

Wild Rice = Minnesota Nice

When it comes to a good many Minnesota traditions, it's not unusual for one to spin off into another.

Yes, hunting is about time spent in the field taking deer, waterfowl, upland game and more, and fishing embraces time on the water targeting walleye, pike, panfish and countless other species that call Minnesota waters home.



Some do it for the sheer joy of the activity alone. But for many Minnesotans, part of the lure of these traditions involves filling the freezer with fish and game so as to enjoy another Minnesota tradition: Preparing and, ultimately, feasting upon all that fish and game.

Both are main-dish favorites in Minnesota. So how about side dishes? Wild rice is certainly a Minnesota staple. No, comparatively speaking, it's not necessarily a main dish when it comes to Minnesota traditions. But wild-rice gathering is definitely among the most unique of Minnesota traditions.



And it's among the most long-standing, too, playing an important role in these parts for centuries. Besides figuring prominently in the culture and traditions of Native Americans, wild rice provides food and habitat for waterfowl, shorebirds, beaver, muskrats, snails and other aquatic life.

And, of course, it provides food for humans, too.

“Genetically, we are holding on to a traditional food that, because of its genetic diversity, has a better chance of surviving against both invasive species and climate change,” wild ricing expert Annette Drewes told *Minnesota Traditions*, which celebrates traditions such as wild-ricing and embraces the resources that represent these Minnesota institutions. (For more, go to www.minnesotatraditions.com.)

And because harvesting wild rice hasn't really changed since Native Americans first took to the rice paddies in waterways across the state all those years ago, there's certainly a rustic, traditional, old-school vibe to wild-ricing that's no doubt a part of its appeal, too – wild rice must be harvested from a non-motorized canoe 18 feet or shorter using only a push pole or paddles for power. The rice is then collected by using two sticks, or flails, to knock mature seeds into the canoe.

In Minnesota, more than 1,200 lakes and rivers in some 50 counties contain wild rice, with concentrations of rice being the highest in Aitkin, Cass, Crow Wing, Itasca and St. Louis counties, according to the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.



Drewes' work in those wild-rice circles has been well chronicled through the years. In one post, after years of following wild-rice harvesters for her research, she talked about embarking on her own annual wild-ricing ritual several years ago.

“With every grain gathered, I feel alive and connected – not just to these wild rice lakes, each with their own character and quirks, but also to a community of harvesters stretching back in time and outward across miles,” she wrote. “All of us are gathering for sustenance of some sort. Mine is the joy of giving gifts of finished wild rice to family and friends, and of gracing our table with a steaming dish of wild rice, hand-harvested from waters close to home.”



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