

Indigenous Chef Wins James Beard Award

By Maria Lynders

Sherry Pocknett made history in June as the first Indigenous woman to win a James Beard Award for culinary excellence—an honor considered “the Oscars of the food world.”

Pocknett is a member of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe and grew up practicing Indigenous ways to hunt, fish, and forage for food. Now she is the owner of Sly Fox Den Too, a restaurant in Rhode Island that specializes in Indigenous cuisine.

The menu features the food her family grew up with, using seasonal ingredients and local fish and game. “It’s all about the bounty of the season and what we can do with it and how we treat it and how it’s gonna treat us,” she said.

Pocknett’s father was a fisherman and would often bring back blue fish and mackerel for her mother to cook for dinner. Despite having six children to feed, her mother would always cook extra. “She said somebody might stop by so you always want to have a little extra on hand so you

can offer someone food if they happen to drop in,” Pocknett said. “That’s a native thing, feeding people.”

If there were any leftovers in the fridge, her mother would cook them into fish hash the next morning, paired with poached eggs on top—one of Pocknett’s favorite meals to this day. “I thought it was poor people’s food, but it was rich people’s food—rich in love, rich in health, and rich in tradition,” she said.

Pocknett now serves food inspired by her family and her tribe. She serves daily caught fish, venison, Indian fry bread, and quahog (hard clam) chowder—a Mashpee Wampanoag original dish. She also serves dishes of her own invention such as corn cakes and rice made with the “three sisters,” an Indigenous name for corn, beans, and squash because when planted together they nurture each other to grow.

Amid the celebrations, Pocknett recognizes this award came at the lowest time in her life. She is currently battling breast cancer and recently finished chemotherapy. “And I’m trying to be strong, that’s for sure. This award has helped and it



Sherry Pocknett, Indigenous chef, smiling and holding a James Beard Award trophy.

“This award makes me just want to keep going. Keep fighting, and keep creating,” she said.

While on the road to recovery, her two daughters have taken over responsibilities at the restaurant. She said her daughters learned how to

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Contact: Stephanie Workman, 478-919-7652, stephanie.workman@sba.gov
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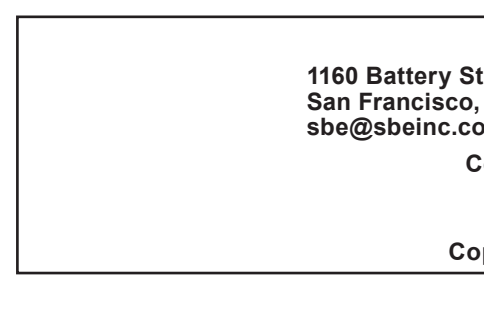
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