



**THE NAME  
OF THE GRA  
WILD RICE**



# AIN:

## Maria Nunes

Peering through the viewfinder, I compose the shot carefully: I place the horizon about one-third down, filling the bottom with the carpet of tall stems of grain swaying lightly in the breeze. In the foreground, a flash of sky glides by, at first still, then rippled by the gentle paddling of an oar. I am seated in a canoe being guided through what was once part of “the rice bowl of North America”. Wild rice, that is; *Zizania aquatica*, also commonly known as Indian rice, Canadian rice, or folle avoine. The Anishinaabek (the people) call it *manoomin* in the Ojibwa language.

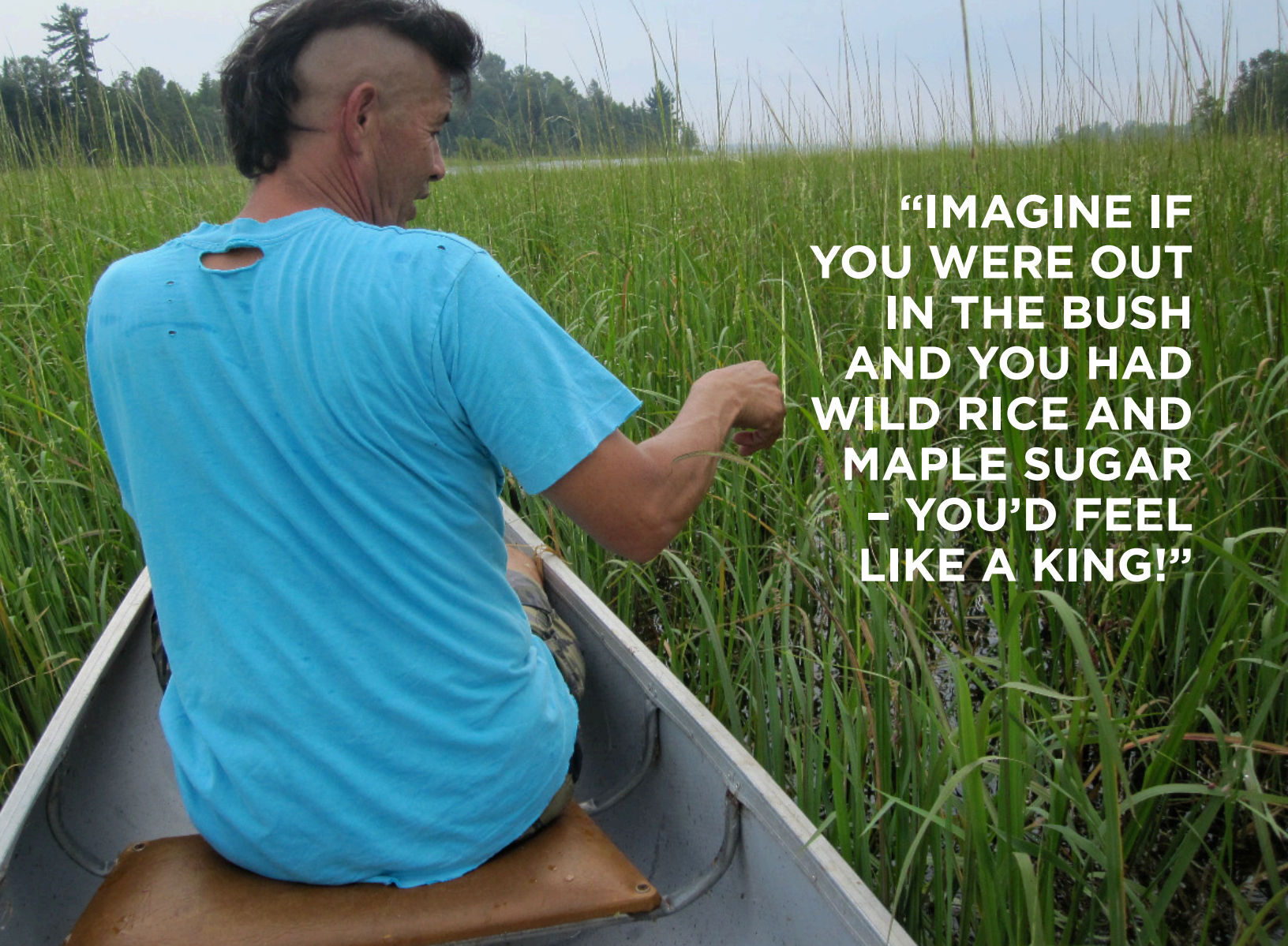
*Manoomin* was a staple of the subsistence diet of the indigenous inhabitants of north-central and eastern North America. Wild rice also played an important role in the survival of European explorers and settlers who learned of, and traded for, wild rice with First Nations people. Though Europeans brought seeds from across the ocean, indigenous foods were the most dependable products – the original “local” foods. In fact, wild rice characterized all that today’s Slow Food movement embraces: it was sustainably produced, artisanal, and an essential element of the cultural heritage of those who lived where it grew.

The native people who welcomed and developed relationships with the Europeans had spent centuries, perhaps millennia, refining their place-based food culture.

*Manoomin* was only one of the many “wild” foods harvested, but it was a fundamental source of nutrition and energy. “Imagine if you were out in the bush and you had wild rice and maple sugar – you’d feel like a king!” exclaims my guide, James Whetung of the Curve Lake Reserve.

His tour takes us through a small “field” (aka bed) of *manoomin* that stretches along the eastern shore of Chemung (Mud) Lake in the Kawartha Lakes region of central Ontario. He revels in the patches, so thick he can’t find a place to dip his oar! But it wasn’t always like this.

*Zizania aquatica* is one of three native North American species of self-seeding annual grasses. It thrives in the rich alluvial soils of shallow lakes, ponds, marshes, and slow-moving waterways. The plant can tower as high as 6 feet above water level when mature. The seed “shatters” from the stalk when ripe and falls back into the muddy bottom from which its parent emerged. Like many myths about wilderness and “wild” foods, this natural



**“IMAGINE IF YOU WERE OUT IN THE BUSH AND YOU HAD WILD RICE AND MAPLE SUGAR – YOU’D FEEL LIKE A KING!”**

cycle was, in fact, managed by those who depended on it. When First Nations people were removed from their lands and forced to give up traditional ways of life and their intrinsic stewardship of the wilderness, these waters came under new management, and wild rice gained a new meaning.

In the Kawartha Lakes region, the building of the Trent-Severn Waterway, the introduction of carp, and the rise in permanent cottages, and boating sculpted these lakes to the newcomers’ own tastes. Water levels became too deep for ideal wild rice growing conditions. The bottom-feeding carp stirred up lakebeds and uprooted young rice plants. Cottagers

using both chemical and mechanical methods eagerly cleared their private shore waters so aquatic plants wouldn’t interfere with their recreational activities. All have contributed to the decimation of wild rice stands throughout the region. Rice Lake is in fact, denuded of the plant that gave it its name.

Ironically, waterfowl-hunting enthusiasts like Ducks Unlimited have supported the reseeded of shallow waters where wild rice once thrived. The rice beds help purify the water, provide excellent habitat for fish, and are a staging ground and rich food source for a variety of waterfowl. Noting a few scavengers fluttering

about, picking at the immature grain, Whetung waves his arm across the sky, joyfully emphasizing how it will be darkened by clouds of red-winged blackbirds once the rice is ripe. He will not harvest here, however; this bed needs to keep reseeding itself for a while yet.

Whetung lives at the edge of the wild rice stands he paddled us through. Looking out his window, he can see his effort of many years taking root in what is now a re-establishing field of wild rice.

Over the last 30 years, through family and elders, he has reclaimed knowledge of the location of wild rice beds and of the techniques for seeding,

harvesting, and processing wild rice. Whetung operates Black Duck Wild Rice, named after his father's clan, practically single-handedly, though he hopes the business will grow. He is able to sell lake-harvested wild rice to people on his reserve, and at a select few stores and farmers' markets in the area, and at Toronto's Dufferin Grove farmers' market.

Wild rice has (d)evolved from a subsistence staple to a high priced luxury food item, taking its place with other "wild" foods such as game meat, fresh caught fish, and even maple syrup. The distinctly flavoured grain can fetch over \$20 USD per pound at specialty food stores or online retailers. Its selling point is the mystique rendered by the "wild" in its "given" name. It is the only cereal indigenous to North America; the high price is not a result of scarcity due to the war on wild rice in its native habitat. Most wild rice in the marketplace is not "wild" at all but paddy-grown, like the rice described in the rest of this edition. The variety sold commercially is the species *Zizania palustris*, which is native to the upper Great Lakes and eastern Prairies. It has even longer grains than *Zizania aquatica*. Both species produce a long, straight, dark, nutty-flavoured grain in contrast to the short Asian grain of the genus *Oryza*, the ubiquitous global staple that is only a distant relative.

Wild rice is by far more nutritious than its long-lost cousin, packing almost twice as much protein and one-third less fat as a similar amount of cooked Asian brown rice. It is also rich in dietary fibre and a good source of vitamin B, potassium, phosphorus, niacin, and thiamine. It's no wonder First Nations people took so much time and effort to harvest and process this important food.

Before contact with Europeans, which significantly damaged indigenous people's traditional livelihoods, wild rice harvesting, drying, roasting, and storing dominated the lives of Native communities in the early fall. The traditional harvest of a rice field is a painstaking job. Because the grain ripens gradually from top to bottom of the panicle (seed head), harvesters must pass the same plants several times every four to five days. Given the wide span of *Zizania's* native habitat, traditional tools and techniques for each of the stages varied with different peoples. Generally, at least two people went out in a canoe for the actual harvest.

In some traditions, one person stood in the canoe, scanning the bed for the telltale dark colour that identifies mature grain. Then, like a Venetian gondolier, the navigator drove a long forked pole into the mucky lakebed to manoeuvre the canoe towards the target. The other person sat in the canoe with long ricing sticks in each hand. One stick was used to bend and hold a swath of stems over the canoe; the other to "knock" the grains off the stems with a firm but gentle tap. If the stems weren't held just so, kernels could fall overboard back into the lake. While this helped reseed the stand, it made for a diminished harvest. Thus, a successful harvest depended on both sets of skills: that of the navigator to locate ripe stands and bring the canoe deftly to the best spots, and that of the harvester to be efficient and precise.

Back on land, the green *manoomin* kernels were laid out on bark in piles or rows to dry. This prevented mildew, cured the rice for ease of hulling, and helped develop a distinctive flavour. The piles were stirred often to ensure air circulation and



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sun exposure. Once dried and cured, the *manoomin* was dry roasted or parched using various methods, including spreading it over hot stones. After contact with Europeans, wild rice harvesters used large kettles. This both destroyed the germ, preventing the grain from sprouting, and removed more moisture from the grain, reducing its size so it became loose inside the hull.

The next step separated the grain from the hull. One of Whetung's first memories is of dancing on piles of *manoomin* with his cousins; the young boys' light weight helped keep the grains from breaking (plus, it's a great way to harness kids' seemingly inexhaustible energy). Another more common method was to dig "treading pits" and line them with wood slats or animal skins to keep *manoomin* clean. With two branches anchored in the ground on either side of the pit, treaders braced themselves while their well-wrapped feet threshed the grain and loosened the chaff.

Finally, the *manoomin* was winnowed by dropping the threshed mixture through the air onto a mat or by tossing and catching it with a wide flat basket, allowing for the light hulls to be whisked away by the breeze. After picking it over to remove sticks or other plant material, the *manoomin* was stuffed into a variety of containers made from animal skins or bark to keep moisture out. Traditionally, containers were stored underground to last, sometimes until the following summer.

Whetung's need to reclaim the knowledge and skills of the traditional *manoomin* harvest demonstrates the cultural loss First Nations experienced when forced to integrate into a "modern" lifestyle. Whetung perfected his canoeing skills and

learned of *manoomin* patches as a young man while paddling with his uncles on hunting expeditions.

Today, Whetung harvests the traditional way with *manoomin* "tourists" who want to learn the traditional methods, setting up camps as First Nations peoples would have. To maintain profitability for his business, however, he unapologetically uses some modern methods at Black Duck Wild Rice. He collects the wild rice in an air boat – the kind associated with Florida's Everglades – fitted with a wide collection trough that can capture more grain at one pass and can hold a larger harvest per outing. As a small producer, Whetung is able to maintain the traditional processing methods for now.

While Whetung and other First Nations *manoomin* farmers, mainly in Manitoba and Saskatchewan (in Canada), are reclaiming sovereignty over their ancestral crop, wild rice is big business elsewhere. Multi-million-dollar, large scale operations dominate the commercial production of this niche food. Farmers in Minnesota experimented with paddy cultivation of wild rice as early as the late 19th century, but it wasn't until the 1960s and '70s that serious developments in large scale farming began. By the 1980s, California dominated the wild rice industry, processing, on average, more than half of the \$20+ million USD of American wild rice. 95% of this crop was paddy cultivated. Paddy technology allows for the control of water levels, flooding to the right depth during the growing season, and draining to allow for harvesting with combines.

*Zizania palustris* has been hybridized so that producers can control shattering (to cut down seed loss), height (for ease of mechanical harvesting), and for maturity speed

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(for efficient production scheduling). Even *Zizania palustris*' genome has been mapped. Native communities fear that in the future, genetically modified "wild" rice might escape into waterways and degrade the diverse natural genetic variations of their honoured grain.

In contrast, none of Canada's 1.7 million pounds of wild rice is paddy-cultivated. It is all lake-harvested by approximately 150 producers. (Note: Harvested rice is called "green rice" and weighs about twice as much as the processed grain, which has only about 8% moisture remaining and has been hulled.) Saskatchewan produced 81% of all Canadian wild rice in 2009, with Manitoba and Ontario producing the rest. Last year, total Canadian exports of what Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada calls a "special crop" amounted to \$2 million CAD. Almost half of this went to the United States.

There is clearly a healthy market for wild rice, but the people who were its stewards for centuries are hardly the benefactors. Asked how he determines his price, Whetung explains that "Uncle Ben's" pretty much sets the bar. In fact, the largest processor of wild rice is Indian Harvest, owned by the Duinick Brothers of Minnesota, who are better known for their highway and golf course construction, concrete, and resort companies.

*Manoomin* was transformed into wild rice centuries ago. Its modern name and packaging imagery suggests exotic origins and the aura of authenticity. The market forces of agribusiness have appropriated these qualities, produce wild rice as an upscale food, and charge high prices that put wild rice out of reach for many First Nations people.

A handful of people at Curve Lake Reserve harvest *manoomin*, partly

because of loss of knowledge and lack of means; partly because of its scarcity; and partly because they are not free to harvest on what is considered, by Ontario's Wild Rice Harvesting Act, water-covered Crown land. *Manoomin* ceased long ago to be the important staple in the diet of the Anishinaabek. It is now used sparingly, mostly on special occasions, as a side dish, an entrée, or even dessert. Otherwise, the local stores carry all manner of processed foods that contribute neither to First Nations' cultural sovereignty nor health.

Whetung considers wild rice of singular importance to the food security of his people and the nation. In his new world order, Whetung wouldn't be the only one who could say, "I eat a lot of wild rice!"