

Made in

# Mississippi

**O**VER THE YEARS, alumni in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences have added essential ingredients to enrich the Magnolia State's cuisine. For forty years, Delta-based Simmons Catfish has provided high-quality catfish fillets to customers throughout the Southeast. In 2013, fourth-generation Delta row-crop farmers founded Delta Blues Rice. Their products, which offer new twists on old favorites, are becoming staples in restaurants and kitchens across the region. To top it off, Reed Food Technology blends art and science to provide made-in-Mississippi seasonings and sauces. Grab a plate and help yourself to some of our state's finest foods, courtesy of Mississippi State University alumni.



# Fresh from the pond

*Delta catfish farmer feeds a region*

By Kenner Patton

**T**HE HALF A CENTURY tradition of catfish farming in the Mississippi Delta is a storied legacy that translates to delicious aquatic fare on tables across the South and beyond. One pillar of that tradition can be found in **Harry Simmons**, a catfish farmer who harvested his first crop of catfish in Humphreys and Yazoo Counties in 1978. Cut to today and his plant processes 350,000 pounds of catfish per week with the Simmons brand growing jobs and catfish in the heart of the Mississippi Delta. However, in the beginning, this entrepreneur lived the typical life of a young man growing up in the region.

Simmons grew up in a traditional cotton and soybean farming family in the area near Yazoo and Humphreys counties. He attended school in the small towns of Louise and Yazoo City. After high school, his parents expected him to go to college somewhere.

"A lot of my friends were going to Mississippi State, so I thought I might as well, too," Simmons said. "I always wanted to be a farmer, so it seemed like a good fit."

Simmons graduated in 1972 with a degree in agricultural economics, the same department that was instrumental in providing economic data to those interested

in catfish production, processing, and distribution. It also provided analysis of various feed ingredients, which is one of the primary costs for catfish production.

After a brief stint in the United States Army, he knew he wanted to come home to the Delta and farm. His family didn't have a large operation, but with forty acres of family land he purchased 600 acres joining the forty and rented an additional 350 acres in 1974 and began a cotton and soybean operation. After that, he was able to increase his venture by renting and purchasing additional land.

His first year was very profitable, but then the second year was a disaster. That's when Simmons made some career-changing decisions.

Simmons knew that to stabilize his operation and remain productive year-round, he needed to diversify. And not just from an income and cash flow standpoint, but also from a workforce point of view, too. Simmons had recently become interested in the catfish industry cropping up on nearby farms.

"It just seemed like a good fit. When the row crop operation had a slow year, the catfish could potentially make up the difference, and vice versa," Simmons said.

He began talking to local catfish farmers about growing catfish. Along with their advice, and lots of assistance from the local MSU Extension Service agent, Tommy Taylor, Simmons decided to build his first ponds in 1977 and grow his first crop of catfish in 1978.

And as with any commodity, you have to be able to sell the harvest, thus yet another innovative thought from Simmons. After selling

to local processing plants for four years, he decided to build a plant of his own in 1982.

When the facility opened, his goal was to process 2,500 pounds per week. Within a year, the plant was processing 120,000 pounds per week.

"We could start to tell that we were approaching a closed-loop process that offered 100 percent quality control. It starts with fresh water, growing our fingerlings (baby catfish), making our own fish



Harry Simmons, along with his daughter, Katy, discuss the upcoming activities at Simmons Catfish. (Photo by Kenner Patton)

former Deputy Commissioner of Agriculture, oversees the processing plant and Dan manages the farm.

Simmons was named President of Delta Council in 2016, an area economic development organization representing the eighteen Delta and part-Delta counties of Northwest Mississippi.

As for advice to students, Simmons laughs and said, "My daughter will tell you that I have plenty of advice. But if I were speaking to students, I would say that making a good living is hard. Just find some-

thing you are passionate about, be 'all-in,' and apply yourself in school. In my case, when your name is on the box, I figured out really quick that it better be good."

When it's time to enjoy the fruits of his labor, Simmons says he prefers his wife's catfish spread on French bread. Simmons Farm-Raised Catfish is available at restaurants and grocers throughout the nation. Find out where you can purchase fresh-from-the-pond flavor on their website at [www.simmons-catfish.com](http://www.simmons-catfish.com).

feed, raising our fish, processing, and marketing the final products," Simmons said. Now the operation employs nearly 225 people and is one of the largest non-governmental employers in Yazoo County. His operation has grown to 1,000 acres of catfish ponds and he farms another 500 water acres with other partners. He also still grows corn and soybeans.

Simmons is quick to point out that he has been blessed to be able to work with some of his family members and

such a fine staff. "We have been processing catfish for 35 years. We have around 20 employees approaching 30-plus years of employment," Simmons said. "And I am particularly proud of my daughter; Katy, my son-in-law, Andy; and my nephew, Dan Bradshaw. Katy is the marketing and brand development director, and has brought a lot to the business by contributing her experience from a culinary degree and three years at Bon Appétit magazine. Andy,

# Soul Food

## MSU Alums Shine the Spotlight on Rice

By Sarah Buckleitner

**F**EED THE BODY, feel the soul: that's the motto of Delta Blues Rice, an up-and-coming business run by Mississippi State alumni, **David Arant Jr., David Arant Sr., and Hugh Arant Jr.** With the same soil that nourished the blues and grew some of America's first comfort foods, Delta Blues Rice is putting a gourmet twist on a southern classic, and transforming a side into the star of the show.

The rice is grown on the Arant family farm, which began in the 1920s—around the same time Freddie Spruell, one of the first Delta blues musicians, recorded his album, *Milk Cow Blues*.

As the Delta blues gained notoriety, Hugh and David Sr.'s grandfather, Newton Carver, moved into uncultivated swamp land to begin farming.

"Farming the Delta was difficult back then—you had to drain and clear swamp land. There were snakes, cougars, and black bears," said Hugh Arant, Jr.

However, the rich soil made it well worth their time—it was perfect for row crops.

When Carver was ready to retire, he passed the land onto the next generation. In 1950, Hugh Arant, Sr., who had married Carver's daughter, Kathryn, started his first crop. Initially the Arants stuck to cotton, but as the farm grew, they branched out into wheat, rice, soybeans, and catfish.

When the second generation retired,

Hugh Jr. and David Sr. took the helm. Both men attended Mississippi State University. Hugh graduated in 1973 in agricultural engineering and David received his degree in 1978, after studying agricultural economics.

While at Mississippi State, Hugh played on the Southeastern Conference winning baseball team and attended Mississippi State baseball's first College World Series.

One of his favorite memories of his school days occurred during the World Series.

"After the first game on Friday night, we went to eat supper, and Jack Cristil, the legendary Mississippi State radio announcer, came with us. I'll never forget that," Hugh said.

Athletics also initially drew David Arant, Sr. to Mississippi State. He had received a football scholarship but a knee injury sidelined his collegiate career. However, the lasting connections and solid education he received made up for his inability to play.

"I still run into people I met during my time at State, even though it's been years. It's an incredibly strong, lasting community," David Sr. said "It's also fun to see how things have changed over time. Tailgating by the 'Malfunction Junction' wasn't popular when I attended, and now it's considered a tradition."



His son, David Jr., took a slightly different route before returning to his roots. While he also attended Mississippi State, he wasn't sure if he wanted to return to the farm after graduation.

"I started out in agricultural engineering technology and business, and then switched to civil engineering," David Jr. said.

He pursued a career in civil engineering for several years, before deciding to carry on the family legacy of working the land as a fourth-generation farmer. And, as his uncle affectionately puts it, "David Jr. gets either the blame or the credit for Delta Blues Rice."

Started in 2013, the small company developed its signature product, rice grits, after running their rice through an old mill, located on premises. The mill broke the grains, and the resulting rice had a creamy, luxurious texture.

The Arants also stick to a single variety of rice, which was developed by scientists at the Mississippi Agriculture and Forestry Experiment Station's Delta Research and Extension Center in Washington County—only a stone's throw from the farm.

"We're taking a locally-developed rice variety, growing it a county over, and processing it onsite. By sticking to a single

variety, there is a distinctive flavor and consistency to our product," Hugh said.

When the rice found its way onto the plates of family and friends, Delta Blues Rice emerged. After only four years of production, the company has already been featured in two national magazines and ships their products around the United States. They also won the food category of Garden and Gun magazine's 2016 "Made in the South" awards, which was judged by best-selling author and celebrity chef, Alton Brown.

David Jr. contributes some of his success to the work he did on the farm growing up. "I remember working in the rice field

David Arant, Sr., David Arant, Jr., and Hugh Arant, Jr., in a test kitchen at Delta Blues Rice headquarters in Ruleville, Mississippi. (Photo by Kenner Patton)

when I was a kid. I thought earning minimum wage was a big deal. At the time, the work I did on the farm was miserable. But now I have fond memories and I believe learning how to work hard contributed to my success," he said.

Life on the farm is ever-changing, depending on the weather, crops in rotation, and time of the year. It has also changed through the generations, as new technology came along to make the work easier.

"It doesn't require backbreaking labor anymore, which is better for everyone," Hugh remarked.

The Arants employ seven to eight employees, depending on the work that needs to be done, and all the Arant children have worked in the fields—though David Jr. is currently the only one of his generation to get involved with the farm.

Each Arant man has a favorite way to eat Delta Blues Rice. Hugh prefers to keep it simple with rice and butter or gravy, David Sr. likes to mix vegetables into his, and David Jr. loves the shrimp and rice grits recipe his wife makes. But they can all agree: "This rice is not just rice. It's soul food."

Want a bite? Look for Delta Blues Rice in Whole Foods, Kroger, Rouses, and many other retailers, or purchase it on their website at [www.deltabluesrice.com](http://www.deltabluesrice.com).

# The Science of Sauce

*Mississippi State alum concocts local sauces and spices*

By Sarah Buckleitner

**I**N THE HALLS of Reed Food Technology, one moment the scent of barbecue sauce wafts through the air—reminiscent of summer evenings at an open grill—and the next, the tang of hot sauce conjures images of chicken wings and football.

**R.J. Reed**, a Mississippi State alum and owner of Reed Food Technology, crafted the company based on the concept that superior products could be created by combining science, art, and high quality ingredients.

“I was always interested in the science of food,” Reed said, “And I wanted to combine that with my passion for working with people.”

Reed Food Technology was created in 1995, when Reed left behind his job at McCarty Foods to become a supplier. He started with spice blends, relying on other companies to manufacture the seasonings. His business grew in 1999, when he purchased a facility in Jackson to do his own manufacturing.

Since then, he has worked hard to reduce his debt line and increase business.

“We have business all around the country, and we work hard to keep a diversified customer base. Mostly, we supply major food manufacturers and food service operations,” Reed said.

For instance, if you’ve eaten at Jack’s Restaurants, there’s a chance you’ve slathered your chicken tenders in sauce

developed and manufactured at Reed Food Technology.

“We work with manufacturers to develop custom products with high quality ingredients,” Reed explained.

The facility includes a lab for product development, where technicians in white lab coats create products for clients.

Reed’s ties to Mississippi State University pop up everywhere—a maroon and white doormat welcomes visitors to his office, and Bulldog paraphernalia can be glimpsed through the open doors of his employees’ offices.

Reed graduated from Mississippi State in 1980 with both his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in food science. He attributes a portion of his success to the connections he made and education he received while at State.

“I feel very strongly that Mississippi State gave me an excellent educational base, which allowed me to be successful,” Reed stated.

The professors he interacted with particularly impacted Reed. He cites his major advisor **Dr. Gale Ammerman** and **Dr. Bob Rogers** in the then-Food Science and Technology Institute and **Dr. Walter Newson** in the College of Business, as inspirations to his career in food sciences.

“The professors were great. They gave me wonderful exposure to the industry,” Reed said.

After graduation, Reed began a doctoral degree at Purdue in food science with a focus on packaging research, but he was soon whisked away by a job offer from the American Can Company.



Jeff Reed and R.J. Reed at Reed Food Technology in Pearl, Mississippi. (Photo by David Ammon)

**Jeff Reed** went to the Culinary Institute of America—where he honed his artistic flair for food before becoming a manager at Whole Foods. In 2009, he switched to running the Reed Food Technology operation in Jackson, while his father transitioned into an advisory role.

“I started out in the lab doing research and development, and then worked my way up to a managerial position. But I’ve been working here since I was 12 or 13 years old, doing dirty jobs. Whenever they needed the building caulked or rocks moved, I was the guy,” Jeff said.

Overall, he loves the work.

“It’s something different every day, and there are always new challenges. Because we work with so many different products, there’s always something exciting happening,” Jeff said.

Justin’s favorite part of working for the family business is the extra time he gets to spend with his family.

“I love getting to work with my dad and brother,” he said.

As for their favorite things to eat?

“I love to cook, but especially Italian cuisine. I’d say my favorite recipe is homemade macaroni and cheese, with everything made from scratch,” Jeff said.

His father prefers smoking ribs and chicken—which is lucky, because they happen to manufacture over 160 barbecue sauces.

And Justin loves all food: “There are very few things that I dislike.”

One thing is for sure: whether it’s barbecue, Italian, or macaroni and cheese, the Reeds know how to transform the science of cooking into a work of art.

“The first product I worked on was the plastic ketchup bottle,” Reed explained. “My job was to test food in packages, and I had the chance to travel all over the country. It laid a great foundation for the rest of my career.”

He ended up back in Mississippi when the poultry company, McCarty Foods, recruited him to develop products for national food service operations. When that company was purchased by Tyson, Reed felt it was time to branch out on his own as a supplier.

Since then, Reed Food Technology has continued to grow. Reed purchased Taste Maker Foods in Memphis in 2007, and has since worked to expand his facilities, capabilities, and product line.

While his two sons, Justin and Jeff Reed, work for the family business, that

wasn’t originally the plan.

“I always told them growing up that they weren’t working in my business—that they needed to branch out and develop their own careers. But then I read about transitioning family businesses, and I approached them about joining the team,” Reed said.

**Justin Reed** also went to Mississippi State University for his undergraduate degree and MBA in business information systems before becoming a pilot for Mississippi State University. He now runs the Memphis branch of Reed Food Technology, Taste Maker Foods.

“My time at Mississippi State University helped prepare me to problem solve, run a business, and deal with people—all crucial skills for the work I do with Reed Food Technology,” Justin said.