

Arkansas Family Grows Sake Rice

Sake is trending in the global alcohol beverage market, with year-over-year growth of more than 5%. Zero Grade Farms (aka Isbell Farms) in Arkansas is pouring on the fuel with their sake rice. The Isbell family has a reputation for busting markets open for Japanese rice, and sake rice is their latest.

"We're supplying sake brewers all over the world, from major Japanese and American brewers to craft brewers and even hobbyists," says Whitney Isbell Jones. "In the early 2000s, we had a call from a sake maker with offices in Berkeley, Calif. They asked if we grew Yamada Nishiki, a rice variety they described as the king of sake. We weren't actively growing it, but we had seed in cold storage."

The following week, company representatives visited the farm to sample the rice. They liked what they saw, and the Isbells began growing it for the company and, soon after, for others.

It took about 10 years, but the market for sake and sake rice from Isbell Farms began booming. For Isbell Jones and her family, it was déjà vu.

"In the 1990s, we were the only rice farm in the country growing Koshihikari, a Japanese rice used for sushi," says Isbell Jones. "When the demand for sushi took off in the U.S., we were already famous for it in Japan."

Having either sake rice or sushi rice on an Arkansas farm was no accident. Isbell

Jones' father, Chris, started working with Japanese rice varieties in the late 1980s. That work stemmed from a search for a competitive edge in a commodity rice market, which began at a technical conference for rice researchers.

"The other attendees were all PhDs, and he was the only farmer," says Isbell Jones. "He asked a Japanese researcher what the best rice was in Japan. When he told him Koshihikari, my dad asked if he could grow it in Arkansas, but the researcher insisted it could only be grown in one region of Japan."

When Isbell went home, he discovered that the region was at the same latitude as his farm. He obtained the seed and grew it for several years. When he had a crop to sell, he found a list of Japanese trading companies and called one he recognized, Mitsubishi.

"The man he spoke with refused to believe Dad had grown that variety of rice, so Dad called other companies on the list," recalls Isbell Jones. "Nishimoto, a rice-trading company in Los Angeles, sent a man out to taste the rice. He said it was as good as that grown in Japan."

By 1996, the family was supplying rice for export to Japan. They had visitors arriving by bus, helicopter and limousine. That included a group of 20 Japanese consumers who had won a trip to the farm from their grocery store.

"There was even a documentary film done on us," says Isbell Jones.

With proof that sushi rice could be grown in the U.S., California rice growers captured a large share of the market by the late 1990s. The Isbell family then began searching for other markets.

"My dad believed that you have to create your own market," says Isbell Jones. "He started looking at other Japanese rice varieties that had potential, using seed from the USDA germplasm center."

One variety stood out for its poor taste. Yamato Nishiki had a starchy finish and was tall and hard to grow. Isbell set it aside. Then came the call from the sake company. Soon, other brewers, including one in the U.S., were calling.

Demand for Isbell's sake rice continued to grow among Japanese and American sake makers. When COVID hit, Isbell Jones and her brother, Mark, began looking for ways to further expand demand.

"We made up sample kits of three different sake rice varieties we grow and sent them to brewers around the world who might be interested in making sake," says Isbell Jones. "We included a farm hat and information on our farm. People started to contact us."

Today, they grow half a dozen varieties of Japanese rice each year, with sake rice on about 20% of their acreage. The remaining acreage is devoted to conventional rice.

"Sake is still a small segment of the global alcohol market," says Isbell Jones. "However, it's growing, and we think we're on the cusp



Chris Isbell in a sake rice field.

of that growth."

Isbell Jones credits the market breakthroughs to a family tradition of innovation. She notes that her grandfather introduced the concept of perfectly level fields in the 1950s, thus the name Zero Grade Farms.

"My son, Harrison, is expanding our markets again by focusing on rice beer," says Isbell Jones. "We have rice flour and broken rice as a byproduct of our sake rice milling. He has a local beer brewer using it, and others are trying it."

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"We specialize in taking down silos that aren't safe to tip over," Forsberg says. "We take off the roof first, then remove the silo brick by brick."



They Tackle Tricky Silo Demolitions

Top Down Silo of Sherburn, Minn., specializes in stove-by-stove silo removal in congested areas.

"I've been tearing down silos for 20 years and saw the need to offer services to pull them down from the top," says founder Carson Forsberg. "I started doing that about five years ago, then founded Top Down Silo in early 2023."

As silos age, they become liabilities. In fact, several counties in Minnesota no longer insure them. Top Down Silo has invested in specialized equipment to safely dismantle silos in crowded spaces.

"We specialize in taking down silos that aren't safe to tip over," Forsberg says. "People usually take down silos like a tree, which is dangerous and unpredictable. We take off the roof first, then remove the silo brick by brick."

The Top Down Silo team has removed hundreds of silos from the top, demonstrating that it's a safe and effective method for removing them without risking outbuildings or livestock.

"We'll take down anything," Forsberg says. "I'd say 95% of the silos we remove are no longer used."

Forsberg estimates his team takes down 60 silos annually, mainly in the spring and fall.

"The average silo will take a two-man crew about two days," he says. "Normally, we can reach a worksite within a couple of days, a couple of weeks at most. But we tackle emergencies in 24 hrs. We recently took down a silo that was on fire. That's a true emergency; you really can't put them out."

Pricing varies and is finalized before the project begins. The crew will manage every aspect of the job, including a complete site cleanup. This includes the option to remove staves or crush them into clean, usable aggregate. A 20-ft. by 60-ft. silo can yield 72 tons of crushed material, and Forsberg notes that about one in five customers chooses this option.

Top Down Silo currently operates throughout Illinois, Wisconsin, North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa and Minnesota.

"But we'll go anywhere," Forsberg says.

Contact the company by phone or email to schedule.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Top Down Silo (ph 507-236-9446; topdownsilo@outlook.com; www.topdownsilo.com).



"It's proven itself in the field and in the trifacta of brewing, baking and tortilla making," says Keith Williams of Creative Botanics.

Culinary Corn Goes Commercial

Seed for a new corn hybrid bred for flavor is now available commercially. Choices F1 from Creative Botanics (Vol. 47, No. 1) has moved from research plots to the field. The bronze-red hybrid was developed from a mix of heirloom flint and dent corn.

"Choices F1 is available from Albert Lea Seeds in larger quantities and from Johnny's Seeds for smaller growers," says Keith Williams, Creative Botanics. "It's proven itself in the field and in the trifacta of brewing, baking and tortilla making. Trillium Brewing and Distilling has made a beer with it and a bourbon that's aging in the barrel."

Unlike traditional heirlooms that have gained popularity in recent years, Choices F1 was selected for its productivity as well as its flavor.

"I love the old heirloom varieties, but I wouldn't want to be in business with them," says Williams. "Choices F1 is a mid-season flex hybrid that runs about 140 bushels per acre on 5 to 7-ft. stalks with 8 to 9-in. ears. In a good year, it'll produce longer or multiple ears per plant."

The culinary aspects of Choices F1 have also proven out. Williams has conducted chemical analyses for distillers that identify high levels of metabolites, oils, and proteins

thought to contribute to flavor.

"It has high congenener values, chemical compounds generated during the fermentation and distillation process," says Williams.

Congeners are responsible for the flavors, aromas and sensory characteristics of each type of spirit. Those same flavors come through in baking for those who prefer red corn.

"It makes a delicious corn bread, but it's not yellow," says Williams. "My next cultivar is coming down the chute. It's a yellow corn that has been optimized for dry or wet milling, with a higher protein for better extrusion for masa. It'll be a little shorter season and a little harder starch."

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