

Sly Fox Den Too Chef Sherry Pocknett Wins James Beard Best Chef: Northeast Award

The Indigenous chef explains the foraged, hunted and fished ingredients that make up her Native American fusion menu that pays tribute to the Mashpee Wampanoag people.

June 6, 2023

Jamie Coelho



Sherry Pocknett won the James Beard award for Best Chef: Northeast.

Last night, one of Rhode Island's own won the title for Best Chef: Northeast for the [2023 James Beard Foundation Restaurant and Chef Awards](#). Sherry Pocknett, a member of the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe, is owner of [Sly Fox Den Too](#) in Charlestown, a restaurant that specializes in Indigenous cuisine and culture.

The James Beard Foundation awards offer prestigious national recognition that has often been called "the Oscars of the food world." This is the first time that an Indigenous woman has won a James Beard Award; she was one of five finalists for the Best Chef: Northeast award category, which was presented at the awards ceremony, held at the Lyric Opera of Chicago ([see list of winners here](#)). The only Rhode Islanders to ever win James Beard Foundation's Best

Chef: Northeast title were Al Forno's late George Germon and Johanne Killeen in 1993.

Pocknett posted a message on Facebook this morning, after the awards: "Thank you to the Creator for waking me up every day. Thank you everyone for believing in me, supporting me," she says. "I feel like I'm dreaming. I am so grateful and thankful to be the James Beard Award winner for the best chef [in] the Northeast! So many people to thank, just so grateful. I felt my ancestors they were with me last night. Gram Delscena, I felt your presence. Dad, I felt your presence."

Pocknett attended the awards in person with her daughter, Jade Pocknett-Galvin, wearing her traditional regalia for good luck. "It feels amazing that finally we are getting the recognition that I think people want to know about. They are curious and people want to try the food," she says.



Sherry Pocknett, chef and owner of Sly Fox Den Too.

She is honored that Indigenous cuisine is being recognized on a national level. The United States was first inhabited by native people, yet the cuisine isn't widely known. "A lot of people ask me what is Native American food?" she

says. “What is Indigenous food? It means to eat where you’re at. It means harvested by the season.”

Pocknett serves foraged, fished and hunted foods at her restaurant, which she runs alongside her two daughters, Jade and Cheyenne Pocknett-Galvin. Some of the ingredients on the menu include venison, rabbit, quahogs, local fish, foraged herbs and vegetables and more. Specialties include chef Sherry’s corn cakes made from both yellow and white flint cornmeal (also known as johnny cakes) that nestle everything from eggs to stew; quahog chowder, which is a Mashpee Wampanoag recipe made with quahog clams, potatoes, onions and ground black peppercorn in a broth; Indian fry bread is served with nearly everything, and there are specials like turtle soup with fiddleheads, skate wing, smoked salmon, housemade sausage and more. Poached eggs come with a choice of home fries or *nausamp*, which are yellow corn grits. “Three Sisters” rice is another of chef Sherry’s specialties made with corn, squash, beans and wild rice. Everything is cooked with vegan-friendly sunflower oil, instead of butter.

The restaurant is named after Sherry Pocknett’s father, chief Sly Fox Vernon Pocknett, who taught her all about foraging, hunting, fishing and harvesting shellfish.” “My dad was a fisherman and a truck driver. He was always working, fishing, hunting, always foraging for something,” Pocknett says. “They taught us the bounty of the season. They wanted to make sure we could take care of ourselves if we had to.”

Pocknett is currently battling breast cancer, so her daughters are now running the restaurant, which has been open since June 2021. She recently completed chemotherapy, and will soon undergo surgery, after which she will be out of work for another six weeks. “I found out that I had cancer last September. I started chemotherapy right away and as everyone knows, chemotherapy knocks you down.”



Sherry Pocknett with her daughter, Jade Pocknett-Glavin.

She hopes to get back to the restaurant after she recuperates, so that she can continue doing what she loves. She also plans to release a cookbook by Christmas, titled *Bounty of the Seasons*.

Pocknett started out cooking as a child by creating a popup food stand at powwows on the Cape. She and her cousin would take ingredients from their parents' kitchens, as well as cast iron pans, a Coleman camp stove, and other equipment and cook their own food items for money. Before that, Pocknett used to test out her recipes on her brothers using her Easy Bake Oven.

“I used to take all the food out of the refrigerator, because my dad was a hunter and a fisherman. Whatever was in season, that’s what I took out of the refrigerator to cook in my Easy Bake Oven,” Pocknett says. “If there was deer meat there, I would take the deer meat out and put it in my little oven and cook it with the lightbulb. And I fed it to my brothers. They ate well and they loved it. I knew then that I was destined to own a restaurant.”

She first scoped out a 3.5-acre restaurant location in Preston, Connecticut, which she purchased and hopes to open sometime in the near future as the Sly Fox Den Museum and Oyster Farm, complete with sustainable vegetable, fruit and herb gardens as well as on-site aquaculture. But this location needs a lot of work ([donate to help fund the project here](#)), so in 2019, she decided to buy a smaller turnkey spot in Charlestown, the former Gentleman Farmer restaurant. She and her family opened this location first, in order to invest in the original spot; hence the word “too” in the restaurant name.

“That’s how we ended up here in this restaurant, because we were trying to create revenue to get that other one open,” Pocknett says. “I was at ceremony in Narragansett territory, and I went by this small building and I needed gas – and the building said for rent – and I said this is a cute little storefront. There was a sign on the door, I got the number and called. Then we ended up with a lease.”

So far, the Charlestown restaurant has been successful by word of mouth. Now it’s especially popular, because of the national spotlight. “Because of what we sell, Native American food; fish, rabbit, venison, all these Indigenous foods are on our menu, I think it’s different from pizza, Chinese food and all that,” she says. “I think people look forward to something different.”

Pocknett also explained how Indian fry bread came to be on her menu, as she says it is something that was adapted by Indigenous culture based on what ingredients they had on hand. She explains how helicopters would drop ingredients like flour and lard on reservations out west, and the Indigenous people learned how to use the items for cooking. “They had to figure out what they could do with it, and they ended up making fried dough,” Pocknett says. “They used their stew beans on the bread. It evolved and they ended up calling it fry bread. They would do different things with it as the years went on. It’s not a traditional native food, but we added it because everyone loves it.”

Indigenous people did not traditionally eat three square meals a day or choose specific items for breakfast, lunch and dinner, Pocknett explains. “They ate when they were hungry. They took food in their pouch while they were traveling and gathering food and looking for new shelter.” Local Indigenous people would settle inland in colder weather months to hunt deer, then journey to the shore in the summer, where they could catch fish and harvest shellfish.

She explains that’s how Rhode Island clam chowder came to be, using harvested native quahog clams to make a clear broth with potatoes and other ingredients. “That’s how the Narragansetts make it. Wampanoags make it that way, too,” she says. “We never had cows, pigs or chickens, but when the Pilgrims came here 400 years ago, that’s how they made New England clam chowder. They put milk in it.”

The next time you taste a cup of Rhode Island clear chowder, think about the native people who deserve the credit for making it such a huge part of the Ocean State’s specialty cuisine.