



Under the Wild Rice Moon

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PONSFORD, MINN.—It is the wild rice moon in the North Country, and the lakes teem with harvest and a way of life.

“Ever since I was bitty, I’ve been ricing,” says Spud Fineday of Ice Cracking Lake. Spud, with his wife, Tater, this year started ricing at Cabin Point, and then moved to Big Flat Lake, lakes within the borders of the Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge.

“Sometimes we can knock four to five hundred pounds a day,” he says, explaining that he alternates the jobs of “poling and knocking” with Tater, a.k.a. Vanessa Fineday.

The Finedays, like many other Anishinaabeg from White Earth and other reservations in the region, continue to rice to feed their families, to “buy school clothes and fix cars,” and get ready for the ever-returning winter. The wild rice harvest of the Anishinaabeg not only feeds the body; it feeds the soul, continuing a tradition that is generations old for these people of the lakes and rivers of the North.

The ricing tradition that Spud Fineday has practiced since childhood is a community event, a cultural event that ties the community in all its generations to all that is essentially Anishinaabeg, Ojibwe.

As the story is told, Nanaboozhoo, the cultural hero of the Anishinaabeg, was introduced to rice by fortune and a duck.

“One evening Nanaboozhoo returned from hunting, but he had no game. . . . As he came toward his fire, he saw 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 ducks 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. . . ."

Manoomin, or wild rice, is a gift given to the Anishinaabeg from the creator, and is a centerpiece of the nutrition and sustenance for our community. The word *manoomin* contains a reference to the creator, who is known as *Gichi Manidoo*. In the earliest of teachings of Anishinaabeg history, there is a reference to wild rice known as the food that grows upon the water, the food the ancestors were told to find so we would know when to end our migration to the west.

It is this profound and historic relationship that is remembered in the wild rice harvest on the White Earth and other reservations—a food that is uniquely ours, and a food that is used in our daily lives, our ceremonies and in our thanksgiving feasts. It is that same wild rice that, ironically, exemplifies the worldwide debate on issues of biodiversity, culture and globalization.

The crispness of early fall touches my face as we paddle through the rice on Blackbird Lake. Four eagles fly overhead, and a flock of geese moves gracefully across the sky. Through the rice, I can see officers of the law, ensconced in their work. They are ricing. Eugene Clark, a.k.a. Beebzo (Ogema mayor and Becker County deputy sheriff), and John MacArthur, a Mahnomen County sheriff, are Anishinaabeg, and they are police officers. Today they are continuing the harvesting tradition. As they move swiftly through the rice bed, MacArthur is knocking and Clark is poling.

Both men began ricing as teenagers. "We're out here to eat, not to make money," they tell me. They are ricing for their families. On this day, they bring in a couple of hundred pounds of green rice.

Ronnie Chilton is working at the Native Harvest (White Earth Land Recovery Project) rice mill. He too has a long connection to ricing. "I've riced my whole life, most of the time with my dad." He considers ricing a part of his family's tradition as well, and wishes he were on a lake, even as I am interviewing him.

It's said that there are fewer rice buyers this year on the reservation, although Beebzo maintains that "there were more people at the rice permit drawing [for Tamarac Lakes] than vote in most elections." There are also lots of ricers. By two weeks into ricing season, Native Harvest bought from 30 or 40 ricers.

There is always a debate about the rice crop—this year is deemed by many to be better than the last few. However, Big Rice Lake, in the northwest corner of the reservation, is seen as sort of the Shangri-La of rice—the paradise for ricers. A perceived reduction in the crop on that lake causes opinions to fly. The reasons are speculative: high water levels, agricultural herbicide runoff, the usual suspects.

"It used to be you would get lost in the rice on that lake," Russell Warren, a 20-year rice processor, tells me. "They used to have to put flags up at the landings, so you could find your way back. It's the fertilizer, and the runoff, that ruins the crop."

As with farmers anywhere, there's much discussion as to the status of the crop, the international markets and their subsequent impact on local production and the preservation (or lack of preservation) by state officials of the water quality around the rice crop. There may well be a diminished interest in the Native-harvested rice, as the big food companies—Stouffer's, Uncle Ben's, Gourmet House and the others—drive a paddy wild rice market, the vast majority of it out of state.

MIRROR OF CHANGE

This fall, the state's Agriculture Department discusses a probable 10 percent decline of the farmers in this northwest region, attributed to the economy, the weather and yet another bad year. I am struck by how the transformation of agriculture from family farms to large corporate farms is mirrored in the wild rice indus-

try. Consumer and biodiversity scholars maintain that the recent enactment of multilateral trade agreements (i.e., GATT) means that, for the first time, multinational corporations are within reach of controlling the planet's genetic wealth. Indeed, this is reflected in food production, processing and marketing, where today corporate agribusiness manufactures and markets over 95 percent of the food in the United States. We increasingly rely upon a smaller group of sources for food.

The concentrated control over not only food production but the seeds themselves has become a significant controversy, as local varieties disappear and farmers lose control over their seeds. Patents are bought and sold, and the actual life itself becomes a market commodity. Many of the seed companies have been acquired by multinational chemical corporations. According to the most recent issue of *Consumer Reports* magazine, Monsanto, for example, has spent nearly \$8 billion since 1996, purchasing seed companies. Dupont is buying Pioneer Hi-Bred. According to the Worldwatch Institute, these combined purchases make Dupont and Monsanto, respectively, the world's largest and second-largest seed companies.

A similar concentration is underway in the wild rice industry. Minnesota's paddy wild rice production began aggressively in 1968, representing roughly 20 percent of the state's crop by the harvest of that year. Paddy rice production increased the available quantities of wild rice, and by 1973 had increased the yield to some 4 million pounds. The increase in production, and interest by the larger corporations (i.e., Uncle Ben's, Green Giant and General Foods), in many ways skewed perceptions of wild rice and altered the market for traditional wild rice. In 1977 the Minnesota Legislature designated wild rice as the official state grain.

That was perhaps the kiss of death for the lake wild rice crop. With an outpouring from state coffers, the University of Minnesota began aggressively to develop a domesticated version of wild rice. By the early 1980s, cultivated wild rice had outstripped the indigenous varieties in production. Ironically, Minnesota lost control over wild rice production to California, which by 1983

produced more than 8.3 million pounds, compared with Minnesota's 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 wild rice hit the market in 1986, the price plummeted, not only affecting the newly emerging domesticated market but devastating the Native wild rice economy.

Now, ricer Joe LaGarde, the White Earth Tribal Council and other Indians are concerned not only with economics but also with biology. "Man thinks he can improve on something that's been developing over thousands of years. Eventually, he might end up with nothing," LaGarde says. He's concerned about the genetic strains of paddy rice and their possible impact on the lake rice crop. Every ricer knows that the rice is distinct between lakes.

"There's sand-bottom rice (usually shorter grains), muddy-bottom rice, all of that," Joe explains. "We're concerned about the possible [crossbreeding] of these 'hybrid cultivated varieties' with our lake rice." The White Earth Tribal Council even wrote a letter to the University of Minnesota asking it to "quit messing with the rice," Joe says.

He is worried, and remembers a childhood spent ricing at Mitchell Dam on the Refuge, camping for a week or so. He'd like to keep that memory a part of a living culture, not a relic of the pre-industrialized agriculture age.

Meanwhile, the wild rice market now serves consumers who demand a big black grain, rice that boils up exactly at the same pace as white rice. That market is huge. Jerry Schochenmaier is the general manager of Indian Harvest Wild Rice Co., in Bemidji, Minnesota. An affable fellow, Schochenmaier is a major promoter of wild rice, and is interested in the preservation of the wild harvesting of the rice, and the Native community.

Interestingly enough, Indian Harvest, which is the nation's largest wild rice processor, is pretty much an operation with few "Indians," although some lake rice is in its program. The plants and operations, for the most part, are in California, where this

year Schochenmaier expects to process around 75 percent of the national crop. Indian Harvest reflects the national trends and market in wild rice, which remains focused on the cultivated varieties.

Schochenmaier has been in the wild rice business since the fall of 1997. In 1989, Indian Harvest processed some 1 million pounds. By 1994, production was up to 6 million pounds, increasing to a projected 13 million pounds this year. "The rice mill was originally designed to be in Bemidji"—the footings for the building are still at Bemidji's industrial park—"but California was identified as the place to produce rice if you were going into the business," he says.

The rice found in the major markets is quite different from the rice most of us see in northern Minnesota. Commercially processed wild rice, for Uncle Ben's, Gourmet House, Pillsbury, Stouffer's, General Mills, ConAgra and the other big companies, is processed black and scarified, so as "to get its cook time to match that of white rice," explains Schochenmaier. That way, those who seek to create "gourmet" meals can ensure that their meals are brought to the table in a timely manner.

While international taste buds and global corporations have one idea of what wild rice is, their market-driven impacts have been felt on the lakes of Becker County and throughout the North Country.

RETURN IN THE RAIN

A pickup pulls up at the rice mill. Eugene Davis and Tony Warren bring in around 300 pounds of rice from South Chippewa Lake. They are tired, wet from the recurring morning rain, but they are happy.

"This is the only job we can make \$50 an hour at up here," 19-year-old Eugene Davis tells me. "I like it when it rains out there. It's nice, you can't hear anything but the rain."

It is that peace which brings the ricers back. It is also the memories. I ask Eugene Davis what he thinks about the fact that probably five or ten generations of his family have been on that

same lake. "I like knowing that they were on the same lake. makes me feel good," he responds, and smiles.

Receiving the rice are Ronnie Chilton, Pat Wichern, Pete Jackson and a few other men who gather under some tarps at the offices of the White Earth Land Recovery Program on Round Lake. The sweet smell of parching rice wafts through the dusty air, ancient machines shift and creak as the husks blow off, and the rice slowly moves through a long chain of events. The air is filled with dust from the rice. Ronnie, Pat, and Pete look a bit like Anishinaabeg chimney sweeps, covered in rice hulls, but smiling beneath all of it.

The equipment is ancient, and much of it handmade—a 1940s Red Clipper fanning mill, a handmade thrasher, a 1980s set of George Stinson (a Deer River celebrity) parching drums, a '50s-vintage gravity table.

The men fiddle with the machines, fine-tune the gravity table, and then the rice comes out—colors of dark green, tan and brown. They are local producers, and this is the perfection of the small batch, and the simple joy of this life. Ronnie, Pete and Pat grin through the dust. They are doing their job. This rice, like that of their ancestors, is going to feed families and feed spirits.

To Pat, Ronnie, Spud, Tater and the rest of the ricers of White Earth, this season, the Ojibwe Wild Ricing Moon—*Manoominigiizis*—is the season of a harvest, a ceremony and a way of life.

"I grew up doing that," reflects Spud Fineday. "You get to visit people you haven't seen for a whole year, because just about everyone goes ricing."

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