

## Wild rice binds this tribe together. It's under threat from every direction.

Inside the Ojibwe's fight to preserve a plant and the extraordinary traditions around it in northern Wisconsin.

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By Nevin Martell

ODANAH, Wis. — I'm speeding along the Bad River in a flat-bottomed boat, wind whipping around us. Next to me sits Robert Blanchard, the 70-year-old tribal chairman and chief executive of the Bad River Band of the Lake Superior Chippewa, a people also known as the Ojibwe.

As the boat weaves through the twisting river leading out to Lake Superior in the northernmost reaches of Wisconsin, Blanchard takes out a small bag of loose tobacco. Pinching a tuft, he scatters it off the side — an offering to the Great Spirit, he explains, to ask for a safe and satisfactory harvest.

As we turn another corner, we see the site of the harvest: the Kakagon Sloughs. Swaths of golden grass jut several feet out of the shallow water, the stalks gracefully bending backward and forward in the wind.

This is wild rice. The Ojibwe people call it manoomin, meaning “the good berry” or the “the good seed.” It is almost nothing like white rice. Slender and up to nearly an inch long, the kernels can be colored from walnut brown to purplish black. Toothsome with a toasty, nutty tone, it is a foreground flavor, not a background filler. (“And it smells like a cool breeze,” I was later told by Elena Terry, a chef and member of the Ho-Chunk Nation.) Several native species of wild rice grow in the Midwest, along the Gulf Coast, in Texas and elsewhere, but wild rice is also commercially cultivated, chiefly in paddy fields in California and Minnesota.

Though the grain in the Kakagon Sloughs was harvested two months earlier, it's an honor to even see these beds on this sunny October afternoon last year. Non-tribal members are not permitted in the sloughs and are prohibited from harvesting manoomin here, though it is legal to gather it with a permit elsewhere in the state. I was only allowed as a guest of Blanchard, who is concerned about the physical and existential threats facing manoomin, a pillar of Ojibwe life providing both food and faith in a higher power.

Manoomin is under attack from what seems like every direction. As an annual, it has trouble competing with perennials. Invasive plant species, such as purple loosestrife, are crowding it out. Boat wakes can decimate the plants early in the growing season. Runoff from agriculture and timber harvesting on the shoreline can damage or kill it, as can other forms of pollution. And tribal members worry that a pipeline running through their reservation could rupture and contaminate the waterways.

Then there's climate change, which is wreaking havoc on manoomin. "It's susceptible to warm overnight temperatures because humidity can exacerbate pathogens and fungi," says Rob Croll, the climate change program coordinator for the Great Lakes Indian Fish & Wildlife Commission (GLIFWC). "And it's susceptible to shorter cold-weather periods and less ice cover, which affects germination." In the agency's 2023 assessment of climate change vulnerability, Croll and his collaborators determined that manoomin is at greatest risk.

Blanchard doesn't need a scientist to tell him manoomin is threatened. The sloughs today are not like they were when he was a child. "No matter where you decided to put your canoe in, there'd be rice," he remembers. "Now you've got to search for a good place, and sometimes it's pretty thin."

I ask him how he would feel if manoomin vanished from the Kakagon Sloughs. "I can't even think about it," he responds before falling silent.

Manoomin is a cornerstone of the Ojibwe identity. The Indigenous people once lived close to the Atlantic Ocean, until a prophecy predicted the arrival of a light-skinned people that would threaten their existence and directed them to move west — to a place where they would find "the food that grows on water." The Ojibwe migrated west, ending up in Lake Superior on Mooningwanekaaning, today known as Madeline Island. Close by are the Kakagon Sloughs, home to Great Lakes' largest beds of wild rice.

Manoomin became a valuable source of sustenance, one deeply imbued with cultural significance. Its annual harvest is as much about gathering food as it is about gathering community.

Manoomin is gathered today the same way as it has been for centuries. Pairs of harvesters go out in canoes or small flat-bottomed boats. One is the poler; the other is the knocker. The former holds a long pole — often handmade of white cedar, though some folks simply use a 20-foot banister from the hardware store — pushing it into the mucky bottom of the lake to guide the boat through the shallows of the rice bed. Meanwhile, the knocker wields a pair of wand-shaped cedar sticks about three feet long. Alternating sides, they grab the stalks with one stick, lean them into the boat, then knock the rice off the stalks.

"It's a sweeping motion. You're not actually pounding the stalk," explains Linton Rembert III, 57, a tribal member who has been ricing since he was a child. "You don't want to break the stalk."

His son, Marcus, was raised around the tradition, but didn't start ricing until a few years ago. Since then, the 16-year-old has become a devotee. "You can tell the love he has for it, because he will take kids out there that are younger than him and show them how to harvest," Linton says.

Ricing binds generations together. Blanchard's grandfather taught him what he calls "the sacred process." As a kid, rice buyers would approach Blanchard when he came in off the sloughs, offering a quarter or more for unprocessed rice. "That's how I'd buy my school clothes," he says. "I'd help my grandparents out from having to spend the money, because times were hard."

Now a father of three — he taught all of them how to harvest manoomin — Blanchard still goes ricing with his youngest son, Randy. He knocks, his son poles. They have a deep understanding of each other's motions and tendencies; a smooth natural rhythm honed over decades. Still, on a recent trip, he ended up getting tipped out of the boat into the water. It was the first time that had ever happened. Randy managed to stay aboard.

Yes, but what happened to the rice, I want to know.

"When I tell that story, people always ask about the rice," says Blanchard, shaking his head. "No one asks about me."

Thankfully, they didn't lose their 30 pounds of manoomin. "And I was fine," he adds with a wry chuckle.

What happens out on the water (and occasionally in it) is only a part of the process. For the rice to be edible, it must be parched, hulled and winnowed.

For hundreds of years, the tribe followed the same steps. First, the rice was left to dry in the sun for a few days. To fully parch it, the grains were placed by the fire in a hollowed-out log, on a piece of birch bark, or in a cauldron, then slowly stirred until all the moisture was released. To hull the rice — a process also known as jigging — it was spread out in a shallow pit. Small children, light enough to not break the grains and brimming with enough energy to work for long stretches, would dance on top of it. As they moved, they twisted their moccasined feet to free the grains from their husks. Next, the separated grains and husks were placed in shallow circular birch bark baskets for winnowing. By gracefully flipping the mixture into the air, the wind carried away the light husks, while the grains would fall back into the basket. Only then was the rice ready for cooking.

Pulling into the driveway at Maria Nevala's house in Odanah, Wisconsin, on the reservation, there's no sign of a woodfire, shallow pit or birch bark baskets. Instead, the owner of Bickering Canoe Wild Rice Processing has a shed the size of a shipping container, opened on the side to reveal three machines custom-built by her partner, John "J.D." Lemieux.

Nevala, 56, is a lifelong ricer. “I was born and raised into it,” she says. “Some of my first memories are around a rice tarp, helping rake the rice or put a stone down to keep the tarp from blowing away. I thought every family did that and that every kid had to do this.”

She and Lemieux modernized the age-old process. The propane-powered scorcher slowly roasts the rice over a low heat to remove the moisture and firm up the grain. Next, it goes into the thresher, where a paddle system removes the husks. Finally, the fanner blows away the husks, leaving the grains behind. Able to handle 80 pounds of rice at a time, this mechanical trio shrinks the processing time from a couple of days to three or four hours.

In the most abundant seasons, Nevala and Lemieux processed 6,000 pounds of wild rice. “That was us and our family going nonstop morning and night,” says Nevala, who processes rice for tribal members and non-tribal folks alike.

No money exchanges hands. Instead, Nevala keeps 20 percent of the finished rice, though she retains only 10 percent if she’s processing for a tribal youth. Occasionally, she’ll barter, taking locally raised honey or some other choice foodstuff instead of her percentage. If a high-risk youth brings rice, she’ll process it free, but there’s a catch: They must stay for a day to help and learn about the tradition.

She enjoys only some of her bounty. Some she shares with family and friends. The rest she donates when tribal members need it for a funeral feast, powwow or community event. She doesn’t sell any, but others do. If you’re passing through the reservation, you can pick up Bad River rice in a few shops, where it retails for around \$25 a pound.

But how long anyone will be able to enjoy Bad River rice is a widely debated question. First, there’s the issue of whether younger generations will keep ricing. To ensure they do, the tribe expends considerable resources on outreach efforts, including getting kids out into the sloughs to teach them ricing skills, organizing workshops on how to make knockers and poles, and investing in canoes and life jackets.

“I’m optimistic, because we have so many tribal programs,” says Paula Maday, a member of the Bad River Tribe and manager of the Moka’aangiizisiban Tribal Museum, a one-room institution devoted to a single exhibit: “Stories of the Sloughs.” “We’ve been participating in these traditions for hundreds of years, and I really don’t see them dying out anytime soon.”

GLIFWC’s Croll believes that manoomin has a chance of surviving the onslaught of climate change, but not necessarily in a way that will be a comfort to the Bad River Tribe. “Just like we have lakes that are converting from primarily a walleye lake to a bass lake because of changing water temperatures, we may have waters now that have marginal rice crops that won’t have rice in the future,” he says. “We may see areas up north that will have better rice crops, but tribal treaty rights and tribal lands are fixed in place, so people from here won’t necessarily be able to go up there and harvest.”

Nonetheless, he still takes an optimistic long view. “At the end of the day, the Ojibwe people are very adaptable,” he says. “They’ve had to be because of the landscape that they live on, the weather extremes we have up here, and since the Europeans came here with the intent to wipe out their culture. But they’re still here, and they’re not going anywhere.”

Almost a year after I spent time with Blanchard in the Kakagon Sloughs, I caught up with him by phone in the middle of September following the ricing season. He couldn’t go out in the sloughs because of work obligations, a turn of events that left him both wistful and mournful. Overall, though, he was happy: His two sons harvested roughly 50 pounds of wild rice in a single day. Blanchard is already looking forward to enjoying some as a part of his Thanksgiving dinner with the family.

“It was a plentiful season,” he said. “I’m hearing there’s people going down and getting over 100 pounds a day. One guy said he had eight bags of rice he had to get processed. That’s a lot of rice.”

He doesn’t deny that myriad challenges remain, with the potential to damage the vitality of their tradition, but he still has faith. “I’m feeling good about the wild rice,” he said. “I think next year is going to be another good year, too.”

#### **CORRECTION**

A previous version of this article gave an incorrect title for Robert Blanchard; he is chief executive, not executive director, of the Bad River Band of the Lake Superior Chippewa. Additionally, it misspelled the name of Madeline Island.

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