

Going With the Grain

On Minnesota lakes, Native Americans satisfy a growing hunger for "slow food" by harvesting authentically wild rice the old-fashioned way

By Lauren Wilcox

Photographs by Layne Kennedy

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Come September in northern Minnesota, on lakes on the Ojibwa lands, harvesters, two per canoe, pole through thick clusters of wild rice plants growing along the marshy shores. One stands in the stern like a gondolier; the other sits midships and uses a pair of carved cedar "knocking" sticks to sweep the tall grasses over the bow. The rice, still in its hull, falls into the boat with a soft patter.

Ricing is a picturesque tradition, but on the White Earth Indian Reservation, where unemployment approaches 50 percent, it spells survival. "It's not a pastime," says Andrea Hanks, a local Ojibwa. "It's work." Each autumn, several hundred Ojibwa harvest more than 50,000 pounds of wild rice, selling most of it to local mills. Unlike commercially grown wild rice—which is crossbred for hardiness, raised in paddies and harvested with combines—the Ojibwa's grows naturally, in muddy shallows. Called manoomin in Ojibwa, it is the mature seeds of several varieties of the grass species *Zizania aquatica*.

The White Earth Land Recovery Project, run by political activist and tribe member Winona LaDuke, was started 18 years ago to preserve the harvest and boost the tribe's share of the proceeds. It operates a mill on the reservation and markets Native Harvest wild rice to specialty stores around the country (and through nativeharvest.com). Ojibwa wild rice is one of only five U.S. products supported by the Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity, an international organization based in Italy that aims to preserve traditional or artisan foods.

On a drizzly September morning, the Recovery Project's mill is a dusty, smoky hive of activity. Bringing the freshly harvested rice in still-dripping sacks, the ricers come by twos: fathers and sons, uncles and nephews, husbands and wives. Most are straight from the lakes, their cuffs still wet, inchworms clinging to their clothes, canoes lashed to their cars and pickups. Fresh-off-the-stalk rice is pale green and encased in a long, thin hull. In the old days, Native Americans toasted it over fires and stomped on it to remove the husks. The mill parches the covered seeds in great wood-fired ovens that can turn a total of 600 pounds at a time. "I can tell just from listening when it's done," says Pat Wichern, who has operated the parchers for ten years. "It starts sizzling, kind of singing in there."

After the rice has cooled, machines remove the hulls and sort the grains by size. The final product, cooked, tastes nothing like commercially grown wild rice: it is toothsome and nutty, with the exotic, earthy tang of fresh lake water. Some local residents say they can tell which lake a batch of rice came from just by the taste of it.

At this time of year, Wichern keeps the parcher stoked from sunup to sundown. Today, the mill is paying \$1.25 a pound; in a few days, it will be \$2, the highest in 20 years, to draw more ricers to the mill. Tribe member Donald Stevens has gathered seven bags in two days, for a total of 353 pounds. LaDuke hands him \$441. He grins. "Not bad for the weekend, eh?" he says.

Many people on the reservation, says LaDuke, patch together a living off the land: trapping leeches for bait stores, ice fishing, berry picking, hunting and trapping, making maple syrup. And the men and women who bring rice to the mill do seem drawn by the prospect of cash in hand. Several wear boots that gape at the seams. One man stops his car at the end of the road and staggers with his bags of rice almost a hundred yards on foot. His car, he says, is running out of gas.

Yet there's no denying the appeal of being out on the lakes during the "wild rice moon," a part of tribal life for some 600 years. Ricing is so central to the Ojibwa it's part of the tribe's founding myth—the creator told the tribe to seek out the place where food grows on the water. Tribesman George Chilton, 90, last went ricing five years ago. "I poled and knocked," he recalls. "Oh, it was hard work. But I sure wish I could get out there now."

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