KBIC cooks it old school

Feast of pre-European foods

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ZEBA - The Keweenaw Bay Indian Community is known for impressive community feasts, but Thursday's Pre-Colonization Dinner took things to a new level. To a very old level.

Participants didn't cook or eat anything that didn't live in the Great Lakes region prior to the arrival of the first Europeans.

"It's going back to our roots, the way we did things in the old days," said Kyle Seppanen, a KBIC Natural Resources Department wildlife technician who helped attendees at the event roast goose and venison over a campfire.

The event began outdoors, where participants cooked up some appetizers over open fires using traditional Ojibwa methods, then moved inside the KBIC's Zeba Hall for a feast of more complex dishes, prepared with modern conveniences but still using only locally indigenous foods.

After that, attendees heard a presentation from Northern Michigan University Native Studies professor Marty Reinhart on his year-long Decolonizing Diet Project (DDP) study, which involved him and 25 volunteers living for an entire year on just indigenous food, and was the inspiration for Thursday's dinner.

The dinner was sponsored by the Lake Superior Stewardship Initiative, which partners with the KBIC and several area schools on natural resources-themed education, and put together by the KBIC's Natural Resources Department, which gathered the food and prepared the meal.

DDP study participants, teachers from local schools associated with LSSI and various other guests all attended, along with KBIC members.
The outdoor portion of the event introduced not just new foods to participants, but also new ways of cooking. NRD worker Wausau Sandman-Shelifoe taught how to make medicinal tea, dropping hot rocks from the fire into a tea-filled wooden bowl to heat it. Tea ingredients included wintergreen, staghorn sumac, sheep sorrel and kinnikinnik, many of which she'd helped gather over the summer.

"There were a lot I didn't know we could drink, like the pine needles," she said.

At the next fire over, Reinhart handed out corn, sweet potatoes and cattail tubers, which are cooked right in the coals.

"Just so it's black on both sides, that's the rule," Reinhart said of the cattails. "You have to split them open. They're high in potassium, and you can also make bread from them."

The cattail was a bit stringy and powdery once you got inside the husk, but had a mild, sweet taste, slightly more flavorful than a potato.

The corn was cooked on sticks, like hot dogs or marshmallows, as were the venison and goose chucks at a third fire. The sweet potato was laid out to cook on a large flat rock set next to the fire, with the stone fire ring raised about a foot outside the cooking rock to preserve heat.

"I think this is incredible, a really neat experience," said Wendy Freeman, a L'Anse Sacred Heart School teacher who was roasting corn and keeping an eye on the root vegetables.

"I think it's so simple to have a flat rock to cook on," she said. "So logical, but I wouldn't think of it."

At the feast inside, dishes included venison stir fry and meat loaf; seed cake; crabapple sauce; sunchokes, which are similar to artichokes; a variety of wild berry sauces and even beaver.

LSSI Project Manager Joan Chadde credited the NRD staff with preparing the meal, which she'd originally proposed having catered.

"They worked all summer to collect it, all week to prepare it," she said.

KBIC tribal member Elizabeth Jukuri was impressed, and said she'd like to see more indigenous foods included at powwows and other tribal feasts.

"We usually have whitefish, but this is a unique spin," she said, noting the pecan topping. "We often have berries, but never elderberry sauce."