

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.



# 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.