

Manoomin/Wild Rice: Ojibwe Food Sovereignty in Louise Erdrich's Birchbark Series

"[T]his plant [i]s a gift from the Creator.... Wild rice is part of our prophecy, our process of being human, our process of being Anishinaabe..."--Erma Vizenor, tribal chairwoman of the White Earth Nation. (Raster and Hill 279)

Food sovereignty plays a significant part in Native American efforts to revive traditional ways of life and affirm cultural identity. Sean Sherman, the CEO chef of The Sioux Chef, defines this as his mission: "We are committed to revitalizing Native American Cuisine and in the process we are re-identifying North American Cuisine and reclaiming an important culinary culture" (<http://sioux-chef.com/>). Erdrich, in portraying the foods and foodways of the nineteenth-century Ojibwe in their traditional territory, draws a portrait of her culture's past before her people were dislocated, when they retained political and food sovereignty. Wild rice, the most important of the food staples she portrays, has historically and continues to be one of the most contested foodstuffs over which the Ojibwe exercise sovereignty rights. Wild rice is "the only grain native to North America" (Berzok 65); it grows only in shallow, slow-moving waters and demands a very particular, gentle method of harvest, which the Ojibwe mastered so that they worked harmoniously with the land and the wild grain. Both *The Birchbark House* and *The Game of Silence* contain significant episodes that occur during the annual rice harvest; the second novel particularly ties the Ojibwe identity of its young protagonist to the proper rites of harvest and preparation of the rice. The harvest is shown as a familial and communal event that stretches over a full month. Through her depiction of historical ricing, Erdrich shows child readers the history of Ojibwe traditional livelihood, recreates it for the present, and implicitly calls for its future.

Sources:

Berzok, Linda M. *American Indian Food*. Greenwood, 2005.

Erdrich, Louise. *The Birchbark House*. Hyperion, 1999.

_____. *The Game of Silence*. HarperCollins, 2005.

Raster, Amanda, and Christina Gish Hill. "The Dispute over Wild Rice: an Investigation of Treaty Agreements and Ojibwe Food Sovereignty." *Agricultural and Human Values* 34.2 (2017): 267-81.