

The Wild Rice Dance

A Time for Thanks for Wild Rice – History and Stuffing Recipe

By: Joy Asham

Riz Sauvage, Wild Rice, the Ojibway of the Wabikimi call it Mandamin. From its humble beginnings in the shallow lakes and waterways of Central Canada and the northern internal States, Wild Rice has come to be a world class delicacy.

It is not really a rice, but a grass and it has been traditionally reaped, cured and used in wonderful ways that the Creator has set forth for us since time began. In fact, it seems, just as many credit Johnny Appleseed with the proliferation of the now American ideal of apples, the Creator carried these grass seeds in his pocket, scattering them across our northern terrain as a special gift for the People, also known as the Anishnawbe.

As there was no sowing of the grasses by Man, the location of Mandamin had to be sought and special means of reaping developed. Most used the “two in a canoe” method for reaping. A patch of wild rice would be located and two would work together in the same canoe for loosening the grains from the grasses.

The canoe would be paddled into the high grass and the forward person would use his/her paddle to bend the heads of the grass over into the canoe. The rear person would use his/her paddle to beat the stems and heads which would rain down the kernels and grain pods into the bottom of the canoe.

This pattern would be repeated until the canoe was full, then back to dump the raw grains off and then a return out to the ricing area until the season ended. The process of reaping was labour intensive as the grass was not domesticated, which is one of the reasons that wild rice pricing is usually fairly high. Of course, it is worth every penny as it is totally organic and absolutely delicious.

The work with the rice is not over. At the point of reaping, wild rice looks green, hard and is far from delicious and edible. It next needs to be cured. Curing begins with a light roasting, drying the seeds enough to loosen the husks.

In ricing tradition, next comes the “Dance”. A circular indentation is made in the ground and lined with hide or cloth. The roasted kernels and grains are placed in the concave hole and the dance begins. Young girls and women, sometimes even men, put on their old moccasins. Into the indents they go, and they begin to lightly dance on the rice.

There used to be special songs for this, special celebrations. A step this way, a movement that, a turn here, many were traditional movements that celebrated culture at the same time they de-husked the rice.

The best way to get through hard work is to make it fun and spiritual. The spiritual nature comes from the thanks that all would give to the Creator for a successful ricing season.

Close to the last step of curing, the dance would end with many husks loosened, only needing winnowing. In large round shallow baskets the cured and danced-upon grain would now be placed. Up in the air it would be tossed and the wind would complete the dehusking, blowing away the loosened outer jackets, leaving only the now brown inner skin as a fine protection for the luscious grain.

It wasn't until the last few decades that machines have been able to mimic this processing. Machines were first too tough, then too gentle to replace the exact nature and skill of the Wild Rice Dancer. Some machines in use are now like large drums that roast and dehusk at the same time.

Wild Rice also proved to be hard to cultivate as it seemed to love its own mud. What I mean by this is rice from one lake could not be sown successfully in another, as each plant's progeny seemed to need exactly the same set of nutrients and environmental conditions as its parent. Finally with some experimentation, cross-seeding was finally achieved by taking mud from the water of origin and wrapping it around each individual seed to give it a homelike environment for its first fragile stages of growth in a new environment.

There is much difference between wild wild rice and domestic wild rice. The domestic looks better: its grains are often shiny brown, long and unbroken. Domestic (or farmed) wild rice does not need to be cleaned, merely rinsed before you begin to prepare it for your table.

Wild wild rice may not appeal to your eye as much. It is often peppered with broken husks, sometimes a small twig or two, even tiny pebbles. It needs to be cleaned and picked, like wild blueberries. But, just as wild blueberries you can't get any better. The traditional hazy smoking makes the wild rice explode with flavour and, if you have a fine palette, you can taste the "depth" of the difference.

Both types look the same once cooked. The traditional rice puts a little more work in your hands and might even cost a little more. But it is well worth it. Depending on your proximity to Canadian Great Lakes First Nations, you may find the traditional hard to acquire. Most First Nations, and many outlets throughout the Wabikimi sell the "real" stuff. But believe me, even if you get the domestic, you will not be disappointed. Wild Rice is a Great Gift from the Creator. Enjoy!!><

Wild Rice Stuffing with Cranberries Recipe

(can be used for Turkey, Chicken, even lakefish, such as whitefish)

Note: I have a heavy hand with Sage, you may want to decrease the amount or substitute Poultry Seasoning. I use Sage as it is considered a Sacred Grass and it represents the Female Spirit and Her special gifts. I also love the pungent flavour and aroma it imparts while its taste tendrils into whatever it graces. Also, the effects of the Sage can be diminished by increasing the amount of dried cranberries, which makes a colourful and mouth-watering alternative.

Ingredients:

2	cups	cooked* wild rice
1		medium cooking onion, chopped
1		handful (about a half cup) dried cranberries
5	cups	dry, but not rock hard, bread cubes any kind or mixed
¼	cup	chopped fresh sage or three tablespoons dried sage leaf
1	cup	sliced fresh mushrooms, morels if you can get them (a drained can of mushroom pieces will do)
	salt and pepper	to taste
	a quart or so	boiling water, although you may wish to use chicken stock
	two gobs	about ¼ pound of butter

***To cook the wild rice**, remember that the ratio is four to one: four parts of liquid to 1 part of wild rice. Rinse and clean, if necessary, about half a cup of wild rice for this recipe. Place in two to three cups of water, add a pinch of salt and bring to a boil. Turn down and simmer till rice “pops” and inner white grain is visible, about 40 minutes. Place to cool before using in recipe, or can be used hot if you are careful. I usually make more rice than this at once as it can be refrigerated, frozen, or you may also want to make wild rice an additional side dish at your meal. If so, butter it and/or cook it with onions and mushrooms, either way, it will be great for your stuffing.

Also note: Many people stir fry onions before putting them into such things as dressing/stuffing. You are losing that wonderful onion flavour in your pan, even if you drizzle it back in your bowl. Onions impart a wonderful aroma that carries flavour and a subtle cohesion when they are actually cooked from raw state within recipes. So please, do not cook onions in any way before you add them to this stuffing.

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Preparation:

The above stipulations make the actual preparation of the stuffing very easy. I usually break up the bread the night before, ripping it into bite size pieces. Our family has different tastes in bread so I usually use several slices of white with some whole wheat and even dark bread, like pumpernickel, if it happens to be around. I cover the crumbled bread with a light dishtowel or paper towel and let it sit overnight to dry it out a bit.

In the morning I prepare the bird. The bird could be a turkey, goose, duck or chicken. You may want to adjust the amount of this recipe you make if you go for a small bird as I have put in the proportions for a family-size turkey. Half the recipe will do a chicken or duck, and even smaller amounts can be made for stuffing fish or partridge or tiny amounts for Cornish game hens. Whatever you are stuffing, salt the cavity well, I like to use crushed black pepper in the cavity too.

Break up the Sage by hand into pieces about the size of your thumbnail. Throw the chopped onion and other dry ingredients in, including the cranberries. Add the rice and stir it all up, fluffing it a bit to ensure that the sage, cranberries and onions get well dispersed in the mix.

Be careful adding your hot liquid. I tend to use a lot because I like softer stuffing. You may want a dryer concoction and this step is up to you. All I know is that while you are adding the liquid, you will be assailed by the most wonderful aromas you have smelled within the last year. Salt and pepper to taste. Define your own consistency, remembering that the bird itself will provide some liquid to the stuffing. Dob it all with butter, yum. This is no lo-cal dressing.

The final trick to making a good dressing and an excellent bird is DON'T steam it. I have found that cooks tend to steam turkey, not roast it. It's fast, but not effective in bringing out subtle and deeper flavours. Do not put a tight lid on it, just continue to dab the butter on the outside skin once you have trussed it and then put it in naked to brown for a while. The aluminum foil tent is good, use this for most of the cooking. I tend to take it back off in the last half hour as I love the skin golden and crisp without being dry.

Don't forget to baste frequently throughout the roasting, keeping the bird luscious and the stuffing wherever it appears nice and moist. Let turkey stand for a half hour after you have cooked it, remove stuffing to a different plate. The aroma alone is amazing but look and see the brown and white of the rice, the green of the Sage, the red of the cranberry and your taste buds will really demand satisfaction.

Presentation of a turkey is always best whole, but I know this is impractical today. My father and men of his time used to take great pride in carving the bird at the table, taking custom orders from the family for dark, white, wings, drumstick meat, etc. I think this is a lost Grace, but then people tend to eat more “on the go” these days, even when we are expressing a day of thanks.

If you are lucky enough to have a carver (or apprentice carver, such as a young grandchild) you can always zing up the presentation of the bird by using a few more cranberries to scatter over it and a sprig of fresh sage or two to give us the colour our tummies also demand.

You will not be disappointed, this is luscious. ><