

# Wild Rice of Reconciliation



## Harvesting new relationships at Grassy Narrows First Nation, late August 2012

photos and essay: Alon Weinberg

### **a big YES! to going ricing**

**W**hen I first heard that there was going to be a multi-day wild rice workshop-experience based out of Grassy Narrows First Nation in Ontario, I knew I needed to be there. For someone doing his research at the master's level in Native Studies, I know that going out hunting is a good way to get to know people from the community practising traditional ways of procuring food, as well as getting to know the land itself. But as someone who is 99% vegetarian – (really I have called it 'ecotarian' and 'honourotarian' after spending a summer with Inuit realizing it makes more sense to eat seal and Arctic char there than lentils and rice.) – the prospect of hunting challenges some of my deepest instincts around my positionality vis-a-vis animals. Nonetheless, I have deep respect for those raised with and learning to hunt for food - I am just quite sure I would not be that good at it. So knowing I could participate in that other half of the traditional hunting-gathering formulation made me jump instantly at the chance. That this harvest was taking place in the traditional territories of the *Asubpeeschosee-wagong Netum Anishinabek* made it all the more necessary for me to go.

Back in December of 2002, word reached Winnipeg that some people, led by community youths and

some strong, clear-headed women, at Grassy Narrows were blocking a logging road and saying a definitive NO! to the continued clearcutting in and of their traditional territories. At the time I was active in several environmental issues, having canvassed for the Wilderness Committee for a few months, but didn't know the least thing about Aboriginal or treaty rights; I was, however, beginning to realize their importance. I met Dr. Peter Kulchyski, professor of Native Studies at U of M and now my MA supervisor, at that time and he, our late friend Dave Brophy and I drove the 3.5 hours out to Grassy Narrows one cold Saturday morning in January. We spent the weekend warming ourselves by the fire in the roundhouse that had been built since the blockade had gone up at Slant Lake, a few kms from the community along the dirt road that heads north into the community's traditional territory, called on government maps *the Whiskeyjack Forest Management Area*. We returned to Winnipeg to found Friends of Grassy Narrows, a solidarity group dedicated to assisting the blockade morally, materially, and through organizing events in Winnipeg where voices from the community could be heard by a larger number of people.

What is a traditional territory you may ask? It is the

site of greatest contention in Canada; it is the front line of continuing dispossession and colonization of Aboriginal peoples and their lands; it is the historic area where communities traditionally have practiced and continue to practice their traditional ways of life:

hunting, trapping, fishing, medicine-picking, gathering, camping, ceremonies and all else that make up the intricate relationship first nations have always had with the land; it is the area beyond the confines of the reserve, so often called "the rez" by the youth that belong to first nations. By contrast, the reserve is the small dwelling area that was created mostly

through treaties – where treaties exist (much of BC is still unceded land, not mentioning the questionable nature of the treaties themselves) – and is the jurisdictional domain of the Indian Act-created chief-and-councils. Traditional territories are sites of resistance. Traditional territories are the sites of cultural reclamation that communities picking themselves up from the cultural discontinuity of residential schools – along with, in many places, the ill-effects of industrial pollution – need as a land base in order both to survive and, culturally, to thrive. In the case of Grassy Narrows, the pollution has taken the form of extensive mercury poisoning of the English-Wabigoon river system throughout the 60s and 70s, discharged from the pulp mill upstream at Dryden, ON straight into the water, bio-accumulating in the fish and bio-magnifying – increasing in concentration – in the bodies of the people eating the fish: the Anishinabek of Asubpeeschoseewagong.

## Grassy Narrows says NO!

After decades struggling with the devastating health effects of Minamata disease (named after the massive mercury spill at Minamata Bay Japan in the 1950s), sick and often having to fight for compensa-

tion from the Mercury Disability Board, tired of seeing their traditional territories further destroyed by machine and polluted by the spraying of pesticides that inevitably follows a clearcut, seeing the ani-



imals disappearing from the land if not discovering them sick, the action was taken nearly ten years ago to up the ante in the fight for the land. Over the years, what was initially a loud NO! to the logging companies – and continues to be a NO! to corporations still trying to finagle their way into the Whiskey Jack Forest and a NO! to the Ontario Ministry of

Natural Resources who has failed to honour treaty obligations – has moved into a resounding YES! to the practise of traditional ways of life and the occupancy of traditional territories.

One woman, **Gwawich Lynxclan**, built a cabin on her trapping line. The MNR discovered it and charged her for not having a permit to build there. A court date was set, but then pushed back. Not once, but several times, over 2 or 3 years. We held a fundraiser in Winnipeg, with wild rice and bannock and pickerel, music and art and coffee and tea, and raised a good amount of money towards a legal fund. Well, predictably in hindsight, the week the case was finally to be heard in a court in Red Lake, the charges against Gwawich were dropped. All along it was clearly a tactic to harass, intimidate, and distract valuable resources in a case the MNR knew it would clearly lose, and worse off in their eyes, would set another legal precedent in favour of the use of traditional territories by First Nations.

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Another person involved in the NO!/YES! dance borne of trying to practise one's traditional culture on the land while facing industrial imposition undermining that practice is **Andy Keewatin**. Called **Shoon** by all who know him, Keewatin was one of three (later 2, as one passed on before the case was heard) trappers named in the recent Keewatin vs. MNR court case that argued logging rights had been given out on the trap lines registered to Keewatin and the others without proper consultation or consent on their part. Last year, the Ontario Superior Court ruled in favour of the trappers, a major victory and vindication of what the blockaders have been saying for years. Learn more about the court case at:

<http://freegrassy.org/2011/08/01/grassy-trappers-win-major-legal-victory/>

## Shoon

Shoon has not yet lived 60 years but in wisdom and knowledge of the land he is clearly an elder. He still traps and maintains his trap line, hunts, fishes, harvests and processes wild rice, and teaches these skills to community members, especially youths from the school, and to visitors alike. The **NO!** of his court case complements the powerful **YES!** of his resistance through the continued practise of traditional Anishinabek life. He is formally employed as an addictions counsellor with the band, but the Grassy Narrows trapper's centre is his base and a site of much teaching and learning. The land, however, is his school. This summer, fellow graduate student Ryan Duplassie went out to Grassy to live at the blockade site. Talking with Shoon he decided to help promote a wild ricing workshop for late summer that would double as an eco-tourism experience, bringing in some much-



needed revenue for the trapper's centre, which is run in the building once the Catholic church.

I realized that alone I could not pay the fee, but knowing that ultimately I would want to share this positive experience with others in the city who could not come out, I solicited contributions from my wider circle of community, promising some rice in exchange. One friend wanted to come along and offered to drive, which I happily accepted, wanting more people to experience being out on the land and connecting to the Grassy struggle. Unfortunately, the night before we were scheduled to go, with my friend's cooler all packed up and him all psyched-up and ready to go, we got the call from Shoon: the wild rice in the one lake in which he had intended the harvest to take place was fallen over, and where it was growing in another lake it was not yet ready. We



would have to wait. My friend never ended up coming due to other commitments, but about 10 days later we other ricers heard the rice was ready and we could come out. So I crammed into Ryan's van, along with his wife and 3 daughters, and we drove out to Grassy Narrows one fair early morning late in August.

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When we arrived, we found a note on the trapper centre door from Shoon saying that he had left earlier and had taken the three people who had also come to rice from Toronto out to the lake. As it's about a 50 minute drive out to the lake, up the same northward road, past the blockade site, and the day was getting on, we just stayed in the community and visited people for a while. We then drove out to the blockade site where I set up my tent and quietly hung out waiting to catch the ricers on their way back. Eventually we all met up and spent that evening around the fire, together with several community members who have been part of the blockade, most notably blockade spokesperson and grassroots leader **Judy da Silva** and her family.



*Judy and her son spend time by the fire at the blockade site.*

Many children enjoy hanging out around the blockade site, a welcome place of quiet, conversation, play, and singing away from the community and out in the open air on the edge of the forest. For long-term blockaders like Judy or **Chrissy Swain**, being out at the blockade site is a good place to drum, sing, build a sacred fire in the wigwam, and generally just reconnect to the blockade's original intention of reclaiming pride and teaching the youth the true meanings of what it is to be Anishinabek. All while standing up to the Ontario MNR and big industry.



## Ricing

The next day we headed out before 9AM and drove (back) to the lake, where 4 canoes and Shoon's solid aluminum boat were waiting for us at the edge of a marshy, plant-rich lake. We set our canoes in and paddled about 20 minutes or so until we reached the rice fields. We were quickly shown what to do by the Toronto crew, who had already been at it several hours the previous day. Generally, when ricing, there are two people per canoe. The person in the front paddles, a hard job especially when one is deep into the thickest patches of rice. The person behind has two carved, two-inch thick cedar sticks of wood, and does the ricing. With one stick the person reaches out and folds down a number of stalks of rice, and with the other one whacks the stalks towards the boat, shaking the rice loose from the stalks. Inside the rice patch, there is rice on either side of the boat, and as one is moving, one is constantly shifting from the right side to the left side, sweeping into the rice, bringing it down towards the boat, and quickly whacking it, as if rapidly peeling a carrot.



***Me with my cedar-carved 'rice saber'***

Slowly the boat started to fill up with what looked like a pile of hay, but accompanying the rice are a whole host of spiders, which end up staying in the boat, and not a few worms that are living in among the rice plants. Every now and then we would find ourselves paddling out of the thicker rice and into a field of lily pads, occasionally coming upon a most beautiful, white lily blossoming on the water's surface.



It was very hot that day and soon we needed a break to refuel and refresh ourselves, so we paddled out of the rice and back up the main open channel of water to where Shoon and others in the bigger boat were waiting with our lunches. After lunch we switched things around, and it was my turn to paddle through the rice while Craig, from Toronto, took his turn ricing. In the thickest patches of rice I used the paddle more like a pole, reaching into the mud beneath the shallow waters, pulling the boat along. The slower one paddles the more thoroughly the person behind can harvest the rice, but if one moves steadily one is ultimately harvesting from more plants. Shoon told us that it was not the best harvest this year, something we had also heard was the case with wild blueberries. It seems that it had been a very wet spring, leading to high water levels, followed by a hot, dry summer, driving the water down and baking everything. I can't say I understand the intricate the ecological cycles that sustain the rice after only one visit to the rice fields – it's hubris to think it doesn't take years, if not generations, to observe and understand, year after year in the same place, the patterns that affect a particular ecological cycle. Still, the boats filled up and by 3 PM we headed back, knowing we still had to pick through the boats to remove the grasses and straw before bagging the rice and heading back to the community.



***Ryan and Mieke on a really hot date in the rice field***



***Ricing partner Craig shows what to look for***

And besides, there was little to no wind amidst the rice and there is only so much midday sun one can take. The Toronto crew, out for their second straight hot day, was probably even more bagged than we were starting to feel. Once the rice was picked through, we moved the canoes to the sides of the trail, walked up the narrow path in the bush and up to Shoon's truck and Ryan's van, loaded our hot, tired bodies into the vehicles, along with the rice, and headed back to the community and to the blockade site.





## A long, slow, & rewarding process

The next day at 8:30 AM we reported to the trapper's centre to begin learning the multi-day processing of the wild rice, called **Manoomin** in Anishinabemowin (Ojibway language). We started the first step that morning, which was to dump out the rice on tarps spread out on the ground. With another hot day, the sun dried the rice pretty quickly of any wetness it had picked up in the canoe. The second step involved roasting the rice over a small fire. We used a large wok, but we found the rice was quickly snapping and crackling, a sign it's too hot, so eventually Shoon went and found a large steel pot, and we were able to roast more rice in it at once,



*Pouring wild rice onto tarps to dry out.*



*Monique dry roasting the minoomin*

stirring it with a canoe paddle. Once the rice starts to snap, usually after 15 minutes over a low fire, it is time to take it off, dump it in a large empty plastic bin, then find some more to roast. While starting to roast, I took the opportunity to pick out as many worms as possible to save them from being cooked alive. Those remaining in would be roasted but removed during a later process. The third step was to start to separate the rice grains— some green, some already black — from their thin beige papery husks. There were two methods we used: dancing or mortar-pestle method. The traditional method involved dancing on the rice in a hole Shoon dug alongside the storage shed. A large piece of canvass was placed over the hole, into which the rice would then go. Shoes were removed and a pair of leather moc-

casins worn. One person would dance by twisting one's hips and lifting one's heels off the ground, not unlike a twist from the late 1950s. The mortar-

pestle was Shoon's creative innovation, carved of stump and thick log.

Apparently there were once songs that traditionally sung when dancing on the rice — not Chubby Checker tunes - along with songs sung to the rice when harvesting it. Those songs don't seem to be very present in the community to-

day, or at least not that we heard. Instead we sang our own songs, or listened to them with earphones. It seemed to work, as after 10 or 15 minutes dancing many of the shells would be separated from the rice. The pestle log had a good sized crack in it to grab it with then twist back and forth. The rice again was in the bowl with canvas stretched out over it to reduce the friction so that the rices wouldn't crack excessively. Originally the log had had a wooden handle nailed



*Big steel pot with paddle for stirring*

in on the top, but since that was gone the crack served well as a handle. It seems the dancing was the more efficient method — traditions become such, no doubt, after much trial and error (in other words, they work) — but I also think at 175 pounds I was a bit heavy, as the rice was cracking, so I stayed with the mortar-pestle tool much of the time.



***Have you danced a mile in another person's mocassins?***



***"winnow what to do: we're big fans of minooman"***

After either the dancing or the pestling-off of the thin skin sheaths from the rice, it was time to winnow. 'To separate the wheat from the chaff' is the agricultural saying that emerges from a similar process. The first day, hot and with nary a breeze we used a couple of big fans to blow the rice skins away from the grains. We removed the rice and skins from the mortar where we'd pestled or from the hole where we'd danced, brought them in a bowl in front of the fans, and standing a few feet away, would take a handful of rice out of the bowl then drop it down into the bowl, letting the skins blow away as the rice fell back into the bowl. Another method was to toss the rice/skin mix up into the air, letting the skins blow away as they passed in front of the fan and the rice land in the bowl. The next day, with a strong breeze blowing off of Grassy Narrows lake, we could repeat the same process without using the fans, simply tossing the rice in the air above the bowl and letting the wind winnow away the unwanted skins.



***The genius of indigenous innovation: Ryan uses improvised mortar and pestle***

Following this process, one usually goes back to grinding the same batch, then winnowing, then if necessary grinding and winnowing a final time. The key is that some of the rice 'grains' or berries are exposed after the first round of grinding and are bound to crack during the second or third round. So one has to stop at some point but leave many grains with their skins still on. This is the final process: the removal by hand, one by one, of the sheaths remaining on the grains of *minoowin*. This step takes the longest amount of time and is the most tedious, but is the most social step, as sitting around peeling rice affords people time to talk. I am told the grandmothers used to do this – sit around all day and chat while peeling off the rice covers. It's nice to be doing something with one's hands while visiting – all the nicer when it's a common activity. Some of the grains were still green, but whatever had wanted to fall into the canoe had fallen into the canoe. Shoon explained that, like a tomato ripening off the vine, the longer we waited the darker we'd see the rice become.



## Reconciliation and the Aboriginal Economy

There is a truth and reconciliation process going on in Canada right now. Some think it only pertains to Christians or to church folk more specifically, and to Aboriginal people who went through the residential school experience. But others, myself, included, see this process as having to address a whole lot more than simply one, albeit devastating, unjust policy. The Aboriginal economy that predates Canada was transformed from a viable subsistence and barter economy before contact to an asymmetric and unjust trade economy throughout the fur trade period. Eventually, the residential school era broke down traditional patterns of oral transmission of cultural knowledge, taking children away from their lands during their formative years and returning them to their communities often no longer speaking their languages. Beyond that period, the most ecologically damaging stage has been the industrialization of the boreal forest, among other indigenous territories, through logging, mining and hydroelectric generation - to name the big three. An already struggling native world in Canada was effectively told 'don't worry about trying to remember and reclaim your old traditional land use practises and values: your old ways are finished and these resources no longer belong to you.' These resources have then been harvested en masse, using heavy machinery, and sold, often raw, out of the country. Labour has been replaced by mechanization, and treaty replaced by pollution, and lately

revenue-sharing agreements intended to co-opt opposition to these land-destroying practices. To oppose this model is to oppose this idol, this much-fetishized paradigm, called 'progress.'

Over the years, harvester boats were designed to



***the distinction between work and labour breaks down as peeling rice becomes a social activity***



***the harvester boat, designed for mass harvest of minoomin, has long been banned at Grassy.***

harvest wild rice en masse, and are still used in parts of the country, such as the La Ronge area of northern Saskatchewan, according to a non-native teacher in the community who used to work up in north Sask. In Grassy Narrows, however, the harvester boat was banned over 20 years ago, out of concern that it was harming the wild rice plant during the harvest. So the way of the harvest today is materially not much different from traditional methods, a truck ride to the site and an electric fan excepted. Socially, of course, the rice harvest does not have the same cultural significance it may have once, and the cultural forms associated with the harvest – the songs, the communal process – have undoubtedly shifted. The practice of the rice harvest, however, is not being preserved in

the abstract as a cultural memory, but through the time- and energy-consuming efforts of people like Shoon it is being passed on to the next generation of youths in Grassy Narrows, and to outsider allies. On several occasions a group of students from the school showed up to help and to learn and to chat. Our group also helped process some rice that had been picked last year by students who went out. We left our canoes by the waters' edge after ricing, as the next day the same teacher took a group of students out to harvest *manoomin*.

But in addition to helping the community practise its traditional patterns of connection to the land and to the source of its food, Shoon is reaching out to us, non-natives, who have also been denied the connection to the land and to the source of wild food through Canada's historical pattern of colonial development. This economy that has been developed, and in which subsequent generations of immigrants and their descendents are taught to place faith, treats the land as a source of natural

resources to be exploited for profit and not as the sacred source of sustenance that it has been understood to be by First Nations since time immemorial. By supporting the Grassy Narrows resurgence economy, we are helping to fight that growth-based model that leaves resources depleted, lands and waters polluted. We are standing

with the blockaders of Grassy Narrows shouting a resounding NO! to clear cuts. But more powerfully, in my experience, by partaking in the wild rice harvest – or fishing for one's dinner or picking wild blueberries – we are partaking in an even louder, affirmative YES! to a longer arc of traditional relationship with the land and with each other. We are going back in a way and starting to mend the messed up relationship between non-natives and the original inhabitants of this land: going back in thought and in action to recognize the value both in the land itself as source of our well-being and of our entire economy. We are also honouring the value of traditional Anishinabek knowledge. Traditional knowledge has been so despicably dishonoured starting with the fur trade, but this devaluation continued to take place especially throughout the residential school experiment and the

quiet acceptance with which Canadians have either partaken of or turned a blind eye towards the industrial growth economy that is still exploiting and devastating the land today.

The rice we have harvested is the rice of reconciliation. It is a small step to take towards reconciling our existence as non-natives in this country with the indigenous peoples and original cultures of this

land. More broadly we are aiming to reconcile our economies as humans with the ecological limits of the land itself. Harvesting and processing wild rice is a slow and meticulous process requiring much patience, a patience we have all but lost in the convenience economy accorded to us by the passing age of cheap, abundant fossil fuels. But the rewards from connecting to the source of

our food and from honouring traditional native knowledge of the land gives me hope that more Canadians can learn to say YES! to a more sustaining economic level of relationship to the land. I have hope that as this alternative model becomes apparent, it will require us Canadians to break out of our passive polite shells, and join the blockaders of Grassy Narrows and those elsewhere fighting environmental racism and devastation, to say NO! to the continued growth of this suicidal model of destruction and depletion; NO! to the continuing second- and third-class treatment of Aboriginal peoples; and YES! to a social, cultural and ecological revolution that seeks to restore some kind of balance to our relationships in this country and on this older, nourishing land we call home.



*Archival photo of a traditional Anishinabek rice harvest*

\*all photos by Alon Weinberg, except 'hands in rice' by Ryan Duplassie and 'blockade' by David Ball

\*harvester boat photo from Gov. Of Sask. website - <http://tinyurl.com/bo3knf5>

\*traditional ricing - stock photo from U of Minnesota Duluth - See <http://tinyurl.com/cf85jnj>

\*more resources: the fight to protect wild rice from scientific patents: <http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/305/> and <http://nativeharvest.com/node/249>

\*the documentary *Scars of Mercury* made about the history of mercury pollution: <http://scarsofmercury.com/>

**Support Grassy Narrows:** <http://freegrassy.org/>

## **Manoomin is YUMMY, healthy food. Some recipes:**

### **Popped wild rice** (as shared by Shoon)

Heat up an inch or two of cooking oil in a deep skillet. When a drop of water instantly sizzles, it's hot enough. Place a cup of wild rice in a mesh wire hand held strainer. Lower into the oil. It should pop within a few seconds. Lift up strainer, drain some oil off, pour popped rice into bowl. Add salt, nutritional yeast, or whatever else you like on your popcorn. A crispy treat!

### **Wild Rice with vegetables and tahina**

wild rice, pumpkin seeds, garlic, tahini (sesame butter), zucchini, kale or chard or collard greens, red pepper, lemon juice, salt and pepper

Rinse 2 cups or however much wild rice you want to cook.

Place rinsed rice in a pot, with 2x the volume of water. Add a bit of salt. Place on high until water boils, then turn down to a gentler simmer. Cook until the rice is soft or all the water is gone.

Separately, add some cooking oil to a skillet. Cut some zucchini and red pepper and fry. Add salt and freshly ground pepper. Fry until soft.

Cut up a bunch of greens. In the rice pot or separately steam the greens for 2-3 minutes and remove. Add them to the frying pan near the end of your frying. Toast pumpkin seeds in toaster oven on tray or dry roast in another skillet.

If you have a blender or bullet or food processor, great. Chop 5 cloves of garlic fine or let machine do it, add a cup of tahini, half a juicy lemon's worth of juice, a bit of salt and some water and blend. Tahini is now tahina sauce.

Take rice off and if it's ready – opened and whites showing, chewy to soft – drain excess water. Mix in vegetables from frying pan, pumpkin seeds, and tahina. Then mix it all together. Add more S and P to taste if necessary. Serve hot or at room temperature. Fridge cold foods, however, generally are harder to digest and taste like nothing.

### **Butternut squash stuffed with wild rice, tomatoes and mushrooms**

Cut the butternut squash in half. Bake both halves face down on a lightly oiled pan.

Cook wild rice in a pot. Make a cup per squash. 2X water and a bit of salt in a pot.

When squash is getting soft – doesn't have to be totally ready – take out and scoop out the seeds. If they're big enough save the seeds to roast later.

When rice is done, turn off and drain excess water if you have any. You shouldn't if you get the ratio right.

In a separate frying pan, fry some garlic lightly, mushrooms, and later add tomatoes. Use sage or maybe oregano or marjoram to savour it up. Mix veggies with wild rice.

Meanwhile, after scooping out the seeds, you might be able to scrape off some of the squash to mix with the wild rice and veg. mix. But don't scrape to the skin as butternut has thin skin and you are still baking it some more, so leave some meat on the skin. Mix in the wild rice and veg mix with the squash, stuff it into the mostly cooked squash shells. Bake face up again for another 20 – 30 minutes.

If you like, at the end, melt some cheese on it. We use a product that is vegan and melts well called Daiya, that is soy and dairy free. Add onto squash and broil for 5 minutes or so til cheese is melted.



**Bon appétit, and thank you for joining me on this part of the journey. Please support your local and indigenous economies, and stand up for food sovereignty. Feast with you soon!**

