

Gift of the Harvest—the art and history of ricing

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It is early September as I steady our small canoe (*jiiman*), keeping my left foot in and my right foot out, while my cousin climbs aboard. It is time to harvest the wild rice. We are on the banks of the eastern edge of Rice Lake, within the boundaries of the Sokaogon Chippewa Indian reservation, in northeast Wisconsin. Our Rice Chiefs have carefully examined the golden crop and officially declare that this small 320-acre lake is ready for the harvest.

A prayer and the laying down of tobacco will ensure a successful day; the air smells sweet. The morning sky provides a dazzling blue canopy, as an inducement to proceed. The sun is as intense as it can be for this latitude and the temperature a balmy 70 degrees. My partner carefully makes his way down the center of the wobbly canoe. Holding onto the gunwale, he readily reaches the opposite end; turns facing me saying, “*Miigwech!*” (Thank you) and then sits down. Stepping into the unstable craft, while performing a balancing act, I blurt, “Howah, looks like a beautiful day for pickin’ rice!”

Crouching down, I grab onto a long and sturdy balsam wood push-pole, then ease it out over the right side of the canoe. My ricing partner attempts to steady the boat a bit, as I slowly stand erect and implant the long skinny pole, with a fork-shaped attachment at its end, into the thick rich clay of the shallow lake bottom. “Are you ready?” I push down on the pole and our vessel moves away from the bank. A few more pushes and a startled great blue heron wading nearby broadcasts several harsh croaks as its broad wings carries it into flight. “Now there’s a good sign” my cousin remarks, “yes, a very good sign especially for a member of the Crane clan.” Sep-

tember is the time of the wild rice harvest moon “*Manoominiigizis*.” A small number of area lakes, extending north-northwest into Minnesota, are teeming with this year’s bumper crop. The people of the Lake Superior Ojibwa are eager to perpetuate this time-honored tradition. The flavorful green seeds of the wild rice plant are known as “*manomin*” or “*manoomin*” in Ojibwe, which identifies it as “the food that grows on the water.” We are anxious to knock off hundreds of pounds, filling our canoe several times, in just a few short days. The harvest is always a welcomed activity as a focal point of late summer activities. The process is carried out in a time-honored traditional way, by Anishinaabeg (Ojibwe) men and women. It is a profound and necessary relationship between man and nature. Moving toward our objective, we anticipate the task and proceed deep into the

consin in 1634—the Ojibwe of the Sokaogon (the post in the lake people) routinely gathered this important indigenous food source, which continues to proliferate in the Great Lakes region. This is a very special place; hardly visible folks not be familiar with the local geography. The lake, which lies just a few hundred feet to the west of the main highway, offers at eye-level a scene which closely resembles that of a field of wheat. The wild rice plant, a tall and slender marshland inhabitant, is more commonly referred to by biologists as *Zizania Aquatica*. It thrives exclusively in the peculiar stillness of this mineral-rich lake. Equally significant is that this continues to be a prime example, of one of the last remaining ancient wild rice beds of northern Wisconsin. What continues year after year is a perfect undisturbed ecosystem where humans can successfully co-exist with a countless mix of insects, plants, fish and wildlife.

This very small and virtually unmo-
lested world contains an orderly combination of consistent water level and temperature to sustain the annual crop. Some might say it’s almost the ideal place, perfectly designed for the precious *manomin* to survive throughout the ages. Wild rice is a sensitive plant species and does not tolerate chemical pollutants or drastic changes in water level very well during its growth cycle. One might also say the crop, which flourish-

bounty of the dense growth cloaking the lake. This brief journey, a jour-

ney that our ancestors had taken for eons, fosters credence to our Ojibwa heritage and culture. Long before the Europeans had knowledge of the existence of this continent—and long before the French explorer Jean Nicolet landed on the eastern shores of northern Wis-

consin here is the proverbial bread basket “tailor-made” for a culture of people. The wild rice plant, a tall and slender marshland inhabitant, is more commonly referred to by biologists as *Zizania Aquatica*. Wild rice has long been a staple for the Chippewa diet and this pre-historic



Mole Lake tribal members participate in the annual tradition of harvesting wild rice.



The annual tradition of the Sokaogon Chippewa harvesting wild rice took place last week in Mole Lake in Forest County.

vegetation is most likely considered, the oldest agricultural crop in the nation. Scientists have determined that wild rice is the only “naturally occurring” grain in North America. Oats, wheat

and barley for example, were imported from Europe.

Working the Rice Domain

With two people working as ricing partners, one person must

constantly push the craft forward while the other gently knocks the seeds loose from the top of the plant; taking care that it falls directly into the center. This requires the use of

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The annual wild rice harvest produced a bountiful harvest this year in Mole Lake.



Wild rice is called *manoomin* in the traditional

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