

Made in

Mississippi

OVER 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

THE 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."

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,

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.