

## **A New Angle**

### **Episode 84**

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**Justin Angle:** This is A New Angle, a show about cool people doing awesome things in and around Montana. I'm your host, Justin Angle. This show is supported by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business.

**Justin Angle:** Hey, folks, welcome back and thanks for tuning in. Today's guest is Mariah Gladstone. Mariah grew up in northwest Montana and is Blackfeet and Cherokee. In 2016, she launched IndigiKitchen, an online platform dedicated to re-indigenizing diets and food systems.

**Mariah Gladstone:** Even from the very early days of the United States as a country, Indigenous food systems were targeted as a way of controlling Indigenous people.

**Justin Angle:** IndigiKitchen reaches a wide audience with a food-based message of education, empowerment and activism. Mariah, thanks for coming on the show.

**Mariah Gladstone:** Yeah, thank you for having me.

**Justin Angle:** So, tell us, where did you grow up and what did your parents do?

**Mariah Gladstone:** I was born and raised in Kalispell, which is obviously just to the west side of the backbone of the world. And I spent my summers over on the Blackfeet Nation on the east side.

**Justin Angle:** Great. And you're your folks?

**Mariah Gladstone:** Yeah. My dad's a musician, and he has made a career singing Indigenous Native Americana music. And my mom has spent her career in state government and now retired in park ranger-ing and running her own booking agency.

**Justin Angle:** Very good.

**Justin Angle:** So, describe as you were growing up, what was your relationship with food?

**Mariah Gladstone:** Yeah, I'm really lucky that I grew up in a home that really encouraged me to learn about where food came from. My mom took an early childhood development class that said that kids that grow up cooking are better at understanding fractions. And so, she had me doing a lot of multiplying and having recipes and doing work like that, which is of course intuitive fraction learning. But also let me experiment a lot in the kitchen growing up. So, I was lucky to have that. But also, my dad and my grandpa carved out a part of our yard and fenced away part of the yard from the dogs so that I was able to have my own garden growing up.

And I got to see the magic of seeds turning into food and being able to pull that food out and put it on my family's table even as a little kid. So, I understood where food came from and combining that with the wild game meat from my cousins and having those experiences, I was really lucky that I was able to experience that type of food system in a way that not everyone has the privilege of getting.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah, and I would assume that, you know, when you decide after high school to go to New York City and study at Columbia, that must have been I mean, it must have been a disruption on many dimensions of your life. But the food dimension in particular, I mean, there's such a wide variety of food in New York City yet feeling a connection to it is a little tricky in a place like that.

**Mariah Gladstone:** Yeah, for sure. For someone that grew up on wild rice and bison burgers. I remember calling my mom one time because I was sick and all I wanted was some wild rice soup. And unfortunately, in New York, there's not a plethora of wild rice or any that I was able to find in my cold induced state. So, I just called my mom crying because I couldn't have any wild rice soup and my nose was sniffly and I just didn't know what to do. Whereas, you know, even at our local Wal-Marts in Montana, we can typically go find ground bison meat. But in New York City, this city of so many different cuisines from around the world, I couldn't find any bison. And I realized that there was this disconnect between our food systems, or at least the traditional food systems that I grew up with and where I was going to school.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah, and in that moment, being sick and far away from home was the craving for bison and wild rice soup, more of like a comfort food sort of thing, like a feeling of home. Or at that point, had you already sort of started to understand the links between how you feel and your health and the food that you're eating?

**Mariah Gladstone:** For me, it was a combination of the two of those things. It's definitely the food that I grew up on that was important to me, but also as a student trying to focus my energy on learning and studying. I also know that putting good food into my body, putting Omega 3's in, healthy fats, things like that are really important to the ways in which my body was able to function. Being able to have enough energy to get through the days. And so I definitely tried to find ways to bring those foods into my life, though occasionally that meant that when I'd come back from breaks, I would pack my carry-on bag on the airplane with some frozen meat that was wrapped in clothes for insulation, because I figured if the airline lost my bag, I really didn't want my wild game meat to thaw out. So, I definitely flew back to college with elk and moose meat frozen in my carry on just so I'd be able to have something stashed for when I got extra homesick and needed that that boost of good Montana meat.

**Justin Angle:** So, talk now about your decision after Columbia to move back home.

**Mariah Gladstone:** Well, I think it was always my goal to return back home and to bring the knowledge that I had back to my community.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah.

**Mariah Gladstone:** And for me, I initially thought that that would be through the path of alternative energy development. You know, my degree was in environmental engineering. And when I came home, I realized that I was, you know, 40 miles or 40 minutes away from the grocery store on the reservation. And food was such an urgent need. But also, you know, the diet related illnesses that affect Indian Country. And combining that with the plethora of food that still grows and is raised on the Blackfeet Nation as well as other indigenous nations. And so I use the tools that I grew up with, my gardening background, my experimental kitchen upbringing to start playing with Indigenous foods, you know, foods that I could forage and grow and gather and hunt and fish and combine that with the tools of millennials, you know, the ability to make digital media with the tools that we have at our fingertips, and to really start to create a teaching tool to help folks relearn some of this information. You know, a lot of the effort to take away our traditional food systems was very intentional by colonial governments. And so that work to restore it has to be really intentional, too.

**Justin Angle:** Sure. Let's maybe take a moment to draw out sort of state of play in that problem, as you describe it. I mean, what is the state of play when it comes to food in Indian Country? And maybe give us a little bit of brief history about how colonization and other forces tried to dismantle some of those Indigenous food systems.

**Mariah Gladstone:** Even from the very early days of the United States as a country, Indigenous food systems were targeted as a way of controlling Indigenous people. You know, George Washington wrote orders to Major General Sullivan to burn Haudenosaunee villages, but also to target their seed banks, their fields, their gardens, so that they would not be able to plant again. This strategy was successful for colonial governments, and so it continued across the continent with westward expansion. The 1850 Commissioner of Indian Affairs report actually wrote it is cheaper in the end to feed the whole flock for a year than to fight them for a week, essentially advocating destroy Indigenous food systems to force native people to depend on rations issued by the government so that they won't be able to physically fight back against the hand that's feeding them more or less. And it was this motivation, of course, that encouraged the targeting of buffalo or bison populations and nearly eradicated these animals, these keystone species of our prairies off the face of the earth. It was, of course, because of this that so many tribes were forced to depend on rations like the original goal was. This took place in a number of different ways across the continent. You know, for some tribes it was river dams that prevented fish from coming upstream. Dams in another way also affected seasonal floods that had both been responsible for irrigation as well as soil fertility of downriver tribes. There were forced relocations that meant that native people were pushed away from the lands where the seeds that they had cultivated for thousands of years grew and into places where they weren't familiar with the growing seasons, with the plants in those areas. And so, there was a lot of different factors. But unfortunately for Native people, it meant that we started to depend on rations which were not things that we were familiar with. And it was, of course, this period of time where we get foods like fry bread being developed. Fry bread is part of our

history. It got us through a period of time that would have otherwise meant starvation, but it's not exactly healthy. Right? And so of course, a lot of our current diet related illnesses stemmed from those initial years of this dependency and this tradition on subsidized food. And so when we shift our mindset to start thinking about our communities as places of abundance rather than places of scarcity, and start to look at restoring knowledge and all of the things that we're able to learn and to do, still, we can really start to begin that transition to restore Indigenous knowledge and not necessarily to go backwards in time, but rather to look at this ancestral knowledge as a template for moving forward. So, we're not decolonizing so much as reindigenizing.

**Justin Angle:** And this is there's so many layers to this, Mariah, I mean, as you're laying that history out, I mean, there are grave health effects and lifestyle effects for all of the people living in what is now the United States. Yet it occurs to me that with Indigenous folks, it is particularly devastating because there's a disconnection from culture, but also just the calorie density and all of the other things that come with an industrialized food system have had really significant consequences in Indian Country. Is that accurate?

**Mariah Gladstone:** Yeah, for sure. That said, I think that anyone can benefit from becoming more connected to their local food systems. You know, of course, everyone can benefit from eating less processed food and learning how to prepare healthy ingredients with real foods in their kitchen at the end of the day. Right. But not to make fancy five-star meals just to cook with real food. And so, I think that when I look at my audience and the folks that IndigiKitchen

really connects with, it is Indigenous people that want to connect to traditional knowledge, but also non-Indigenous people that want to be more connected to the land, that want to learn how to steward that better, that want to learn how to steward their own bodies better. And so, I think this is something that everyone can benefit from and the land can benefit from as well, too.

**Justin Angle:** We'll be back to our conversation with Mariah Gladstone after this short break.

**Justin Angle:** Welcome back to A New Angle. I'm speaking about reindigenizing food systems with Mariah Gladstone.

**Justin Angle:** Let's talk about IndigiKitchen more specifically, like what is the genesis story of the business you alluded to a little bit ago, but like, how did you kind of bring this thing to life and what were some of the key challenges?

**Mariah Gladstone:** This initially launched in part because I was joking around and I said, we just really need to create an Indigenous cooking show and I'm going to do it and I'm going to call IndigiKitchen. And someone said, sure you are Mariah. So, then I had to do it right? Of course, I don't have a background in culinary education or videography or anything of that sort. And so, I set up my tripod and a camera I bought on eBay and I edited things in Windows moviemaker, and I just started doing what I know. But even from the very early days, people were really excited, even considering my terrible lighting setup and everything else. People



wanted information about traditional foods. They wanted resources on what to do and different things that they could do rather than just being told what not to do. Don't eat fry bread, don't eat spam. Whatever it is, it's about giving people positive tools for change rather than negative feedback.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah. I mean, your skill as a storyteller must have sort of developed and taken great shape during this time of learning what your audience wants and what they respond to, and that the message rather than the sort of quality of the production sort of came through is really important to talk about that like how you kind of developed your skill as a storyteller.

**Mariah Gladstone:** I have definitely learned that, you know, not only is it the food that brings people to be interested in what I'm doing, but it's the stories of those foods. It's not just this plant's edible, but it's, you know, the flower of this plant is edible when it looks like this and it can be harvested in this way at this time, and you can preserve it like this, and you can cook it like this. And also, here's these other stories of this plant, and this is how it came to us. And this is nutritional value and there's all these other things that connects within that. Right. And it's not just a notation in a plant ID book that says this plants edible. It's all of the other things that go along with that.

**Justin Angle:** And how did you get this thing off the ground? I mean, you live in a rural area as an Indigenous woman, as an entrepreneur, creating a digital business like there are some

hurdles to overcome in making something come to life, whether it's funding or infrastructure or all of those things, like how did it actually happen?

**Mariah Gladstone:** I have always grown at the speed that I'm able to grow with in terms of not taking out debt on my business, of course, that meant using a free video editing software.

Right. I have learned a lot of what I know how to do from free YouTube videos as well. Just in terms of how to set up lighting. I've reached out to the folks that I know that already have those resources. Internet connectivity for a digital business has definitely been a challenge. I bought my house on the reservation in early 2020 and at that time I didn't have Internet options besides a Verizon hotspot, which is of course data limited. I also live in a place with limited cell phone signal. So I had a cell phone booster. You know, I was doing cooking classes, just streaming them from my phone.

**Justin Angle:** Now, your business is to a point where you do a variety of things. You do the online cooking classes, you do in-person trainings, other sorts of interactions. How have you decided to make choices about what sort of spaces to play in with interacting with customers?

**Mariah Gladstone:** I'm really lucky because I get to choose the work that I do and I try to do a diversity of work in part because I get bored easily. And so I love having a variety of projects I could work on. I get to do curriculum development, so I partnered with a school district in Oregon and I got to make a variety of cooking videos for their classrooms so they can always have cooking videos based on First Foods of Oregon, for example, I've partnered with No Kid

Hungry to write a toolkit directed at food service directors in the state of Montana for incorporating more native foods into school lunch programs, and then, of course, doing a lot of cooking classes both virtually and in person. I've done workshops based entirely on Indigenous teas, so I get to do a presentation for the Montana Native Plant Society and to just talk about different native plants that people have traditionally and still use for teas. So I get to do a lot of really cool work and my audience is everyone from students at schools in reservation communities, to teachers at schools around the country, to college students, to law firms that want to do an Indigenous cooking class for their staff on their lunch break. So I get to do such a diverse amount of things, and I'm super lucky that I get to touch so many spaces and teach people, but also learn from so many people as well.

**Justin Angle:** You know, we had a conversation a while back with a young Indigenous photographer, Taylor Irvine, and, you know, she's enjoyed some incredible success and exposure and opportunities. But one thing she talked about was being kind of tokenized as like the go to Indigenous photographer for all things Indigenous by publications like The New York Times, for example. And that just sort of is problematic on a variety of dimensions. I would assume the same risk applies to some degree for you. I mean, the wide variety of sorts of Indigenous folks throughout these lands and the wide variety of foods and plants and animals. I mean, how do you kind of know what your lane is and how to play in that space?

**Mariah Gladstone:** Yeah, that's definitely a challenge that I have faced. Probably not as frequently as Taylor has, but, you know, I've been contacted by organizations in other states,

and though I work across the continent, a lot of that work is continent wide focus rather than really specific regional focus. And so, you know, an organization contacted me in California to do work on some California specific food materials. And that's a thing that I said, awesome, sounds like what you're doing is really great. But here are some native chefs that are focused in California. Here's some tribes that you should reach out to in the area. Don't do the teepees and, you know, generic plains things in your California specific publication. Let's really look at the tribes that are there and then you should work with them and not me. Not necessarily, because I don't think it sounds like a great project, but because there are other folks that are much more familiar with that knowledge, and they're the ones that should be serving in those roles. So sometimes my role is just connecting folks with other people. Because of my platform I'm fortunate to be in that space where people reach out to me, but also there's definitely opportunities to know when my job is connecting them with people that will be better resources for them.

**Justin Angle:** You know, you said you launched in IndigiKitchen in 2016. I wonder how did the summer of 2020 and you know, post George Floyd, the renewed conversation about race and disparities in our society, how did that moment or did that moment affect interest in your business, how you looked at the opportunity in front of you and kind of the landscape that you were approaching?

**Mariah Gladstone:** The summer of 2020 was honestly probably one of my busiest times. And part of that was, of course, because of these conversations that were taking place on a national

level in terms of racial justice, in terms of communicating these resources, these critical needs that people have, but also because there was a realization at that point, you know, after we had gotten over the initial hurdle of everything being canceled and shut down, people realized that there was a huge opportunity to connect on a digital front with communities that may not be in your immediate area, may not be your immediate community that you're familiar with. But really to have those opportunities to do virtual workshops and connect across this digital space. And so you know, at times I was doing two or three presentations in a day.

**Justin Angle:** Wow.

**Mariah Gladstone:** Because it was suddenly possible. And folks that had wanted to organize things like this but, you know, didn't have the capacity to pay for travel or whatever that may be, suddenly realized that they were able to connect a whole bunch of different folks who could all suddenly be virtually present at the same time. And to have those conversations taking place and really to make progress in a way that wouldn't otherwise be possible.

**Justin Angle:** Yeah, in many ways, a message and a business for the moment we've been living through along those lines. I mean, we didn't talk a ton about health, but health is a really important aspect of this. We've all lived through this massive upheaval in our health system overall with COVID. We get bogged down in, you know, talk about medical interventions and vaccines and all that. But the link between food and overall health is pretty critical. Has that been a part of your sensibility with IndigiKitchen?

**Mariah Gladstone:** Yeah, for sure. I'm really lucky to work with some of the folks at Fast Blackfeet, which is the Food Access and Sustainability team based here on the Blackfeet Nation. And part of the work that they do is not just to run a local food pantry and to supply a source of emergency food for folks, but really to connect with food as medicine or food as a preventative care. And so they have a dietitian/nutritionist on staff that works with local grocers in the area, grocery stores, and she will write prescriptions for food. And then I'm lucky that she uses some of the recipes on IndigiKitchen to teach some of the cooking classes to pantry participants and community members that are interested in learning more about, you know, how to work with ground bison meat that we're now able to buy at our tribal grocery store from the tribal herd and to be able to really connect all of those dots and to work on really healing ourselves but again, giving people tools of new recipes, new cooking techniques, things that they're able to use rather than just coming in and saying, don't do this, don't eat so much sugar, don't eat so much whatever it is, but rather say like, look at all these other things that we can do.

**Justin Angle:** The way you approach your work seem to have such grace when it comes to the balance between being an educator, an educator who empowers people with important tools to improve themselves in their communities, but also activism too. You have a style of activism, if that's if you would accept that moniker that is welcoming and not ostracizing, and it doesn't sort of point the finger at folks and say, you're not welcome in this in this message.

**Mariah Gladstone:** I think that food is a really good vehicle for approaching a lot of subjects that can be challenging to talk about otherwise. Genocide is not a topic that people tend to approach, whereas food enables folks to have those hard conversations, but to talk about them in a different frame and again, to speak about things as systems of abundance rather than systems of scarcity, you know, to look at our home and our knowledge and all of these demonstrations of resilience, but also in a way where we're able to build off of that, use that as our foundational framework to continue moving forward.

**Justin Angle:** Well, Mariah, this has been wonderful, learning more about you, learning more about IndigiKitchen. If listeners want to learn more about you and your business, where would you point them online?

**Mariah Gladstone:** All of my work is available at in IndigiKitchen dot come. As well as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram at IndigiKitchen.

**Justin Angle:** Awesome. We're excited to follow along and yeah, thank you for sharing your story with us today.

**Mariah Gladstone:** Yeah, thanks for having me.

**Justin Angle:** Thanks for listening to A New Angle. We really appreciate it. And we're coming to you from Studio 49, a generous gift from UM alums Michele and Loren Hansen.

**Justin Angle:** A New Angle is presented by First Security Bank, Blackfoot Communications and the University of Montana College of Business, with additional support from Consolidated Electrical Distributors, Drum Coffee and Montana Public Radio. Keely Larson is our producer. VTO, Jeff Amentt and John Wicks made our music. Editing by Nick Mott, Social Media by Aj Williams, and Jeff Meese is our master of all things sound. Thanks a lot, and see you next time.