

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.



Soul Food

MSU Alums Shine the Spotlight on Rice

By Sarah Buckleitner

FEED 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.