

# Growing with the Grain

THERE'S RICE, AND THEN THERE'S RICE. SOME LOCAL FARMERS ARE GOING BEYOND LONG-GRAIN

BY ERIC FRANCIS | PHOTOGRAPHY BY DERO SANFORD



**A**rkansas produces more rice than any other state in the nation. If you grew up here, you've doubtless heard that line before. You might very well have quoted it a time or two. But ask yourself: Do you know what it really means?

Well, here's the short answer: Half. Of the ten million or so metric tons of rice grown in the United States each year, about half of it comes out of the Natural State, with California a not-too-close second and everyone else in the rearview. By way of comparison, tiny Japan grows the same amount of rice every year as the United States, while massive China produces one hundred million metric tons annually. This year (a down year by all accounts) there's more than a million acres in rice across Arkansas — you could blanket Rhode Island with our rice farms and have enough left over to tuck in around the edges. In 2009 alone, according to the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service, rice farming meant some \$6 billion and 25,000 jobs for the state's economy.

And yet... America's appetite for rice hasn't waned, but there are vast, untapped markets in the world, especially in Asia, that could make rice farming even bigger business in Arkansas, which already exports about half of what we grow. China, for example, which grows and consumes more rice than any other nation on the planet, is interested in possible trade deals with Arkansas. And even the most notoriously closed markets, like South Korea and Japan, have begun to show some willingness to consider imports.

But rice isn't rice, if you get our drift. The fluffy variety you smother with gravy here is radically different from the sticky stuff that's used in sushi. If Arkansas rice farmers are going to feed people who grew up with a completely different rice tradition, they're going to have to make some adjustments, take some risks.

And that's where somebody like Chris Isbell comes in.

**A**sk Chris Isbell how long he's been farming and he just smiles. "I've always been here," he says as his sips coffee inside the large workshop of his family farm in Humnoke. "I'm fifty-five years old. I don't know

when you'd say I started."

Likely around the time he was born, seeing as his father Leroy — himself a third-generation farmer — started growing rice after returning from World War II. Today Isbell Farms has 2,500 acres; not a huge operation as farms go, Chris Isbell acknowledges, but every single one of those acres is in rice.

This season that means long-grain rice, because that's what Isbell's research showed the market was going to demand. But in the not-too-distant past, Isbell pulled something of a coup in the rice world, when he successfully

rice if you can't export it? Isbell smiles again. It'll get exported all right — just to other parts of the United States.

"What I'm talking about is, it's a niche market but a good one," he says over another sip of coffee.

California's rice crop is mostly the medium-grain, sticky rice that appeals to Asian buyers for use in crackers and other processed foods; being situated right on the Pacific Ocean means they don't face the shipping problems Arkansas would have in getting it to the other side of the world. Meanwhile, there are Asian communities and restaurant suppliers throughout the Lower 48



Chris Isbell, above, farms rice — and only rice — on his family's 2,500-acre farm outside of Humnoke, pictured above and opposite.

grew a variety of low-amylose, medium-grain rice called Koshihikari that is perfect for sushi. Before then, nobody believed it could be grown outside of Japan. His agricultural legerdemain opened a lot of minds, both here and abroad.

But does he expect to see Arkansas sending container ships full of Koshi rice to Japan and South Korea anytime soon? No, says Isbell, noting their fierce protectionism of the rice market — an attitude he appreciates.

"I totally understand. I don't want people importing rice here," he explains. "There's a kinship with these rice farmers."

So what good is figuring out how to grow sushi

that will be looking for a reliable supply of rice like Koshi to meet their own needs.

"I think the possibility for California to export more is huge," Isbell sums up. "And if they do, somebody's got to pull the slack. The Sacramento Valley's only so big."

Not that there's just California to consider when deciding what kind of rice to plant, mind you.

"When I was a kid, you'd look at the adjoining county and see how much rice they had. Maybe an adjoining state," says Isbell. "Now we try to decide every year whether to grow long-grain or medium-grain, and I find myself calling to find



Clockwise from top left: Sunrise over the Isbell fields; Shane Isbell works a combine; grains from a previous harvest in a sifter.

out if Egypt is going to export rice this year. If Egypt doesn't sell medium-grain to Turkey, then that's an Arkansas market.

"And I'm always watching to see how Thailand's monsoon and India's monsoon works out," he continues. "Thailand can grow three crops a year. Vietnam grows three crops a year. Australia's crop is opposite ours — they're planting when we're harvesting. And Argentina and Uruguay are starting to be real big in rice."

And let's not forget Mexico. And Europe. And...

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the future,

where growing rice means being equal parts farmer, economist, and international trade analyst.

**S**uffice it to say that Richard Bell knows rice.

Before being tapped as the first secretary of the Arkansas Department of Agriculture in 2005, he spent nearly thirty years with Riceland Foods before retiring as president and CEO. He's watched as the rice industry in Arkansas grew from just 700,000 acres in the late 1970s to nearly 2 million acres

at its peak. He's seen how the increase in acreage created new jobs in mills, trucking, and auxiliary services. And he believes the state hasn't reached its limit yet, especially if export opportunities crop up.

"We can still grow some more if we need to, and the market is there," says Bell.

But he also notes that there's a steady domestic demand. In fact, he points out, much of the rice grown in Arkansas doesn't wind up eaten, but drunk.

"Traditionally, the largest buyer for Arkansas rice has been Anheuser-Busch. Budweiser has been made from a base of rice," Bell says. "One of the first days I was here, I got summoned to St. Louis by August Busch III. He was upset by the price of rice going up. During the meeting he asked if he changed the formula [away from rice] if it would affect people drinking beer." He pauses for a chuckle. "I was the wrong guy to ask, because I said yes."

Another of the state's major rice buyers is cereal maker Kellogg's, which uses it in (surprise!) Rice Krispies and buys much of Arkansas's medium-grain crop. And both of these buyers have stringent standards for what rice they will buy, Bell says — standards that Arkansas farmers are happy to meet.

"To grow rice for both of them you've got to meet specifications," he explains. "They have buyers come out and test. They're exacting. A lot of these other states don't mess with that, though California would.

"We're growing more than rice," Bell says. "We're growing food to be used in different recipes."

That willingness to meet high standards is part of the reason Bell is bullish on the state's rice industry.

"[Rice has] been a big winner for Arkansas," he says. "I have no question in my mind it will continue as long as you can see."

**B**ack out at Isbell Farms, it's the tail-end of August and the first of their crop is ready to harvest. Two John Deere 9870 STS Bullet Rotor combines squat like giant green-and-gold scarab beetles next to the diesel storage tanks outside Isbell's workshop, their 305-gallon fuel tanks being topped off; half that diesel will be gone by the end of a day's harvesting, Isbell says. Each one of the combines cost a cool \$400,000, though Shane Isbell speculates the new Caterpillar combines top half a million bucks apiece.

This day, however, it looks increasingly doubtful they'll bring any rice in. Isbell and his crew of four — son Mark, son-in-law Jerry, nephew Shane, and thirty-year farmhand Carl —



The Isbells also grow Japanese Koshihikari sushi rice.

are struggling with a balky stripper head (which pulls the rice from the stalks but leaves the stems standing) and watching the increasingly cloudy sky for raindrops. Even without mechanical problems and inclement weather to slow things down, it will be October before they can bring in the entire 2,500 acres, at a rate of about 100 acres a day.

But that's farming for you.

Given the decline in family farms over recent decades, does Isbell think his operation will be picked up by the next generation?

"That's what we want to do," he says, gazing out over the gold-tinged green of nearly mature rice. "I've got two grandsons and Shane's got two boys. If they want to."

Meanwhile, he's working to make sure there will be new markets for future Isbells to explore. Sure, he could rotate his crops like most farmers do. Soybeans are tried and true in Arkansas, and corn is gaining ground. But while Isbell is considering branching out, it's in the direction he knows best. So in addition to his broad swaths of long-grain rice are small test plots to see what other special varieties he can cultivate here — an ongoing experiment with Japanese rice used to make sake, and building up seed stock of Arborio rice from Italy, ideal for risotto, in anticipation of future demand.

"We're strictly rice farmers," Isbell says, plain-spoken and with a dash of pride. "If you ask me what we'll be growing ten years from now, it's rice."

## JUDY ISBELL'S FAVORITE RICE RECIPES

I use our Koshihikari in most recipes that call for rice. A couple of our favorites are stir fry and chicken and rice. Probably our very favorite way to eat rice is as breakfast cereal: Mix butter, sugar, and milk with cooked rice, and it is so delicious. The Japanese would think this was almost sacrilegious, but the Koshihikari makes it the best.

Our main-dish meal with rice would be with stir fry. I saute green onions and garlic, add chicken, and cook until chicken is done. Then I add broccoli, carrots, cauliflower, peppers, and cabbage, along with some water, and put a lid on and steam those veggies with the chicken. Then I add soy sauce and brown sugar mixed together and thicken the sauce. I really do not have a particular recipe, just use whatever veggies I have in whatever quantities I want. This can also be done with pork or beef.

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