Wild Rice Moon

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One evening Nanaboozhoo returned from hunting, but he had no game. ... As he came towards his fire, there was a duck sitting on the edge of his kettle of boiling water. After the duck flew away, Nanaboozhoo looked into the kettle and found wild rice floating upon the water, but he did not know what it was. He ate his supper from the kettle, and it was the best soup he had ever tasted. Later, he followed in the direction the duck had taken and came to a lake full of manoomin. He saw all kinds of duck and geese and mudhens, and all the other water birds eating the grain. After that, when Nanaboozhoo did not kill a deer, he knew where to find food to eat.

It's September, Wild Rice Moon in the north country. The lakes teem with a harvest and a way of life.

"Ever since I was bitty, I've been ricing," reminisces Spud Fineday. Each fall, he and his wife, Tater, rice at Cabin Point and Big Flat Lake on Minnesota's White Earth Reservation. They alternate the jobs of "poling" (pushing the canoe through the water with a 10-foot pole) and "knocking" (the gentle gathering and tapping ofrice stalks with two sticks to release the rice into the boat). "Sometimes we can knock four to five hundred pounds a day," Spud says.

The Finedays, like many other Anishinaabeg (Ojibwe) in the region, rice to feed their families, to buy school clothes and fix cars, and to get ready for the ever-returning winter. But the wild rice harvest is also a cultural tradition that ties the community to other generations and to all that is essentially Anishinaabeg.

Manoomin, or wild rice, is a gift to the Anishinaabeg from the Creator, Gichi Manidoo. In the earliest teachings of Anishinaabeg history, wild rice was known as "the food that grows upon the water." The ancestors were told that when they found it, they would know when to end their migration to the west. Manoomin is a food that is uniquely Anishinaabeg, the centerpiece of our community's nutrition and sustenance, our ceremonies, and our thanksgiving feasts.

Unfortunately, this same wild rice exemplifies the worldwide debate on issues of biodiversity, culture, and globalization.

Economic and biological change

There is, it seems, a direct link between loss of biodiversity and industrialization in foods. Corporate agribusiness today markets over 95 percent of the food on grocery store shelves, and the consolidation under way in the food industry is mirrored in the wild rice industry.

The first step was "domestication," turning wild rice strains into an elongated, shatter-resistant variety that could be industrially/mechanically harvested.

In 1968, with the help of the University of Minnesota, aggressive production of paddy wild rice production began. That year it represented some 20 percent of the state's harvest. By 1973, paddy rice production had increased the state's yield from less than a million pounds to some 4 million pounds. The increase in production and subsequent interest by the larger corporations such as Uncle Ben's, Green Giant, and General Foods, skewed consumers' perceptions and altered the market for traditional wild rice.

In 1977, the state legislature designated wild rice as Minnesota's official state grain – a move that may well have been the kiss of death for the lake wild rice crop. Financed by an outpouring from the state coffers, the University of Minnesota began aggressively to develop a domesticated version of wild rice, and by the early 1980s, production of cultivated wild rice had outstripped that of the indigenous varieties. Then the industry moved to California. By 1983, California's crop, at 8.3 million pounds, easily surpassed Minnesota's, at 5 million pounds. By 1986, more than 95 percent of the "wild" rice harvested was paddy grown, the vast majority produced in northern California. When the glut of paddy-grown wild rice hit the market in 1986, the price plummeted, dampening the emerging domestic market and devastating the Native wild rice economy. Lakeside prices crashed.

But it's not just economics that worries the White Earth Tribal Council and other Indians. It's also biology. "We're concerned with the possible cross breeding of these hybrid cultivated varieties with our lake rice," says tribal spokesperson Joe LaGarde. The differences between wild rice beds are well known to local harvesters. Some plants grow tall and live in deep water; others have adapted to shallow water. Some strains have fat grains, others long. "There's sand bottom rice, muddy bottom rice, all of that," LaGarde says. The tribal

council wrote a letter to the University of Minnesota asking them to "quit messing with the rice."

The White Earth Band is also concerned that the lake rice crop is diminishing. One culprit is water levels – who controls them and why. Dale Greene, a traditional leader from the Rice Lake Band of Anishinaabeg, claims that a decline in production began in 1934 at Rice Lake, near McGregor, Minnesota, when the US Fish and Wildlife Service dammed the lake and managed it for waterfowl production. Organic material was then trapped in the water. "There's so much sediment, the seeds never get to the bottom to germinate," Greene says. "There used to be 300 to 500 boats out here. Now, maybe 40, in a good year."

Other threats to the wild rice harvest include invasive plants, pollution, boat traffic, agricultural runoff, and beavers. Though beavers have coexisted with rice beds for thousands of years, a decline in trapping and the virtual removal of natural predators means beavers, with all their ambition, rule the northern waters in the end. Today there is much less state regulatory interest in ecological preservation of the rice than when natural rice predominated. There are fewer buyers, at lower prices.

Together, these factors translate into a loss of genetic diversity, which is essential, even to the paddy rice industry.

Ervin Oelke, a University of Minnesota wild rice agronomist who nurtured the paddy crop, is concerned. "Wild rice is a reservoir of genetic diversity," Oelke points out. "We are in the process of domesticating the species. It's important we have all the genetics that are available to us to develop this crop."

All of these factors inevitably link the wild rice of a remote Native community to worldwide debates on biodiversity, genetic engineering, and indeed, the future of our foods.

Strengthening local production

A pick-up truck pulls up at the new rice mill at Native Harvest on Round Lake. Eugene Davis and Tony Warren, tired, wet, and happy, have brought 300 pounds of rice off South Chippewa Lake. "This is the only job we can make $50 an hour at up here," says Eugene, a young man of 20.

He doesn't mind the rain, either. "I like it when it rains out there. It's nice. You can't hear anything but the rain."

That quiet and peace is what brings the ricers back – along with the memories. I ask him if it matters to him that five generations of his family have riced on South Chippewa Lake. He smiles. "I like knowing that they was on the same lake. It makes me feel good."

The sweet smell of rice parching wafts through the dusty air. The shifting, creaking machines are ancient, some handmade: a 1940s Red Clipper fanning mill, a handmade thrasher, a 1980s set of George Stinson parching drums (a regional celebrity), a '50s vintage gravity table. Most new equipment is made for the big operations in California, not for here. The men fiddle with the machines, fine tune the gravity table. Then the rice pours out – a stream of dark green, tan, and brown grains. This is the perfection of the small batch, and the simple joy of this life.

To the ricers of White Earth, the Ojibwe Wild Rice Moon, Manoominikegiizis, is the season of harvest, a ceremony, and a way of life. "I grew up ricing ," reflects Spud Fineday. "You get to visit people you haven't seen for a whole year, because just about everyone goes ricing."

Far away in California, a combine is harvesting paddy-grown wild rice, and consumers are eating a very different food. The Anishinaabeg would not trade for the rice or the combine. In the end, our rice tastes like a lake. And that taste cannot be replicated.

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