

Indigenous Food on Indigenous Land: Café Ohlone Founders on Contemporary Traditions

by Katherine Hamilton



CCA@CCA Virtual Brunch: A Conversation Exploring Self-Nourishment with mak'amham / Café Ohlone

Thursday, March 25, 2021

Join the CCA community in a live Zoom event that explores the practices of Vincent Medina and Louis Trevino, co-founders of mak-'amham/Café Ohlone. mak-'amham (mahk-am-haam) means "our food" in the Chochenyo Ohlone language, which is the Native language to the Eastern shores of the San Francisco Bay, where CCA's Oakland campus is located. Medina and Trevino work to revive and strengthen traditional Ohlone foods by actively demonstrating the vibrancy and beauty of Ohlone food and culture, and mindfully stripping away layers of imposed identity in an ongoing process of decolonization.

Vincent Medina (Chochenyo Ohlone) and Louis Trevino (Rumsen Ohlone) began [mak-'amham or Café Ohlone](#) at the back of a book shop just south of UC Berkeley in 2018. Small but mighty, the pop-up cafe was a way to rekindle the pair's love of their ancestors' traditional food and share their culture with family, friends, and the larger community around them. The restaurant's founders joined an intimate group of students and faculty on March 25th to discuss how their food and restaurant are challenging colonial narratives about Indigenous peoples, how they are feeding their spirits, and how we might provide for ours.

In Chochenyo, the East Bay's Indigenous language, mak-'amham means "our food." Near the beginning of the talk, Medina recalled how his friends in the Bay Area could take him to restaurants where everyone could appreciate how culture and language are folded into the restaurant experience. He didn't have that for Ohlone culture—there were no Ohlone restaurants, and many in California thought the Ohlone were entirely gone. Only recently, Medina stated, did newspapers begin writing about Ohlone people in the present tense. For years, the San Francisco Chronicle had reported that the "last Ohlone person has passed away," essentially writing Ohlone people out of existence. Centuries of colonial harm and violence cannot be undone by merely referring to Indigenous peoples with proper terminology and timeframes. Nonetheless, Medina acknowledges this action to be a first step in the public's journey towards healing colonial wounds.

As I watched Medina and Trevino discuss foods they prepared with ingredients they had foraged in the Bay Area's forests, I was reminded of how industrialization and 21st-century hyper-consumerism have masked our dependence on the land as a food source. Many people's idea of "salt," for example, comes in a container from the store, not from kelp in the sea or from pink rock salt mines in the Himalayas. This disconnection from food production isolates many humans from the land, making us think we are separate from nature and not one of its many parts. For so many, food is rooted in ceremony, celebration, and gathering together. Removing one from their traditional food is not only a colonial strategy that disrupts food sovereignty, it is a strategy that disrupts cultural connections to one another and the land.

Part of the reason extractive capitalism suppresses those who know the land so intimately is that most newcomers form a relationship to the land

through the English or Spanish language frame.¹ Listening to Medina and Trevino speak Chochenyo and Rumsen, respectively, was intensely moving. Hearing them acknowledge all the Muwekma Ohlone people in the Bay in their ancestors' language emphasized just how significant language is in understanding culture, food, and land. All languages were formed by the land on which they were first spoken, and through people's relationship to the land. Thus, languages Indigenous to so-called North America reflect an utterly separate world from the societal formations in Europe that developed colonial attitudes and extractive capitalism.

I grew up in λematax^w (Tlah-mah-tauxw), known in English as Campbell River. In the First Nations language of that region, Kwakwaka'wakw, many words describe actions and objects in ways that communicate ideas about the area and the natural abundance in a way that just makes sense. Samka means to put eulachon, a tiny fish that was essential to Kwakwaka'wakw cooking, into a pot and cover it to boil; ali'wadzagwis is a spruce tree on the beach; hana'wa means to fish for humpback salmon; hamsgn means "I'm picking berries"; and hamya'isi is a container used for picking berries. These are several words that demonstrate how language reframes actions and objects in a place, but in truth, the entire language system creates the frame—not a few words. Though I could not understand the words Medina and Trevino spoke, hearing food and land be discussed in the language developed around those ingredients for millennia brought something to the air that is otherwise hidden in English's colonial framework. Medina told us that in Chochenyo, there is no word for famine: there never needed to be because there was always more than enough for everyone. Through his work with [Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival](#) and through mak-'amham, Medina is teaching Chochenyo classes with the help of Elders, in hopes that their language, their cultural frame, can continue and prosper.

The duo reminded the audience that the Muwekma Ohlone peoples know these lands intimately, stewarding the area for millennia before colonization to help all beings in the ecosystem thrive. This stewardship included controlled burns, which colonial governments banned as they misunderstood the purpose of such activities. Controlled burns were not wasting resources but burning off the old and highly flammable brush, debris, and leaves, preventing the spread of large forest fires, an ongoing devastation every summer for California's multi-species inhabitants. These burns also brought nutrients into the soil, allowing for new growth to emerge from plants hidden under the debris. Medina and Trevino's talk was grounded in mak-'amham, but illuminated many more issues surrounding culture, decolonization, healing, and how to feed one's spirit to feed oneself.

¹ I am referring to "newcomers" here as anyone who is not Indigenous (meaning they or their ancestors came from somewhere else) to the land on which they currently reside. Bev Sellars introduced me to this term in her book, *Price Paid: The Fight for First Nations Survival*, 2016.

This event was organized and moderated by Menaja Ganesh and is part of the Creative Citizens in Action initiative at CCA (CCA@CCA), funded by an endowment gift to support The Deborah and Kenneth Novack Creative Citizens Series, an annual series of public programs focused on creative activism.

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