.

Céline Gounder: Reagan's dad, Roy Talker.

Roy Talker: I think that was deep down in her. And that's where that desire of wanting to achieve something and really help her people. Because she's realized that she is Diné.

Céline Gounder: As she traveled around the Four Corners, Reagan met many elders. They would lose track of time talking.

Reagan Wytsalucy: We stayed up and we talked, you know, almost to midnight just through an interview and had a lot of conversation and dialogue that had taken place, not just about the peaches, but about, like, the star patterns and all of these different things that we don't talk about anymore in our time.

Céline Gounder: Reagan traveled with her father. Because Reagan doesn't speak Navajo fluently, she relied on her father to translate. The time they spent together interviewing elders and searching for orchards showed her a new side of him.

Reagan Wytsalucy: And as we've gone through this together, it's been very impressive to see him recall, not just memories of his childhood, but even like how he would catch a rabbit and pull it out of its rabbit hole. Memories like that, all of these traditional ways of how they were able to do that and able to survive naturally off of what was available to them, is just, my mind just keeps wanting to find more.

Céline Gounder: And there might start to be some signs of change. As caretakers of the orchards passed away and diets changed, many peach trees were lost.

Reagan Wytsalucy: Some of the things that we say is, when the plants feel like nobody's there asking them and caring for them to help them be productive, they themselves — it doesn't matter what the conditions are — will start to die off.

Céline Gounder: Reagan's research has inspired some Native communities to care for the trees again.

Reagan Wytsalucy: And they say, you know, “Because of you, we are starting to go up and take care of those trees again. This is a healthier food source for us. We want to bring it back, and have it a part of our life again.”

Céline Gounder: She hopes that her work to revitalize the Southwest peach can be a source of pride for younger people.

Reagan Wytsalucy: Whether they desire to want to grow the food or not, it's just giving them a piece of who they are and giving it back to them. That piece of us that connects us to the land, connects us to our heavenly father, connects us to who we are in our families, in our own communities, and continues to sustain us today.

Roy Talker: This is our fruit, this is our tree.

[Music up]

CREDITS

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I'm Dr. Céline Gounder. Thanks for listening to *American Diagnosis*.

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