

Manomin_The_Story_Of_Wild_Rice_1989.txt

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Manomin: The Story Of Wild Rice Michelle Meyer

*Many of our members have asked for articles that focus on the use of wild food plants. Many thanks to Michelle Meyer for this informative and thoughtful study. Michelle works directly with Kagiwosa Manomin Inc. the only major Native Indian controlled and operated, wild rice processor in North America. Editor

For most of us, wild rice remains a gourmet food delicacy which we only have the opportunity to enjoy on rare, special occasions. We relish the unique flavour as part of a dish mixed with regular white or brown rice or as one of many ingredients in a turkey stuffing at Thanksgiving or Christmas. Few of us are aware of its longevity and significance in the diverse and little discussed history of the Native peoples of North America.

Wild rice is in fact a misnomer for a grain bearing aquatic plant identified scientifically as belonging to the family Gramineae, the genus *Zizania* and the species *aquatica* or *palustris*. It is a very distant relative of the domesticated, Asian white or brown rice we eat regularly. Fossilized wild rice pollen dates back to 500 B.C.E. while archaeological evidence indicates that there were inhabitants of wild rice areas as early as 7000 B.C.E. The importance of wild rice in the diet of North American Native Indians certainly dates back into prehistory.

Wild rice or wild oats were the non-Native names given to a food stuff the Native Ojibwa population called manomin. Manomin derives from Manitou, the name of the Great Spirit, and Meenum which means delicacy. Ojibwa elders refer to it as *Manitou gi ti gahn* or food from God's garden. Manomin has shared a wide variety of names given it by numerous Native tribes such as the Dakota (Sioux), the Miami, the Omaha, the Osage, the Potawatomi, the Seminole (Florida), and the Seneca (New York) who all have used it as a food staple.

Wild rice is the only naturally occurring grain in North America. Other grains such as wheat, barley and oats were imported from the Old World (Europe). It is the single most nutritive food the Native Indians consumed in their traditional diet although it was not sufficient in itself to maintain good health over long periods of time.

Wild Rice Habitat - Originally, before the onslaught of European settlement, wild rice grew naturally over a fairly large portion of North America, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Rockies and from the Gulf of Mexico to near the Hudson Bay (above the 50th parallel). The expansive wild rice habitat shrunk rapidly with the non-Native population expansion which saw the conversion of

land from wilderness to farms, industrial growth and changes in water quality. The most concentrated regions are in Northwestern Ontario and Manitoba west and north of Thunder Bay to Winnipeg, in the upper two-thirds of Wisconsin and east of the Mississippi River in Minnesota. These regions still produce wild rice today. Wild rice has also been carried to and seeded in Saskatchewan and Alberta. Wild rice grown in California is not naturally occurring. (It is produced through artificial paddy seeding of a hybrid form of the original species which is fertilized and sprayed with pesticides.)

The Plant - Wild rice reseeds itself naturally in areas of circulating mineral-rich water. Water levels vary from 1 to 12 feet. It will not grow in stagnant or fast moving waters. It requires dense alluvial mud deposits for its roots to hold. The seeds are heavy and sink. The barbed end anchors the seed firmly in the soft muddy bottom. Aeration of the bed occurs in the spring when the ice floats to the top of the melting river or lake bringing up the old roots and plants which afterwards sink again.

The best areas for wild rice are the headwaters of major rivers. The naturally occurring stands are found in the undulating channels. The rice bed spreads gradually downstream. In the mid 1800's, wild rice stands were recorded as stretching for thousands of acres near the Winnipeg River. Today, the larger stands are 320 acres of dense crop.

Following seed germination with the snow melt, the wild rice plant develops a straight root and grows long leaves under water to derive energy from the sun. By the end of May, these leaves are 1 to 5 feet long and have reached the water's surface. By late June, new leaves have grown and float on the water surface. Within two more weeks, aerial leaves are formed. In early July,

the stalk appears above water and begins to form fruit primordia which develop into pale yellow green blossoms, delicately shaded with reddish purple. The stalk resembles bamboo and can grow as much as 8 feet above water. By mid July, a shoot emerges from each stalk and in August, each stalk terminates in a panicle with male pollen-filled flowers below female flowers. When wind pollinated, the upper flowers develop into the seed or grain which is harvested over a three week period usually beginning the last week in August.

Manomin is a sensitive plant. It does not tolerate chemical pollutants or great changes in water level during its growth cycle between germination in mid April and its full ripe stage in late August or early September. The introduction of hydro dams in the mid-nineteenth century was devastating to the wild rice stands as was the wide spread slaughter of beavers for their pelts. The slow currents downstream from beaver dams were ideal for the plant.

The profitable harvesting and sale of wild rice by non-Natives led to widespread premature harvesting using techniques which seriously damaged the plant stalks and reduced the reseeding because the grain was not ripe enough to germinate. Insect, bird and weather damage have not been nearly as significant a destructive force upon the existence of wild rice as has Non-Native interference in the name of growth, development and profit.

Wild Rice As Food- Wild rice or manomin was a significant part of the secured traditional subsistence of the Ojibwa Indians over the past three centuries. Ethnographers observed in the first half of this century that the Ojibwa increased their numbers considerably during the past two hundred years while other tribes suffered gruesome decimation. This they attributed to their close

connection to a secure subsistence basis provided by the wild rice district. Wild rice was the principle staple of Indians in the rice district, particularly the Ojibwa, as the number of plant foods they used was one of the lowest for Great Lakes tribes.

Wild rice was more nutritious than any other food consumed by the Indians containing high levels of protein, potassium and magnesium and significant amounts of a variety of trace minerals and vitamins. It was eaten as a porridge or in combination with venison, moose, blueberries or maple syrup. It was also used to thicken soups. Processed manomin was ground into flour and mixed with oats to make bread. Babies were weaned with manomin at about ten months of age.

During the harvesting season, families would indulge in many meals of manomin including eating some freshly harvested green (unprocessed rice). The remaining rice was immediately cured and preserved for use for the rest of the year. Sometimes, during a naming ceremony feast, the wild rice was popped like popcorn and served with maple sugar as a special treat. The popped rice was sometimes carried by the men when they were out hunting or fishing.

The Spiritual Significance of Manomin - Ojibwa life elevates manomin above being simply food. It is a sacred food which is harvested, processed and eaten with a deep respect and reverence. Wild rice is deeply imbedded in the mythology and ceremony of the Ojibwa.

Ojibwa legends make it clear that manomin was intended especially for the Native Indian people. The story of Nanabojo's discovery of manomin confirms this. Nanabojo is sent on a vision quest by his grandmother and discovers a beautiful plant in the lake he is

canoeing in. He plants some of the seeds with his grandmother in other lakes and then discovers that he can eat the seeds after learning that the roots made him sick.

Manomin is eaten in celebration at the annual Pow-wow thanksgiving feast and at numerous other ceremonies. The thanksgiving ceremony ensured that the spirits would continue the bounty in future years. Smaller family feasts around naming and curing ceremonies also included manomin. In the Drum Dance, the wild rice was first blown in the four cardinal directions "on the wind to be carried to the Great Spirit".

Manomin was used as part of the food offering at the graves of deceased relatives. The grave had a house on top with a window on one side into which food was inserted at regular intervals for years. Those who were in a year of bereavement were restricted from ricing without a taboo release. This involved their being spoon fed some of the first food (manomin) gathered.

Manomin was seen as a special gift. This is reflected not only in its use in ceremony but as well its use as a medicine to promote recovery from sickness. Failure of the crop was attributed to supernatural causes.

Non-natives started to grow wild rice scientifically about the time the traditional legends celebrating the importance of manomin to the native peoples were on their way to becoming extinct.

The Traditional Harvest - The traditional Native Indian lifestyle was one oriented to seasonal activities, not necessarily the legal statutes of the dominant society. The gathering and processing of wild foods, particularly manomin, required the participation of the entire family. At the beginning of the harvesting season, there was a mass movement of the Band community to the location of the rice stands. Camps were

established to allow processing to take place immediately following the harvesting of the green rice.

Traditional harvesting and processing took place in six distinct stages. These were: the binding of the rice plants, the knocking of the ripe grain into harvesting canoes, the drying of the rice, the smoking or parching of the grain, the hulling of the seed and the winnowing of the rice to remove the chaff. A certain quantity of processed manomin was stored in caches for the latter part of winter and the next summer.

Two or three weeks before harvest, the Band women would go out into the rice stands and bind the rice stalks in preparation for harvesting. A special curved stick was used to pull down the 4 to 5 foot tall stalks which were then wrapped with "Indian" string made from the inner bark of cedar torn into narrow strips and rolled into balls. This elaborate system included a birch bark ring sewn onto the woman's garment at the shoulder which allowed the string to run through smoothly. A group of stalks was bent into an inverted "U" and required up to 12 feet of string for binding.

Stalk binding served several functions including: the protection of rice kernels from the wind, birds and ducks; increasing the harvest yield from more efficient knocking of the seed into the boat; the provision of channels for boat travel during the harvesting process and the delineation of family ricing territories by the colour and type of string binding done in a specific rice stand.

Rice binding was abandoned by the period of the First World War. In certain areas, economic alternatives such as guiding, lumber mill work and sale of cranberries could have decreased the number of harvesters while store bought food increasingly replaced

traditional food sources. Clearly, the "white" influence led to a breakdown of ricing traditions including the violation of customary property rights within the rice stands as economic motives led to premature harvesting and increased numbers of harvesters in some areas. This in turn resulted in the decline of the rice fields because of this disregard for "proper" ricing techniques. Today, only "free" (unbound) rice is harvested.

Until 1940, 10 to 12 foot birch bark canoes or dug outs were specially made for rice harvesting. The boats were cleaned and lined with blankets or canvass to gather the ripe manomin. Since then, wooden boats, aluminum or fibreglass canoes and more recently motorized canoes and mechanical air boats have been used. Motorized boats have damaged the crops by uprooting the plants. The manually propelled boats needed one of the two occupants to pole the boat through the dense rice stand and possibly shallow water. Eight foot long poles were specifically carved with a hard wood fork on the lower end to do this task.

Until this century, women did the rice harvesting. The woman poling the canoe usually stood at the rear of the boat while the woman in the front of the boat knocked the ripe rice kernels into the boat using a specially carved set of knocking sticks. The sticks were 2 to 3.5 feet long, tapered and made of light weight white cedar. One stick would pull or hold down the rice stalks while the other stick was used to brush the ripe rice into the boat. These roles were alternated as the canoe would be poled down the channel in the stand and rice was gathered on either side. Bound rice was sometimes shaken into the boat.

Between 100 and 200 pounds of rice could be collected in a canoe on a good day. Once the boat was full it went back to shore where it was unloaded into winnowing trays. The same area could be harvested again four days later. Unfortunately, as one Native

Indian put it: "Nowadays, people go out and rice, they just murder the rice."

Back at the camp, everyone in the family was busy processing rice. "The community was transformed into a swarming anthill." The green or unprocessed manomin was laid out to dry for a few hours. After this, it was either smoked over fires on wooden or reed racks or it was parched by stirring the rice with a paddle in a metal tub over a fire. Parching only started with the fur trade when traders introduced metal tubs. At Rat Portage near Kenora, Ontario the rice was both parched and then fire dried.

Once this curing process was complete, the manomin needed to be de-hulled. The strenuous work was done by treading or dancing on the rice in clay lined tramping pits further lined with elk skin or wooden slats. The pit or jig hole was knee deep and cone shaped, with a 2 to 3 foot diameter at the top and could hold about a half bushel of rice. Men or young boys would tread the rice for up to 45 minutes using clean wrap around moccasins or canvas wrapped around their feet. Small boys were good at this task because they were light in weight and this reduced rice breakage. A pair of poles tied together in a 'V' around the hole were used for balance. In some Bands, women de-hulled the manomin using large pestles, one in each hand.

After the hulling was done, the rice was either spread on blankets or mats and fanned by hand to remove the chaff or it was tossed in the birch bark winnowing trays while standing sideways to the wind. The trays were specifically designed to facilitate this tossing and removal of the chaff.

Finally, after the processing was completed, at least one-third of the family's supply, usually 5 bushels (100 kg), was packed in cedar bark rice bags or sacks made from fawns or young buffalo

and stored in caches 6 or 7 feet underground below the frost line (about one pound per person per day). Until recently, laying a winter's supply was a habitual concern in fall. The manomin could keep indefinitely as long as it wasn't exposed to moisture. An unwritten law prevented stealing from neighbours. Nonetheless, it was demoralizing to the Natives that white traders stole from Indian caches.

The Native North American period of wild foods was one characterized by sharing, a respect for the natural environment and a desire to live in balance and harmony with nature. Tragically, the "white" settlement of North America led to the corruption of many Native traditions by a non-Native, profit-oriented, industrial society which has valued monetary growth above the needs of nature and humankind. The Native peoples and their diversified cultures have been decimated in the same way as the formerly wide ranging wild rice stands. Perhaps a greater knowledge and appreciation of the Native traditions will help us to preserve these rich cultures and our fine natural resources including manomin.

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