

Making miso: For this Conway family, it is a living and a way of life

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By LAURA HILL

CONWAY — To some health-food aficionados it needs no introduction, but to many in America "miso" is an unfamiliar word. To South River Miso Factory owners Christian and Gaella Elwell, however, miso-making is a way of life.

Miso is a food that was developed in Japan and introduced in the United States in the early 1960s. It is a high-protein seasoning that is made from a combination of soybeans and fermented grain. The Elwells are one of only three miso producers in the United States, and their shop on Shelburne Falls Road in Conway is the first non-Oriental one in the country.

Miso has the consistency of soft peanut butter, and its taste can range from savory, almost meaty, to subtly sweet, depending on the form a substance called koji. This koji is mixed with soybeans that have been slow-cooked and mashed to form raw miso. Raw miso is then put into huge cedar vats and allowed to ferment for anywhere from three months to three years.

The Elwells carry out this process in the traditional way, mixing and cooking by hand, using no automation. To mash the soybeans they tread them underfoot, stomping them like grapes with plastic coverings on their feet.

"We're just concentrating on making the finest quality miso according to traditional methods," explained Christian Elwell.

Food and health

Elwell's interest in miso developed from an interest in diet and its relationship to health. His father was a vegetable farmer, and when he died of cancer when Elwell was in his 20's, it raised a lot of questions for him about food and its impact on wellness.

Later, when he was traveling in

Iran and India with the Peace Corps and became very sick with jaundice, he realized that he "didn't know anything about the physical body, about how to create health and how sickness is developed."

This realization led him to an interest in macrobiotics, a discipline which includes the concept of food as medicine in the path of healing. It was while studying macrobiotics in Boston in the mid-1970's that he met Gaella, who had recently returned from Canada and was also studying macrobiotics.

Elwell's interest in food for health dovetailed at this point with his lifelong interest in farming. In miso, Elwell saw an opportunity to earn a livelihood by growing grains and soybeans that he could then process.

First profit

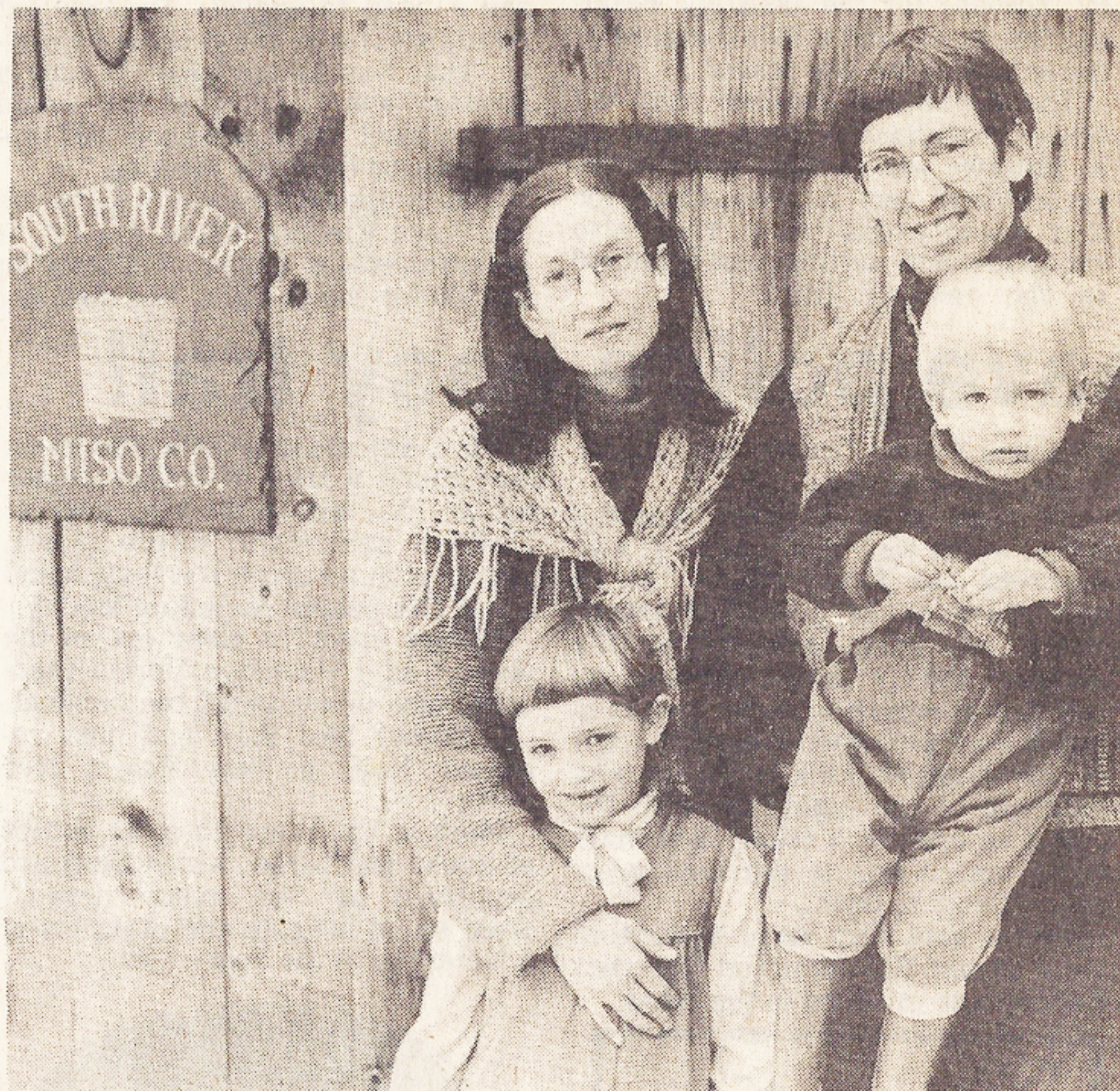
The Elwells moved to Conway attracted by its natural beauty and the land, and are now in their fourth year of business. For now they are not farming, but are concentrating on perfecting the processing of miso. In the future they hope to grow the ingredients as well.

The Elwells ship their miso as far away as California, to health and natural food stores all over the country. They produce 15 tons of miso a year. Last year, for the first time, the business made a profit.

"The whole way of approaching food is changing in this country, and we're just riding that wave," says Elwell. We haven't had to do a whole lot of marketing."

Natural balance

Elwell attributes a great deal of degenerative health problems such as cancer to the introduction in the last 100 years or so of foods that have not existed in previous times. He says that the body has no way of adjusting to these in a healthy way, and the result is that the body's natural balance is upset.



SOUTH RIVER MISO Factory owners Christian and Gaella Elwell of Conway with their children Anni, 6, and Isaiah, 2. (Photo by Laura Hill)

Miso, on the other hand, is a food that has been around for over 1,000 years, and in addition to being a high-quality vegetable protein, Elwell says it also contains valuable microorganisms that aid in digestion and in breaking down organisms that are harmful to the body. It reportedly has a cleansing effect in the blood, a preventive against arteriosclerosis.

Health and connection to the har-

mony of nature are preserved in the Elwells' own lives as much as possible. They and their children Anni, 6, and Isaiah, 2, eat natural foods and avoid wearing synthetics, which Elwell believes further separates man from the land.

"If one wants to live a healthy life, and a long life, one has to change his way of living," is Elwell's advice to modern man.