

**Gift of the Harvest** from page ten

a pair of small ricing sticks or rice knockers (*bawai'ganaak*), both of which are handmade from lightweight cedar branches. These slender tools resemble a pair of rather long drum sticks. With the aid of my push pole I continue moving us slowly forward. My partner continues gently sweeping the sticks from left to right, moving the sticks back and forth over the slender stalks of the rice plant. Using one stick, he gently bends the heavy tips of a group of plants over the wide opening of the canoe. He then gives a swift but gentle tap with the other stick, followed by a quick brushing motion across the tips. Dozens of the ripened two-inch-long seeds encased in their husks break free and fall. The stalks are then released and allowed to freely spring back into position, bringing no harm to the vegetation. The gentle and repetitive swishing action produces a remarkable rhythmic sound. Always smooth and precise, the skilled rice picker progresses with this alternating action repeated hundreds and hundreds of times while migrating back and forth across the lake.

There is a soothing quality to this repetitive sound in the stillness of the environment. We become immersed in absolute harmony with nature. Our attention is drawn toward a flock of Canada geese, passing low overhead. Their honking seems to declare, "See you next year!" My

cousin shouts to them, "*Boozhoo*" (greetings)! The timing is perfect; almost as if pre-planned and orchestrated for a National Geographic magazine. As the hours pass the small vessel becomes unsteady and weighted near capacity. "It looks like we've got more than enough for now," my partner says. The real trick in returning to shore, without unintentionally dumping the unstable cargo, requires both skill and patience. The shadows grow longer as the late afternoon sun hangs heavy on the horizon. We arrive back to where we had earlier embarked. I push our unwieldy craft hard against the soft mud of the bank. Then brace the canoe as best I can with my pole. My partner steps onto solid ground, grabs the bow and begins to pull as I push. A portion of the canoe is now on land, allowing for better stability. I step out along the side of the craft and into the shallow water. "Tomorrow we'll definitely get an earlier start."

**The Next Phases**

The act of gathering the wild rice, on this somewhat humble lake, is only the first phase of a process. Some of the green rice is set aside for re-seeding purposes. Other portions may be purchased by the Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission for research and study and possibly for the re-seeding of area lakes. Before the rice can be consumed however, several steps must be

completed. First, the wild rice is spread out onto a tarp and air dried in the warm September sun. Next, it must be parched or scorched beside an open fire to thoroughly remove the outer hull and any remaining moisture. If not, it will mold while in storage. This is accomplished with the use of a broad wooden paddle and metal pan. A few pounds are transferred into a large galvanized metal pan, propped up next to a crackling fire. As the pan heats, the seeds are stirred continuously with the paddle until a few of the seeds begin to pop open, just like popcorn. The batch of rice is immediately removed from the heat and set aside to cool. After it has cooled, it is ready to be "danced." Dancing the rice is a procedure requiring the agility of a lightweight person. The batch is poured into a shallow hole in the ground, lined with a tanned deer hide, wide enough to step into with both feet. Dancing the rice requires that the dancer, wearing soft buckskin moccasins, step lightly into the hole. He or she positions a tripod made of cedar poles, next to the hole to hold onto and support the body weight. The dancer then steps or walks lightly "in place" carefully, while bending the knees and working the feet in a slow, heel-to-toe motion. This action causes the thin outer husk to break and separate from the edible seed. Next, a pound or so is scooped up into a wide, shallow, handle less fanning basket made of birch bark, so it can be

"fanned" (winnowed) to further purify the edible seed. The small amount of rice in the basket is tossed briskly, like a salad, for a while. As the contents go up and down repeatedly, the air catches and removes much of the remaining bits of dried husk. Lastly, a thorough cleaning by hand to remove any small bits of remaining husk improves the purity of the product before it is packaged and added to local family's food pantries. Some is also set aside to be packaged and purchased by consumers. The result is a natural, chemical free, self-sustaining nutritious food. Those who have long savored the pleasing flavor of our rice, rich in both riboflavin and niacin, as a delicacy on Thanksgiving Day, indeed recognize the benefits of a healthy diet. The texture and flavor of Sokaogon harvested wild rice is a welcome addition to any dinner table, especially on those all too

numerous intensely cold northern Wisconsin winter days. Wild rice is a pleasurable compliment to a myriad of meals, served either as a side dish, or part of a salad or added to stuffing or included in a variety of soups. A special favorite of course, is wild rice soup. It is very important to understand, however, that our rice is not the same as the wild rice you found in retail grocery stores. The rice in stores is probably either "paddy rice" or river rice, which has been commercially grown, mechanically harvested and processed by heated air and packaged for mass distribution. Our rice, as with all authentic Native American harvested wild rice, is in limited supply; both labeled and sold at a higher price than commercial rice. It is important to note that Sokaogon Chippewa wild rice grows naturally and is processed in a traditional Indian way. Retail rice seen in a grocery

store is nothing like the manoomin harvested on the reservation. Shortly after the wild rice is stored, the cool Wisconsin nights of mid-October (*binaa'kwii-giizis'*) induce a delightfully enigmatic fog upon the lake. Soon, the first snowfall of early November sends the brief deer-hunting season into full swing and if luck has its way, just might engender a glimpse of the ephemeral aurora borealis. The surface water begins to freeze, (*gashkadino-giizis*) and local hunters delight in the fact that the deer are preoccupied by a short-lived yet fervent mating season. The cycle of life triumphs as winter (*Biboon*) finally takes full command. It is a time to reflect on the dreamy days of the harvest and anticipate the next.

**A Sacred Activity**

The annual harvest of this tiny seed is a sacred and vital activity and will ensure that our unique culture and heritage will endure, against the influences

See page 17

**Deer: 2017 seasons**

|   |                          |
|---|--------------------------|
| Archery and Crossbow  | Sept. 16 - Jan. 7, 2018  |
| Archery and Crossbow *Metro Sub-units only*   | Sept. 16 - Jan. 31, 2018 |
| Gun hunt for hunters with disabilities  | Oct. 7 - 15              |
| Youth deer hunt   | Oct. 7 - 8               |
| Gun   | Nov. 18 - 26             |
| Muzzleloader  | Nov. 27 - Dec. 6         |
| December 4-day antlerless hunt  | Dec. 7 - 10              |
| Antlerless-only Holiday Hunt  | Dec. 24 - Jan. 1, 2018   |
| *Only in valid farmland units. Please see deer regulations booklet for valid units. |                          |

All dates are subject to change through a rule making or a legislative process. Please check the Wisconsin Deer Hunting Regulations for a complete set of dates and unit designations.

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