

Head: One of Nature's Great Health Foods

Subhead: We're blessed to be able to produce food in an area that's so pristine

Pull quotes: "Our biggest challenge is our isolation, and our biggest obstacle is the cost of shipping."

"Our rice and California organic paddy wild rice, it's like night and day—ours is dark brown, almost black."

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By: Barb Feldman

When Tracy Wheeler-Anderson travelled 800 kilometres northwest of Winnipeg to teach in the small community of Cranberry Portage in 1986, she thought she'd stay a year. Instead, she met and married Bob Anderson. Almost 27 years later she, Bob and their family live at the edge of the Canadian Shield on the shore of Lake Athapapuskow, surrounded by boreal forest.

Wheeler-Anderson, who still teaches half-time at Cranberry Portage's 100-student school, began Naosap Harvest in August of 2010 to market organic lake-grown wild rice directly to restaurants and consumers at a reasonable price. She named the new business after one of the lakes originally harvested by her husband. ("Naosap" is a Cree counting word meaning "fourteen.")

Bob Anderson and his brothers, who began farming wild rice more than three decades ago, were among the first to experiment with planting wild rice in isolated northern lakes, she says. Wild rice is not actually rice, but a variety of grass that can grow to as much as nine feet high, with part of the plant growing above the waterline and three to five feet growing under water. At harvest time airboats fronted by giant "hoppers" are piloted across the shallow water's surface, catching the loose ripe seeds from the tops and leaving the semi-submerged plants intact. Wheeler-Anderson buys her wild rice exclusively from her husband's operation, which in a typical year harvests close to 100,000 pounds and also sells to other distributors. "I know all their experience with

harvesting, and that they wait until the rice has the optimal flavour and size,” she says. They are certified organic through the Organic Producers Association of Manitoba, “and that’s very important to me.”

Because its moisture content can be as high as 80 per cent, freshly-harvested wild rice must be dried to prevent spoilage. Forty to fifty thousand pounds at a time are taken to a certified-organic processing facility about 45 minutes north of Cranberry Portage, says Wheeler-Anderson. As the grains tumble-dry in a machine “like a giant heated cement-mixer,” their outer hulls peel off, and the green shells become shiny black. Two pounds of green rice produce a pound of finished rice with about 7 per cent to 9 per cent moisture content, which will keep almost indefinitely in a moisture-tight container.

People assume that something that is called “wild rice” is always “natural,” but, in fact, some paddy-raised wild rice grown in the US has been genetically modified to ripen all at once, making the crop cheaper to grow and harvest. But in order to earn its organic certification Naosap Harvest wild rice must also be verified as non-genetically-modified. “If you saw a pile of our rice and a pile of California organic paddy wild rice, it’s like night and day—ours is dark brown, almost black. Theirs is a different colour, skinny, and even the protein and nutritional levels are different,” she says, noting that even in southern Manitoba, lakes may be exposed to fertilizer or manure runoff from nearby fields or pastures. “We’re extremely blessed to live where we do and to be able to produce a food that’s still in an area that’s so pristine, and our long summer days just seem to produce a plumper, longer grain.”

Selling directly to restaurants and customers ensures that her prices are the lowest they can possibly be for organic Canadian lake-grown wild rice, says Wheeler-Anderson. “I started off small, built my website, started cold-calling businesses and restaurants, and sent hundreds of e-mails—and so far, so good!” she laughs. Winnipeg restaurant owners have been very supportive, and Naosap Harvest has loyal Facebook fans across North America and in Britain, Australia, South Africa and Europe. “I’ve had customers from China, we did a bulk sale to Malaysia—the internet is amazing,” she says. “Our biggest challenge is our isolation, and our biggest obstacle is the cost of shipping.” Although the average cost of shipping a kilo across Canada is more than \$11,

most customers will buy 5 pounds at a time. As more people around the world look for alternatives to genetically-modified foods, she has seen a growing willingness to pay a premium for products that are certified organic.

“People think of wild rice as expensive, but a pound will yield 9 cups of cooked rice,” or about 18 servings for \$6, she notes. With the help of the Food Development Centre in Portage la Prairie, she is developing ideas for new ways to present wild rice products. Gluten-free and a great source of fibre and iron, wild rice is “one of nature's great health foods,” she says. “I would love for more people to really enjoy it.”

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