

Cobuilding healthy futures  
with Indigenous populations

A voice paper  
by Fondation Olo

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# MIROSKAMIN



Among the Atikamekw people, time flows with six seasons, each dictating the activities. Miroskamin, or spring, runs from May to June and means the awakening of nature. It's the season when grouse hunting and fishing begin.



# Introduction

Fondation Olo's position toward First Nations and Inuit communities in Quebec is first and foremost to listen.

The Olo care initiative has proven its worth across Quebec. However, Fondation Olo knows that each Indigenous population has its own specific particularities and does not pretend to know the ideal solution to address them. By ensuring that we don't work for the Indigenous communities, but rather in collaboration with them, we strive to develop strong relationships based on mutual respect and trust.

Fondation Olo recognizes the significant disparities faced by Quebec's First Nations and Inuit communities in terms of access to maternal and perinatal healthcare, as well as the systemic issues that prevent equal opportunity for these populations. Although published studies unanimously report the prevalence of health problems in these communities, Fondation Olo knows that there are many different realities that vary from one community to another.

Working with various Indigenous communities therefore takes many forms, depending on the needs and realities of the families who live in them. For example, the Olo care food voucher system is used in some communities, while in others, Fondation Olo funds the distribution of foods to facilitate access to certain nutritious products. Fondation Olo also translates some of its resources and tools into English, and is working on codeveloping and translating others into Indigenous languages to make them accessible.

In the spring of 2024, two Olo employees travelled the 407 kilometres between Montréal and the Atikamekw community of Wemotaci to meet the people who make Olo care possible and the families who benefit from it. This document is the result of various meetings and discussions about life in Wemotaci, with all its beauty and difficulties.



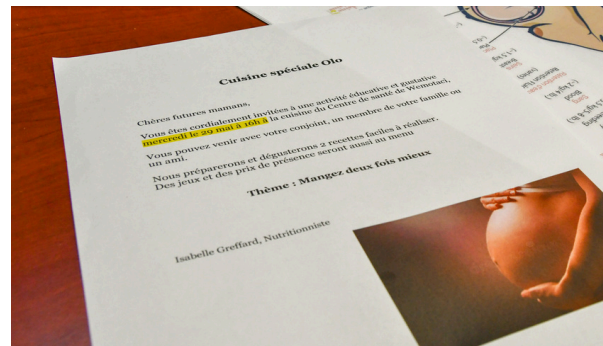


# Olo sets foot in Wemotaci

Deep in the mountains of Northern Quebec, bordered by the Saint-Maurice River, lies a village where dogs run free and time seems to slow down. Named Wemotaci, or “the mountain from which we observe” in the Atikamekw language, this Indigenous community surrounded by forest is resilient and proud of its traditions.

Isabelle Greffard knows this magnificent landscape like the back of her hand. Originally from La Tuque, the trained nutritionist first set foot in this community in November 2002. For over 20 years, she has supported this community of about 1,500 members from her office at the Wemotaci Health Centre.

Over the past 20 years, Isabelle has used her creativity to simplify basic nutrition concepts and help community members adopt healthy eating habits.







“When I started here, the hot topic was the high rate of diabetes. I used to lead a diabetes clinic in a natural setting, where several speakers gave presentations. We proposed hands-on activities as well as healthy, ready-to-taste menus and participants learned how to test their blood sugar before and after physical activity.”

- Isabelle



Since then, she has spearheaded countless initiatives. In 2007, for example, she introduced educational cooking workshops, for which she chooses a theme and recipes to cook and enjoy with participants at each meeting. She even supervised the renovation of the Health Centre's kitchen so that it could efficiently accommodate participants.

In 2012, with a colleague, she started the Mirokinaniwon project, inspired by the Olo care initiative.

“The project used homemade vouchers and we took inspiration from Olo's work.”



The collaboration between Fondation Olo and the Wemotaci community exists because of Isabelle's initiative. About a year ago, when she learned that Fondation Olo had a new team member in charge of codeveloping projects with Indigenous communities, she got in touch with that person to assess the possibilities.

“Collaborating with Fondation Olo means that we have not only financial, but also professional support. We have access to tools, training and many other resources. It also means being part of a community of practice where we can share our different realities and see what's being done elsewhere.”

We chat with Isabelle, then it's time to head for the grocery store. Tomorrow afternoon, we'll take part in one of her educational cooking workshops, and we have to go and buy the ingredients for the recipes.



A photograph of a grocery store produce section. The shelves are filled with various fruits in woven baskets. In the foreground, there are baskets of lemons and limes, with a price tag that reads "2.79 lb 6.15kg". Below that, there are baskets of kiwis and apples. In the background, there are more baskets of oranges and apples. A yellow price tag is visible on the right side of the image. The text "Eating well: an everyday challenge" is overlaid on the left side of the image in a bold, yellow font.

## Eating well: an everyday challenge

For Indigenous people, eating means much more than just cooking and feeding yourself. Traditional food, determined by the seasons and the land, is central to their culture. It is linked to tradition, spirituality, intergenerational sharing, cooperation and connection with the land.

Traditional Indigenous foods are those taken from the territory's flora or fauna through activities such as trapping, hunting, fishing or gathering. Long before the arrival of white people, these foods were part of a nomadic, active lifestyle that included a rich and healthy diet composed exclusively of unprocessed foods.

One of the many consequences of colonization is the adoption of a sedentary lifestyle by Indigenous populations and the decline of traditional food practices. Although these practices have not completely disappeared, we must recognize that people are now dependent on stores for their supplies. This change in consumption patterns has led to serious health problems and nutritional deficiencies. Some more remote communities find it hard to get fresh, healthy food in sufficient quantities. The products on the shelves are often high in fat, sugar and preservatives, while fresh products are much more expensive and often in poorer condition.

Although the food situations and landscapes vary from one community to another, a higher prevalence of diabetes and anemia is observed among Indigenous people than among the rest of Canadians.





In his office overlooking the few aisles of Wemotaci's Bonichoix, the community's only grocery store, Patrick searches his ordering system to find the new postnatal foods offered through Olo care. No need to explain how things work to the young manager. He already knows.

"Moms come to redeem Olo vouchers every day!"

Patrick asks us a few questions about the new foods offered during the postnatal period of Olo care, but is mainly concerned about delivery details to ensure that the products can handle travel on the road between La Tuque and Wemotaci.

"Suppliers don't come all the way here. What we order is delivered to a warehouse in La Tuque. That's as far as they go! After that, someone picks up the products and brings them to us."

Patrick explains that when there's a mechanical breakdown or severe weather, the truck can't make it. Accessible only by forestry road 25, Wemotaci is not the most remote Indigenous community, but it's still hard to reach, and access to certain products is therefore difficult.

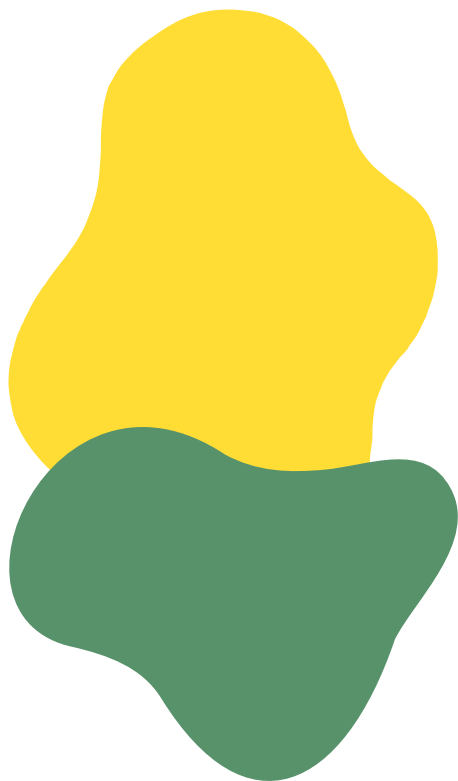
"It's hard to get fish because it has to be kept cool and delivered the same day it's received. Often, it's not possible."











Because of charges related to storage and delivery, the cost of food at the Wemotaci grocery store is high. The other option for families is to drive to La Tuque and stock up at a large supermarket, provided, of course, that they have a vehicle and money for gas, and that the weather is good, so they can make the 115-kilometre drive safely.

Fortunately for Wemotaci residents, food prices are still lower than in other remote communities. The reason is that the Wemotaci grocery store is based on a rather unusual business model.

“We’re not necessarily aiming for profit, it’s okay to be at zero at the end of the month. The important thing here is to provide jobs for people in the community.”

Patrick is the manager since last December and leads a team of 18 people.



# Cooking together for better learning



On this particular day, in the kitchen of the Wemotaci Health Centre, participants in Isabelle’s workshop sit around the large island. About twenty people came to the educational cooking workshop today: new mothers and their children, two dads, but mainly pregnant women. All these people came to listen to Isabelle, to get information and tools, and also to taste a few recipes.

The chaos slowly quiets down as children settle to draw at a table while parents sit and chat, waiting for the workshop to begin. A mix of Atikamekw and French resonates in the sunny kitchen.

Leaning against the large windows, mothers chat. One of them, Coralie, is 38 weeks pregnant.



“Aren’t you afraid you’ll give birth in your car?” asks Laurie, another woman with a round belly.

“A little,” admits Coralie, laughing “I’m not going to go wait in La Tuque, it’s too long.”

“I had to give birth in the city of Québec. I had family there to put me up. It’s not realistic to expect us to wait in La Tuque or Trois-Rivières,” adds Maully, quietly rocking her newborn baby.


Since Wemotaci lacks the facilities and personnel required to perform deliveries, women have to leave the community at 38 weeks of pregnancy to travel to a hospital centre where they can give birth. But some, like Cynthia, put it off for several reasons. Waiting in an unknown environment, being uncomfortable, costs and the need to organize a long journey are just some of the reasons mentioned. In some cases, women have to find someone to look after their other children. In other cases, they simply don't feel comfortable. Most women would prefer giving birth in their community, in their cultural environment and in accordance with their traditions.

When we speak with Eniko Neashish, the director of the Wemotaci Health Center, she explains to us that giving birth on the territory is an ancestral practice that is coming back, but current human, organizational and material resources do not easily allow it.

In her soft voice, she tells us that the team from Wemotaci's health center and the La Tuque obstetrics unit have promoted the development of a trajectory for monitoring pregnant women and their childbirth. If they wish, Atikamekw women in Wemotaci now have access to the service of interpreters during childbirth and follow-up.





A scenic landscape featuring a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. Below the sky is a dense green forest. In the foreground, a calm river reflects the sky and surrounding greenery. A yellow abstract shape is positioned in the lower right corner of the image.

Indigenous Services Canada pays for accommodations for expectant mothers and provides a food allowance of \$70 per day for the first week of travel. After that, the food allowance is \$100 a week for the rest of the time spent away from the community, which is not a lot of money to eat. In some cases, this time spent away from the community can cause or aggravate food insecurity and economic precariousness.

What's more, giving birth outside the community can be difficult for all the logistical reasons mentioned above, but also because of the psychological impacts of such an undertaking and of the broken connection with the cultural setting. Fortunately, awareness of the need to offer culturally safe care is being raised in some hospital settings, but there's still much to do.





Iron deficiency is a real problem in Indigenous communities, and many people suffer from iron deficiency anemia. These deficiencies can have consequences on physical capacities and resistance to infections. In children, research shows that an insufficient iron intake during the first 1,000 days is linked to delayed emotional, cognitive and motor development. Avoiding these harmful consequences for the development of babies and their future is one of the reasons that prompted Fondation Olo to introduce iron-rich products in its postnatal food offer.

Isabelle quietly draws the group's attention as the workshop is about to start. She begins by officially welcoming everyone, then she starts talking about the balanced plate using Olo's tool. While Isabelle gives a demonstration to explain the importance of iron in the diet, we start preparing a salmon spread recipe for the tasting.

“Since food is more expensive in [Indigenous] communities, families often don't take the risk of buying unfamiliar products to try them out. That's why tastings are so important. They give participants the opportunity to taste new foods and learn how to include them in their diet,” explains Isabelle.

Our spread made with canned salmon and ingredients available at the local grocery store is an excellent source of iron and omega-3. Isabelle explains the importance of these nutrients and invites everyone to try the spread. Children are the first to venture a taste, while their parents are more reluctant. After a while, one of the moms decides to try and bites into a salmon-covered cracker. The others watch her reaction. She nods her head in satisfaction and encourages the others to give it a try. Gradually, the plate of crackers empties, and we soon have to prepare more.





It's now time to prepare the vegetable soup, using the recipe found on Olo's blog. The room quickly fills with a pleasant aroma. A mother helps us hand out the bowls and we proudly taste the soup while Isabelle leads a quiz on food categories.

The educational cooking workshop is coming to an end, and it's another great success. Little by little, some participants collect their belongings and leave, while others linger and chat. A few people take leftover soup and copies of today's recipes to make again at home. Lysianne, who is expecting a baby boy, stays to confirm her next appointment with Isabelle. At 22 weeks of pregnancy, she benefits from Olo care and is learning to better manage her diabetes.

“There are more vegetables on my plate now that I have consultations with Isabelle! She helps me eat better and I feel well supported during this first pregnancy,” she tells me.

Once everyone is gone, we wash the dishes and store the pots in the large cupboards, ready for the next educational cooking workshop.





# Potential solutions

Our visit to Wemotaci wasn't very long, but it was rich in encounters and learning. As for the Olo care initiative, we cannot talk about it without mentioning the colossal work and dedication of professionals like Isabelle, without whom our ambitions would be no more than unattainable ideals. It's also unthinkable to talk about that visit without mentioning the strength and determination of the people of Wemotaci, who continue to find solutions to the challenges they face.

Our visit to Atikamekw land confirmed that, by working together, we can promote the birth of healthy babies and the development of healthy eating habits throughout the province.

Here are a few of the ways in which Fondation Olo is working to be an effective ally for members of Quebec's First Nations and Inuit communities.

## **Adapting our tools**

Fondation Olo is rethinking some of its tools to make them even more relevant in an Indigenous context. Whether by including traditional nutrition in its educational tools on healthy eating, or by translating them into English or Indigenous languages, Fondation Olo continues to reflect and adapt its offering based on the needs observed in the field.

## **Developing relationships with other Indigenous communities**

Relationships with Indigenous communities require continued, adapted efforts and special attention. Fondation Olo continues to discuss with several Indigenous friendship centres and communities to codevelop solutions adapted to the realities of each and every one of them. Such an approach requires appropriate, dedicated funding.

## **Supporting community partners and local initiatives**

Fondation Olo has been supporting community-based organizations with a specialized offering since 2018, and strongly believes that collaboration between these organizations and the health and social services network is paramount for a healthy future. That is why Fondation Olo wants to maintain the Financial Support for Local Initiatives in Community Organizations project, which allocates funds to support cooking activities conducted by organizations such as educational kitchens and other promising projects in Indigenous communities with whom Olo collaborates and beyond.



# Acknowledgements

First of all, mikwetc to the entire Wemotaci community for welcoming us so warmly.

A huge thank you to Isabelle Greffard for her welcome, her time and her proactivity in making this project possible. Thank you, Isabelle, for your authenticity and commitment! Your passion for your work is inspiring and your dedication is remarkable.

Many thanks to Eniko Neashish and Maryse Weizineau, as well as to the staff of the Wemotaci Health Centre, and to all those who took the time to share their stories with us.

Finally, thank you to everyone who helped make this project possible!

## Miroskamin

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## About Fondation Olo

Fondation Olo's mission is to provide families with an equal chance of bringing a healthy baby into the world and of introducing them to healthy eating habits early on. It acts during the first 1,000 days of the child, from pregnancy until the child is two years old, a crucial period for their development. By working within the health and social services network with Olo Care, with community organizations and indigenous communities, Fondation Olo fights against three barriers to healthy eating: access to nutritious food, nutritional knowledge and capacity for action. Since 1991, it has helped more than 250,000 babies be born healthier in Quebec and helps prevent food inequalities while mitigating their consequences.