



MANITOBA Town & Country

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Open For Business

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Polar Bear Bonanza

Churchill excursions offer visitors chance to share 'pure nature' /5



By David Square
For the Free Press

THE PAS – If you're searching for food that is healthy, organically grown and very palatable, take a walk on the wild side and give Manitoba northern wild rice and related products a taste test. You'll be impressed.

Grown in pristine waters in northern areas of the province, the rice has a nutty flavor and lovely long black grains, desirable for attractive table presentation.

The rice, actually a grain producing grass rich in vitamins and anti-oxidants, is the number one choice of gourmet chefs and individual epicureans worldwide, says Richard Atkins, co-owner of Wild Man Ricing near The Pas.

"Don't be fooled by lesser quality domesticated wild rice grown in paddies in Minnesota and California," Atkins says.

He says paddy-grown rice has shorter, softer grains which lack the taste and visual appeal of rice produced in northern lakes and rivers.

Moreover, chemicals and pesticides are used to nurture domesticated rice so it can't qualify as an organic product, Atkins says.

"Harvesting and cleaning procedures can break domestic rice into small pieces, giving the grains a stubby, unattractive look and a bland flavor," adds his partner and nephew Tony Atkins.

Tony says the main advantage of paddy-grown rice is it can be profitable at \$2 per pound, while organically-grown northern wild rice should retail for about \$8 to \$11 per pound to be a money maker.

Company started eight years ago

Richard and Tony started Wild Man Ricing over eight years ago when Richard retired from a career that included a job with Manitoba Hydro, time in Africa and a stint as a restaurant owner.

Though not retired, Tony was at a point in his life where he was looking for something to sustain himself and his family when he does leave his day job.

"My family has been in the business on a small scale for over 25 years. In fact, my dad still owns the rights to a lake that he continues to harvest each year, weather permitting," Tony says.

"Years ago the government put a moratorium on the number of lakes that could be leased for the purpose of harvesting wild rice," Richard adds.

"To get into the business today, a person



PHOTO COURTESY OF WILD MAN RICING

Wild rice harvested in northern Manitoba is showing up on menus throughout the world.

Gone wild

Northern Manitoba rice harvesters feeding ever-growing demand for organic delicacy

must purchase a lease from someone who is getting out of the business."

As the wild rice business has been in a slump due to poor weather in Manitoba and bad economic conditions worldwide, Richard and Tony were able to buy a lease on a lake in The Pas area.

They now own the harvesting rights to seven lakes, one as far north as Sherridon, more than 125 kilometres north of The Pas.

Since it's no longer economic to harvest using the traditional canoe, push-pole and ricing sticks technique, Richard and Tony have gradually purchased a small fleet of air

and pontoon boats to accomplish the task.

The air boats have smaller hoppers from 10 to 14 feet wide to gather the ripe rice, while the pontoon craft have 20 foot hoppers that cut a wider swath, collecting more grains per pass.

Both types of craft are powered by engines mounted near the stern equipped with air-plane propellers covered by a wire cage to protect the operator.

The boats basically hover across the surface of the water, leaving the rice stalks undamaged for a second harvest a week or so later depending on weather, Richard says.

This year, Tony says they gathered between 25,000 and 30,000 pounds of rice, an above average yield even though four days of high winds knocked some mature seed off the stalks before it could be harvested.

Two years of product in hand

"I'd say we need from 10,000 to 20,000 pounds a year to keep the business viable," Richard says.

He and Tony also have two years worth of product on hand to meet sudden market demand or to cover poor harvests.

Freshly harvested rice is trucked to a facility at Denare Beach, near Creighton, Saskatchewan, just across the border from Flin Flon.

The grains are cleaned, dried and packed into 50 pound sacks at the mill, then hauled back to Richard's home near The Pas where the rice is packaged and mixed.

Prices are \$8.89 per pound for one to 11 pounds and \$7.99 for 12 to 200.

The company also markets 100% organic dehydrated soup mixes including wild rice vegetable, wild rice pasta and vegetable, 32-bean vegetable and spicy bean and vegetable.

The soups are gluten-free, high in protein and fiber and low in fat, Tony says. "Meat can be added for non-vegetarians."

The company's rice is certified 100% organic by the Organic Producers Association of Manitoba, to which it pays an annual fee to receive the designation.

"In this day when people are so health conscious, it is important to be OPAM certified as it guarantees our product is free of pesticides and other chemicals," Richard says.

Bulk rice is sold to larger retail stores which repack and market it in Europe, Japan and to a lesser extent China, says Tony, adding that he has been approached by individuals who see great potential for sales to the Chinese market in the near future.

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The Pas craftsman creating one-of-a-kind keepsakes

Entrepreneur on the cutting edge

By David Square
For the Free Press

THE PAS – Custom knife maker Syd McKay started to make his own knives because he didn't want to pay for a factory product "that wouldn't do the job."

McKay, an outdoorsman who lives with his wife in a cabin on the edge of Clearwater Lake north of The Pas, owned a hunting knife for many years that finally wore out.

He says the blade was edge-tempered and once the hardened edge was removed by repeated sharpening the steel would no longer hold an edge.

"I loved that knife because I could

gut and skin a moose and it was still sharp," he says.

But when McKay went to buy another just like it, the price was two to three times higher than the original and the steel was of lower quality.

"That's when I decided to make a knife that would meet my standards," says the owner of Opasquia Custom Knives, a name derived from the Opaskwayak Cree Nation across the Saskatchewan River from The Pas.

Though he'd read articles about knife making, his initial attempts were "not quite what a guy would expect."

One of his first blades was crafted of guillotine steel obtained as scrap from the local paper mill in which he

had worked.

"The steel was too brittle for knives, so then I tried making blades out of old files," he recalls.

Through trial and error, McKay discovered that file steel didn't have the qualities to produce first-rate knives either.

Undiscouraged, the intrepid craftsman ordered a 72" x 1 1/2" x 1/8" piece of stainless steel from a company that caters to one-of-a-kind knife makers.

McKay used a band saw and a grinder to cut the metal into a shape that he felt was pleasing to look at and practical to work with; then he sent the blank out to be tempered professionally.

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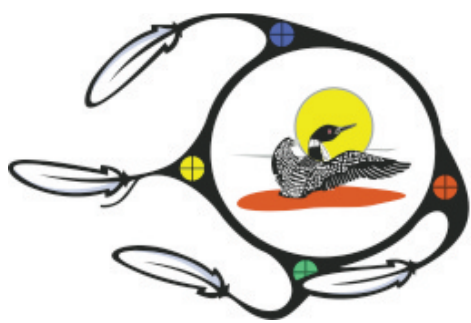
PHOTO COURTESY OF OPASQUIA CUSTOM KNIVES

Knife maker Syd McKay poses during hunting trip to Africa.

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