



MADE IN CANADA

INTO THE WILD

Wild rice may not actually be rice, but it does still grow wild in the Great Lakes. This Canadian delicacy is known for its nutty flavour and dense nutrition (it has just as much protein as quinoa!).

BY VALERIE HOWES

I'm standing waist-high in reeds at Williams Wild Rice Farm, near Nopiming Provincial Park in Manitoba. Murray Ratuski, the president of Shoal Lake Wild Rice, and his newest employee, Sai Jiang, are nearby navigating a silver canoe gondolier-style through a two-foot-deep lake replete with tall red-tipped grasses. Chirping crickets, hovering dragonflies and flitting monarch butterflies compete for my attention as I watch the men cut great armfuls of rice grass—enough to fill the whole boat—to take back to Winnipeg for nutritional testing. It feels more like we're in the Yangtze River valley than rural Manitoba.

PRECIOUS CARGO

Ratuski tells me that the Chinese call wild rice "precious rice"—high praise from the population with the world's highest rice consumption. This grain indigenous to the Great Lakes and California is different from the regular stuff in a few ways: it comes from a delicate aquatic grass, not an actual rice plant; it has a chewy texture and a toasted nutty flavour; and it boasts an impressive nutritional profile, with 30 times more antioxidants than white rice, says one 2009 study, not to mention higher levels of fibre, protein, folates, magnesium and other essential nutrients.

Wild rice is an aquatic grass seed and called a "pseudograin" like quinoa, buckwheat and amaranth.



(Above) Murray Ratuski and Sai Jiang gather rice grass at Williams Wild Rice Farm; (left) an airboat used to harvest wild rice.

THE WHOLE PACKAGE

Wild rice is gluten-free. One cup of cooked wild rice offers:

- ✓ 37 g carbs
- ✓ 3 g fibre
- ✓ 6.9 g protein
- ✓ 17.7 mg choline, which has reduced inflammation and boosted stamina in some studies
- ✓ 15.8% of your recommended daily intake for vitamin B₃ (a.k.a. niacin)
- ✓ 13% of your recommended daily intake for vitamin B₆
- ✓ 25.8% of your recommended daily intake for zinc

RICE ROUTE

Our truck loaded with grasses, we head to Winnipeg, past bee hotels, grain towers, white Mennonite churches with sturdy wooden crosses above their doors and fields of sunflowers, heads turned toward the sun. The highway looks like it was drawn with a ruler toward a perfect centre point on the horizon and feels like a road to nowhere. On the 90-minute drive, Ratuski, the third generation of his family to be involved in the wild-rice industry, explains how wild rice gets from plant to package.

"When you look at the lake and see long single leaves floating on its surface, that's nature's first promise of a wild-rice crop," he begins. "The leaf gathers nutrition from the sun and air to feed the submerged stalk." High or low water levels, hail, high winds and early frosts can dramatically alter the yield from year to year.

A True Canadian Mainstay

First Nations farmers have been cultivating wild rice for at least 1,000 years. Long before European settlers arrived, they maintained rice lakes as large as an acre and would embed mud balls with rice grains to replant areas damaged by high waters. Ojibwa men and women have traditionally gathered wild rice to preserve and eat as a gruel or brew into a tea. It had spiritual associations, too, and was used in ceremonies.

From August through September, First Nations harvesters zip back and forth across the rice lakes in airboats. Their light flat-bottomed vessels have a hopper on the front to hit the grasses, creating a whiplash effect that makes the grains drop while leaving the plants intact.

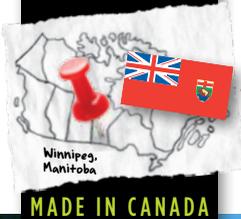
TIME-TESTED TECHNIQUE

The rice is bought from the harvesters when it's green, then taken back to the Shoal Lake facility in Winnipeg to be processed. "It's the same kind of process as roasting coffee beans and takes the same kind of precision," says Ratuski. The kernels are cured, getting misted with cool water as required to prevent overheating, then they're parched with hot air. "If you don't cure wild rice properly, it can sour and you won't get a good roast." The process used at the factory today was developed by Ratuski's father. "He has 60 years' experience, so we don't deviate from his techniques. He still comes in and mentors us."

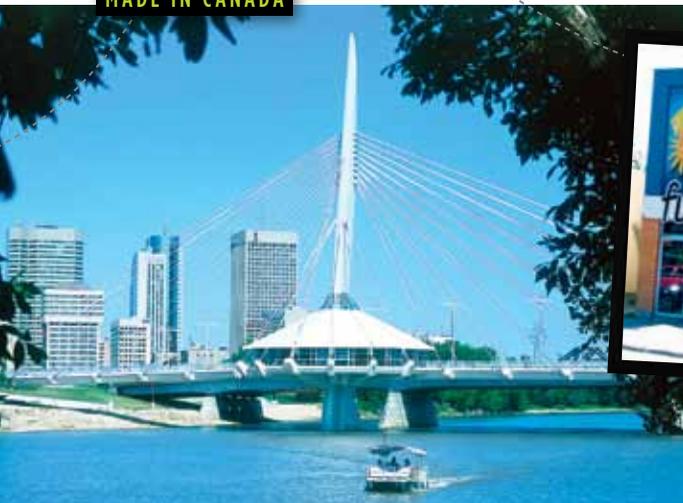
Next, the grains go through a huller to have their husks worked off, then they go through cyclone and vibrating aspirators that separate rice from the husks removed by the huller. The grains are metal-detected for quality control (to ensure that no tiny pieces of the processing equipment have fallen in), then sorted by weight: the large-grade ones have been used in Sysco Canada's products for 30 years and are exported; the medium-grade ones go into blends or are sold as Oh Canada pure organic wild rice; and the small-grade or broken ones are used in soups or ground to make pasta, flour or Floating Leaf's gluten-free Pancake, Muffin & Waffle Mix, one of Shoal Lake's bestselling flours. Packaging is done mechanically for large runs or by hand for more exclusive small-batch products,

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Winnipeg, Manitoba
MADE IN CANADA



(Clockwise from left) Scenes of Winnipeg: The Esplanade Riel Pedestrian Bridge; Fusion Grill, a foodie favourite; wild rice that has been transported to the city for processing.

Wild Rice Potato Latkes

Winnipeg's Fusion Grill, named one of Canada's top-10 restaurants by *The Globe and Mail* in 2011, serves dishes made mostly from regional, wild and sustainable ingredients that have been sourced from local producers. Its chef, Lorna Murdoch, was a silver-medal winner at the national chefs' cook-off Gold Medal Plates. This is Murdoch's simply delicious recipe for a classic winter comfort food (and Hanukkah must-have): the latke. Serve latkes as an appetizer with smoked salmon, with eggs for brunch or as a side to any main dish.

- 1 lb / 450 g potatoes
- ¼ cup / 60 mL finely chopped green onion
- 1 large egg, lightly beaten
- ¼ cup / 60 mL popped wild rice (see Get Popping!, below left)
- ½ tsp / 2 mL salt
- ½ to ¾ cup / 125 to 175 mL olive oil, divided

- 1. Peel potatoes** and coarsely grate by hand; transfer to large bowl. Stir in onion, egg, rice and salt.
- 2. In 12-inch/30 cm non-stick skillet** over medium, heat ¼ cup/60 mL of the oil. Working in batches, spoon potato mixture 2 tbsp/30 mL at a time into skillet, spreading each dollop into 3-inch/8 cm round with fork. (**Tip:** As you spoon out mixture, try to avoid potato liquid that collects at bottom of bowl. This will ensure that latkes fry up crisp.) Cook latkes until undersides are browned, about 4 minutes. Flip and fry for 4 minutes more. Transfer to paper towels to drain; season with salt. Keep latkes warm on wire rack set in shallow baking pan in oven. Add more oil to skillet as needed to finish batches.

Photography: iStockphoto.com (map, pushpin); Travel Manitoba (Esplanade Riel); Grajewski Photograph Inc. (restaurant); Valerie Howes (wild rice).

then the rice is shipped across Canada and as far afield as Hong Kong, China, Brazil, Europe and South Africa.

Back at his office, surrounded by new products, family photos and teddy bears made from wild-rice cloth bags, I ask the president of Shoal Lake Wild Rice how he likes his precious rice.

"I love a wild-rice stir-fry with steak or seafood," says Ratuski. "It's delicious in a casserole with cranberries, celery, bacon and mushrooms for the holidays, too. And wild-rice soups, they're just awesome! But my absolute favourite is Floating Leaf Wild Rice & Quinoa."

WILD WAYS

While you can eat wild rice on its own, it also mixes well with other grains. Shoal Lake makes 10 blends, bringing its organic wild grain together with everything from basmati rice to brown rice to quinoa and lentils. "Each blend was chosen because it offers a significant or unique nutrition profile," says Ratuski. Since wild rice typically takes from 90 minutes to two hours to cook through, the company has developed a process that uses soaking and drying to ensure that every kernel is ready at the same time, in around 25 minutes.

"We've also just launched a new organic pure-wild-rice product, Floating Leaf Wild Rice in Minutes, that you can either boil on the stovetop for 10 minutes, soak in boiling water for half an hour or soak in cold water for 90 minutes, and the nutritional benefits, taste and texture are exactly the same," he says. "We introduced it in Chicago at the [2013] IFT food expo, and it has been very well received internationally. Nobody else has been able to minimize cooking time *and* keep the wild rice's nutritious bran, so we're keeping our process as close to the chest as possible."

And two new Floating Leaf blends are coming soon from the product-development lab: an organic multigrain blend made from 100 percent Canadian product and a wild rice, pulse and bean blend—exciting news for the super-health-conscious.

Get Popping!

How to "pop" wild rice.

- 1. Heat** heavy-bottomed saucepan over high. When pan is hot, add ½ to 1 tsp/2 to 5 mL vegetable oil.
- 2. Add** ½ cup/125 mL wild rice, shaking pan vigorously to coat rice; keep shaking pan until popping slows. Quickly remove kernels; drain on paper towel.