

## **Podcast Series: Holistic Nature of Us**

### **Episode # 22: Meet Rachel Sayet**

**judithdreyer.com**

Hi I'm Judith Dreyer,

Thank you for joining me for this pod cast series "The Holistic Nature of Us".

My intent is to take us, you and I, into a better understanding of the concepts behind our holistic nature and how that ties directly to the holistic nature of the world around us. How can we connect the dots in practical ways that we are nature and nature is in us?

I will be featuring authors and educators, practitioners and others whose passion for this earth helps us create bridges. We'll see what's trending, what's relevant to our world today, not just for land use, but to connect the dots between nature and ourselves. It's time for practical action and profound inner change so our natural world is valued once again.

Today I'm really delighted to introduce you to Rachel Sayet. She is a member of the Mohegan Tribe from Uncasville Connecticut. Rachel has been working for the Mohegan Cultural Department since 2013. Since then she has been researching Native American foods. She has presented her work throughout the country at conferences and classrooms and has begun food sovereignty initiatives at the Mohegan Tribe, partnering with the health department on gardening events, cooking and story-telling workshops for the Mohegan youth and a native cooking show. Her most recent project is the native food discussion group, created in order to share knowledge about seasonal eating, harvesting, growing and fishing practices.

Rachel, I'm delighted to have you. Welcome!

RACHEL: Thank you Judith.

JUDITH: So, let's talk about your experiences. You've got quite a bit here about food initiatives and gardening events, cooking and story telling that all relate, makes a connection between your tribe within the tribe but also for the outside world too, to understand the rich cultural heritage that you have to offer, that also supports the holistic nature of us.

RACHEL: Sounds good, thank you. I have always been interested in food my whole life and have always been cooking. I grew up cooking. My family sat down for family dinners growing up and things like that. My Mom had a vegetable garden, so I've always been around healthy, wholesome meals for the most part. I've just always had a passion for food. My parents also took me out to eat when I was a child at gourmet restaurants when I was about 2 years old. Most kids didn't get that experience. They took me to Scotland to a restaurant where children weren't even allowed in. After I went to the restaurant they started allowing children because I ordered off the adult menu.

JUDITH: Aha.

RACHEL: So, I've had a long history of eating well and I really enjoy food. It's definitely one of my passions. I did my undergraduate in restaurant management, worked in kitchens for awhile. Later I studied anthropology and learned how to talk about food in more of a cultural context. Upon graduation I started working for the Tribe and someone actually asked me to be on a panel about Native American foods for a conference. I hadn't written anything about it; I'd just been interested in it. I had never really done much work with it, but I had grown up eating seasonal Native American foods. For instance, during the summer, we have the succotash season when those red kidney beans are ready towards the end of the summer, the same thing with the corn being ready. We have the green corn Thanksgiving. The Green Corn Festival, which is our modern-day powwow which this year is going to be August 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>. And so that powwow is based on our traditional Green Corn Festival, the harvest of the green corn. We have those kinds of things growing up, but it wasn't all the time. It was just for the festivals and different things. When my friend asked me to be on this panel I thought about it and I said, hmm, you know I don't know that much about all the different foods, but I've always wanted to learn. And I had a mentor at the time and I still speak with her quite often. Her name is Dale Carson. She's from the Abenaki tribe and she lives in Madison Connecticut. She has been doing work with Native American foods, herbs,

reenactments, things like that, her whole life. She's an elder now and just an amazing woman. She has published multiple cookbooks. One of them is called "New Native American Cooking", another is "Native New England Cooking" and basically, she introduced me to the subject and shown me some things that she was cooking at home, her garden, some traditional pots and things like that. When I was approached to do this panel I went over to her house, interviewed her and got more in depth about the subject. She really helped to spearhead this project in that she also connected me with other chefs in the area, people she knew. You know, folks who are known for the clam cakes. People who were known for their Johnny Cakes. Johnny Cakes being a traditional food of New England that are basically cornmeal and water. Nowadays people make them with milk and butter and things like that. Kind of a modern Native American cuisine and non-natives make them too. They're a pretty popular New England kind of food. She introduced me to these different people who made all these different things and what I did was, I just took it upon myself to interview them for this paper. I went to different powwows. And for those of you who don't know what a powwow is, it's an intertribal celebration, celebrating native-ness, Indian-ness. Multiple tribes get together. They eat, and they dance. You can watch dance performances and buy crafts and things like that. So, I went to the powwows. I went to Shinnecock Powwow in Long Island and a few other different events, small ones, university powwows. I did these interviews and I just learned a whole lot about the different people who are in the field of Native American cooking, whether it be someone at a powwow, whether it be a home cook, all different people. And what went into it, some folks, Sherry Pocknit is a very well known Masapewampanauag chef and she and her family have been doing Native American food for generations and generations. She does catering at powwows as well. Her powwow vendor name is Sly Fox Den and actually we're very lucky, those of us who live in Connecticut, because she is actually living in Ledyard now. She does catering also out of her home. She'll actually do lunch orders. I have actually ordered lunch from her and she'll deliver. You can actually order a Native American meal pretty much any day of the week now for a pretty reasonable price. So, I learned a great deal from her because her family actually used to run a Native American Restaurant on the Cape called the Flume. Her uncle has written a book called Cape Cod Wampanoag Cooking. She grew up with going oystering, going hunting, doing all of that. Knowing when the herring comes in and it's the start of the Wampanoag New Year towards the April/May time of year. That's the time that they really think about as their New Year, when

the herring come back to the rivers. Things that we probably had at Mohegan too, but we don't necessarily talk about any more, or we didn't at that point. Meeting all these people and learning these stories was just amazing and enriching for me to a point of something, you know, that I'd always been passionate about, but I just never really knew about my own people. And there are elders that retain these stories, but it's just not always talked about in the general tribe. All of that was kind of the start of this project. It became a paper and a conference panel and then later evolved into really wanting to do more ground work and hands on work with it because, not only myself and my tribe, but other tribes throughout the country have joined in on this food sovereignty movement. And food sovereignty really being sovereign in the way that you grow your food, the way that you plant your food, harvesting food, hunting, all these different things. Basically, being able to be self sustainable is the concept of food sovereignty. Being able to not rely on the supermarket, things like that. And this movement is broader than Native American Tribes. This movement is throughout the world. U.S. Food Sovereignty and then there's also a Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance. They're a little bit different because the tribes are already sovereign nations. They have that the government to government relationship, the tribes that are federally recognized, so they need to be sovereign on their own. So, kind of feeling like it's not enough to be recognized as a sovereign nation, we also want to be recognized in our food. We want to be sovereign in our food as well. Because we don't want to be relying on the government and on this country that basically took our land and all our resources for food that they've brought to this country. Basically, there are many, many vegetables and plants that we all eat that are Native American foods: corn, tomatoes, squash and beans being some of the primary ones, the New World foods that everyone knows. But those foods that were brought in here were very, very detrimental; the foods that were brought from colonization such as pigs, cows. They destroyed the landscape. They tore up things. They brought in different animals and pets and things that are still affecting our environment today. So, to go back to where we were will be a long, long process and we may never get back to that. But to start slow, teaching people about the traditional foods, like what are they? What do we have here in New England that is a traditional Native American food. And most people think of it as Yankee cuisine or Yankee food. They don't even acknowledge the native ancestry behind the food because many people aren't taught Native American history or anything like that.

JUDITH: That's true and I have Native American in my ancestry and I always think about the beautiful gifts of the corn, and that that's such a typical New England food. I think of it as New England, but I know it's in other parts of the country as well.

But the fact is you are educating us to the ancestry about it, so that it doesn't get lost. What I miss in my own world are the stories that go with the planting; the stories that go with the harvesting; the songs that go with the reaping. And we've lost that kind of communal connection to the land, which to me brings us back to what is Holism? What is a Holistic nature? What does that even mean? And I think, from my own experiences and from the contacts that I have through the pod cast series, that nature wants to work with us and when we give thanks and we work closely with the land with real mindfulness and intent, nature rewards us a hundredfold, you know?

RACHEL: Yes, I believe that is true. The simple concepts of Native American cultures throughout the country, indigenous cultures throughout the world really are caring for the earth, respecting Mother Earth. That reciprocal relationship with nature that many people have lost touch with in general. The most common concept that people know is when you hunt a deer, you're going to leave tobacco in place of that as an offering, things like that. Simple things like that. But that's really why myself I practice my native spirituality. I was raised Jewish on my dad's side and my mother is a medicine woman. And I practice my native spirituality because that to me makes sense, just the concepts of respecting the earth, reciprocity with animals, plants, rocks, everything like that. Everything working together in a cycle, a healthy cycle, holistic cycle is really how I feel I'm meant to be part of this earth and this universe, and how many people feel. And I think that's why many people are drawn to Native American Culture, Native American Spirituality, because these are basic concepts, but they are extremely important and many people just don't think about them.

JUDITH: I know. We have to get out of our heads with the concepts and we have to really get into our hearts with it, because to walk our talk takes great diligent effort, and it's not an easy thing to do. It's very easy to say I respect the earth and I say thank you but it's more than just that. There's got to be some consistency. There's got to be some mindfulness put behind it.

Well let's get back to the food though Rachel. You have such an interesting story about all the people that you've met, the foods that you've probably tried and made yourself. What's your favorite NA food or dish to make?

RACHEL: Hmm. People ask me that and I don't know. It's hard for me to pick a favorite food. I have, I enjoy a lot of seafood in general. I cook a lot of seafood. I cook clams, oysters and that kind of thing. My mom does more of the soups, stews, succotash and succotash, a Mohegan recipe for succotash is basically the corn, the kidney beans that I mentioned, and some water and you boil the corn for awhile. I could send a recipe, but they also add pork fat which is a modern day, modern day being the past few hundred years. We've incorporated pork into a lot of our recipes throughout the past few hundred years just for flavoring. Traditionally we didn't have pigs, as I've mentioned, and we didn't have cows and we didn't have flour or gluten and those are the big things that cause health problems, and we can get more into that. But for me I would say the seafood is a big one. I enjoy the yokeg which is our traditional parched corn and *yokeag* is basically parched corn meal. So instead of just raw corn meal it's a traveling food. Hunters and warriors would carry it with them when they went on a long journey. They'd place it in a sack around their waist and it was nourishing. So basically, you parch the corn and once it's dried over an open flame, and we're talking flint corn, we're talking you know ancient varieties of corn, some of these corns that I'm growing now, not sweet corn at all. We're using this corn for parching and grinding. It would fill them up and nourish them on their journey. Now we use this corn meal, or this parched corn meal, *yokeag*, is the Mohegan word for it, for various things. Again, we can make it into modern recipes. We can put it on top of ice cream as a little crunchy topping. We'll put it on top of corn bread, again as a little nice texture and again you can still eat it on its own and it's just a good snack to have. It's a pretty neat food and the Wampanoags and Narragansetts have their own version of that as well. Traditionally we had all these hundreds and hundreds of varieties of corn, these are things that I'm working on, two initiatives with the tribe, bringing back. We come from the Lenape Delaware so a little farther west originally. I have got some *sasaping* corn which is a blue corn variety from my friend, whose name is Owen Taylor, and he's a seed saver. There's a large initiative in this country to save our heritage seeds. There's also actually an indigenous seed keeper's network. Owen is not indigenous, but he works closely with indigenous folks. White who is Mohawk; she is the head of the Indigenous Seed Keeper's Network. These folks are really working to preserve these heritage seeds. They're

doing amazing work and I'm just learning myself about seed saving and that type of thing. But I'm excited that we have planted some of these blue sasaping seeds at Mohegan because these seeds themselves have a unique story. Again, they're for grinding. It's a blue corn. It's not for eating off the cob. But these have an interesting story because at one point they were close to extermination and my great aunt Gladys Tantaquigen, who was a medicine woman and ethno botanist, she actually passed along some of these seeds to a culinary historian in Pennsylvania, William Woys Weaver who I actually just met yesterday.

JUDITH: Ah, good for you!

RACHEL: It was exciting, yes. These seeds are now being brought back to the tribes. The seed savers call that rematriation, so similar to repatriation bringing back objects and things like that to tribes. These seed keepers are actually trying to give back certain heritage seeds which is just an amazing project.

JUDITH: It is because we could spend another whole pod cast on what's happening to our seed populations and how contaminated they are. All of these grass root efforts will make a difference in the long run if we keep at it. Seed Saving is an art unto itself, so it's always good to pass on information for people who are seed saving. My listeners can purchase them from reputable places so that they can keep them alive in their yard. The more that we keep them in our yards and save those seeds, they get acclimated over generations to our particular neck of the woods. We can create strong strains that can handle some of the changes in the weather. You know we can't predict as much today as we used to be able to. The weather is very erratic. We have very strong wind currents that come and go and leave us with rain, leave us with drought, and it puts a stress on all of us including our plant nations. So that's really interesting.

You were talking also about, your work with the youth. Do you tell stories with your food making?

RACHEL: Yes, sometimes I do food stories. I also do traditional stories. I run a story time at the Mohegan library every week. I share traditional stories from various tribes and some of the stories that I've done have been food stories as well. We've done stories where we've made a strawberry drink, which is an Iroquois traditional drink. Right now, we're in the

Strawberry Moon, and Strawberry Moon you know is basically the month of June; although, you know we have the 13 months so it's a little different. And all sorts of different strawberry recipes. The strawberry drink is just basically muddled strawberries that sit in the water and you can drink that. There are so many stories about the strawberries. There are a couple of cute kid's stories and we can share that with folks, the links to those. But strawberry drink is just one of them and then yesterday, actually, I did this cooking demo out in Philadelphia and I made a strawberry corn bread which is actually one of Dale Carson's recipes. Just really unique ones.

JUDITH: That sounds delicious. I don't find too many recipes in terms of a cake or cookie with strawberries. It's more of the puddings and the pies. So she has one?

RACHEL: Yes and that recipe is fun and it's interesting too because that recipe is a modern day recipe that incorporates flour again but I don't know what the original recipe would have been. It might have been just the cornmeal and it wouldn't have been as much leavened. I would like to speak with her further about that. But, what's funny is that in the Colonial accounts Roger Williams actually says that he actually tried this corn bread and he said that the Narragansett's make a very fine strawberry bread. He had something similar and he was excited about it.

JUDITH: Oh, that's interesting. Well, I save chestnuts and acorns and I make flour out of those. I've also had flour out of the cattails and that's delicious. The only thing is, in the cooking, from my experience is, if it calls for a cup of flour than you put half and half. You put half acorn to half whole wheat, hopefully organic whole wheat, and it comes out very good. To do it just by itself, they don't have the gluten. So, I'm thinking that maybe the breads were more flat breads, that type of thing.

RACHEL: That's what I'm thinking too. I'm thinking almost similar to the Johnny Cakes that are flatter. But you're right. I didn't even think to try it with the acorn flour. That's something that I really want to learn how to make as well as the acorn flour. I know acorns, you know some of them can be very tannic and traditionally we would soak them in the stream and things like that. It kind of depends on the variety of acorn though.

JUDITH: It does. In my experience the white ones are the easiest. The red ones do take a lot of soaking. But I've made flour from the red ones and if I



soak them, I think the last batch I made I had to soak it at least 10-15 times to get the tannins out. But then I had a really great flour, you know, and I would put it in my pancake recipe. I would make my pancakes totally gluten free by using chestnut flour, acorn flour and then I would add a little bit of other organic flours to it. Because I make more of a French pancake, like the crepe kind of thing.

RACHEL: Hmm, sounds good.

JUDITH: Yeah, interesting. So, before we conclude, what is your opinion as you do these travels with food in terms of our connection to the plants? You know, do you see people having a connection to plants and food in general?

RACHEL: I think that varies person to person, right? I think there are many people these days who are gardening, farming or even just connecting to plants on a daily basis. You know, just walking in nature and they enjoy that and that's a huge part of their life. Folks who just want to go and sit in the woods and relax and those types of things. And then there's other people who just go to the supermarket. And as Ellen Moyer had said in that other pod cast that that disconnection is real. Many people don't even have that connection at all. But, I think that in terms of ways to connect with nature, did you want me to mention the ones that I have here?

JUDITH: Absolutely. I'd love you to share whatever is relevant and what you feel comfortable with.

RACHEL: Okay. So for me I'm also very into essential oils. I have my own business with that and that kind of goes with a lot of these holistic concepts but I'm also into astrology and so I spend a lot of time looking at you know the moon cycles and that again, it can be Western but it's also Native American, right? We had our own ways of connecting with the moon, connecting with the stars, that type of thing. We had rock structures and formations that would tell us what was going on with those things and what we were supposed to be planting, all of that. You know we were looking at the moon to know when to plant, when to fish, all of that.

1. So that's one of my recommendations for people is to look at the moon, look into the moon cycles, whether you want to use an astrology app or the Farmer's Almanac or something like that. All of those are great ways to connect with nature and connect with our moons. Obviously, we have 13 moons again and the traditional native

kind of calendar would be more of a 13-moon calendar. Actually, something I'm trying to build with the native food discussion group is a 13-moon food calendar. So that's a goal of ours to kind of pick a food from each season, like the Strawberry moon, the Green bean moon would be July, things like that and make a calendar. So that's one suggestion.

2. And **noticing the fruits of the season**. Just noticing. I think it's hard in this day and age for many people including myself with all the technology around us to just look up, to see that there are strawberries coming up, right? That there are these plants coming up because you're just so focused on the phone or the technology, unfortunately, and people need to look up. They need to look up at the sky, the night sky. You know take a look at the stars, appreciate the planets and the moon cycles and just look up and see, you know, what's growing.

JUDITH: I agree. And that just takes, in some ways we have to think about that more. I know as an herbalist gathering from the meadowland, that when /if I'm too busy, the plant's gone. I've missed the opportunity to harvest that plant and I have to wait until next year. I have to be mindful what the season is, what's going on in the yard, whose coming up next? You know? It's like who's on first, who's on second. If I miss it and I'm out busy in the world they're gone, and I can not get my supplies.

Do you have another tip for us?

RACHEL: I personally, part of my, as I mentioned I practice my Native spirituality so I personally, I leave tobacco outside in nature. I do prayer. I pray to my ancestors for guidance and things like that. Everyone has their own spirituality so whether they want to go out in nature and do a different type of prayer or whether that's something that they're comfortable with, that's up to them, right? But I think that's a good thing to do, do something like that in nature.

**3. Go outside, think about whether it's your ancestors you want to pray to or whether you just want to kind of just have a little talk with the trees, right?**

JUDITH: Right! And again, I love you bringing in the fact of giving back, giving something. It doesn't have to be elaborate. A friend of mine who did a lot of practicing with her native elder, absolutely adored chocolate. She

just felt it was an incredible food and an incredible gift to give back to nature. It doesn't matter who eats it or nibbles it. The fact is the action of saying thank you with something to give away.

RACHEL: Right, exactly and in many tribes, we do spirit plates. You know we do them during a ceremony. We'll leave a spirit plate out for spirits to eat and it could have a variety of foods on it; meats, berries, anything like that. And sometimes I actually do go out and leave spirit plate as well. So similar to what you're saying. It's more something that's filled with food that you put out. I've even heard people just pouring their coffee on the ground. There's all different ways to do it.

JUDITH: Again, it's the intention that comes from our heart. You know giving thanks is simply giving thanks. Whatever we can give away with the same spirit, who is going to say it's right or wrong, you know?

Rachel this has been very, very interesting. What I'd love you to end with is some of your upcoming classes or your contact information. How can people get a hold of you, for future classes on your part?

RACHEL: Sounds good. I have a website **[www.rachelsayet.com](http://www.rachelsayet.com)** and I've been posting my upcoming workshops and events both my lectures and my essential oil workshops, both of those get posted on the website. I also have a little Facebook page where I post some Native American foods and it's called Uni will never be bacon. You can follow me on Facebook on that page too.

JUDITH: Well that's great. I want to thank you again. I hope everyone feels as inspired as I do by Rachel's talk and your enthusiasm for these foods and what you're doing for your community and how you're sharing with the world. Because, it's not just for your particular tribe. You're doing things at universities and other events to get our connection, to keep our connection strong with the beautiful things this earth provides.

I want to say, this is Judith Dreyer, author of *At the Garden's Gate* book and blog. For more information about this pod cast go to my website **[www.judithdreyer.com](http://www.judithdreyer.com)**. You'll find the transcript as well as my class schedule and book.

I like to end *The Holistic Nature of Us* with a quote from Paul Hawkin. He's an environmentalist and author, who reminds us

*“Sustainability, insuring the future life on earth is an infinite game, the endless expression on behalf of all.”*

Bye for now and enjoy!