Tremendous tradition is carried in that tiny bottle of hot red pepper sauce known as Tabasco. That might sound like a pat commercial, but it isn’t really. It is true that the McIlhennys, Averys and Simmonses and other members of the enduring and distinguished Louisiana dynasty are involved in the manufacture and sale of the well known sauce. But they have managed to make the Tabasco operation seem important only as one other aspect of continuity in the proud and venerable heritage of Avery Island — a mere paradise rising from the swamplands of southern Louisiana, a few miles south of New Iberia. This year Tabasco has been given the twin virtues of beautification and strategic importance by the Avery Island plant. The dynasty of Avery Island stirs its sauce and grooms its land.

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For example, of more than a hundred oil wells on the island’s offshore periphery, nor of the busy salt mine reaching five or more miles beneath the lush, natural subtropical growth and acres of carefully planted gardens of Avery Island. Indeed, that’s what the island is — a mammoth salt dome surrounded by marshland and one of the inevitable Louisiana bayous rather than Gulf waters. However, the salt deposit was not discovered nor the mine activated until almost 50 years after John Craig Avery, the forebear of the present family, bought the northern half of the island in 1818. Marsh, who had come from New Jersey, established his home there. Louisiana Circuit Court Judge Daniel Dudley Avery of Baton Rouge eventually acquired the rest of the island, having married the Marshes’ daughter, Sarah, in 1837. Their son, John Marsh Avery, is credited with uncovering the salt plug — the first such discovery in the United States, incidentally — in the early 1860s.

Meanwhile, in 1859, a New Orleans banker named Edmund McIlhenny married the Averys’ daughter, Mary Eliza. It was with McIlhenny’s brother in San Antonio that the family received refuge during the Civil War, when the island’s salt mine was a prime objective of the Federal forces.

In 1868 Edmund McIlhenny distributed 300 bottles of his sauce — his complete stock — as samples in strategic quarters. The response was heartening and the next year the first sauce was sold — at $1 a bottle, wholesale. When Edmund McIlhenny died in 1890, his wife appointed the eldest son, John Avery McIlhenny, manager of the family affairs, including, of course, the flourishing Tabasco enterprise.

The second son, Edward Avery McIlhenny, meanwhile, a naturalist by instinct and interest, traveled far afield from the island on scientific and big game expeditions. He brought plants from all parts of the world and set them in the fertile soil atop the salt dome of Avery Island salt that covers the cover.

After that time, the pepper mash, as they call it, is mixed with vinegar and stirred for 30 days. Until recent years, when machinery took over, it was churned by hand with a large paddle. Always with an eye to the past, the McIlhennys have kept the vats and paddles around to show visitors who come to the plant.

After the sauce is strained it goes into the familiar bottles with the green neckband — another automatic process, of course.

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Avery Island and thus began the now famous jungle gardens. He also encouraged birds and wildlife to make themselves at home in the natural and cultivated setting there.

"Mr Ned," as he became widely known, is credited with saving the snowy egret from extinction. The birds' lovely white plumes had become popular in the 1890s for women's hats, and hunters had practically killed the white herons off.

Ned McIlhenny searched the swamplands himself and found eight young egrets. Bringing them back to the island, he settled them in a cage over a lake and watched happily as they matured. That fall he set them free to migrate to South America—and waited. The following spring his birds returned, bringing their young.

As the egret population grew McIlhenny had to build bamboo platforms out over his lake so they could have enough room for their nests. Some estimates place the egret population of what McIlhenny named Bird City at 20,000.

Eventually Ned McIlhenny succeeded to the presidency of the Tabasco company and his 40-year reign of Avery Island was progressive, benevolent and indelible. He planted most of the 60-odd varieties of bamboo, the camellias from all parts of the world, the acres of azaleas, the innumerable other exotic species of flowers and shrubs.

He placed the ageless Buddha from the Tsuny Dynasty (960-1127 AD) high on a hill of Avery Island after friends of his intercepted the course of the idol to a New York museum, bought it and presented it to the master of Avery Island in the 1930s. Then he built a Chinese garden and erected a torii in tribute to the magnificent statue.

Walter McIlhenny, the son of John Avery McIlhenny and nephew of Ned McIlhenny, became a part of the organization in 1940, and then promptly joined the Marine Corps when World War II broke out. He returned to Avery Island as a decorated Marine lieutenant colonel, and in 1949 became president of the company, the post the 56-year-old McIlhenny still retains.

He was the fifth generation to join the company. Then along came Ned Simmons—Ned McIlhenny's grandson and namesake—the sixth generation and vice president of the company.

Through the years Avery Island and The Family have found themselves the subjects of ever widening publicity. The earliest and most notable was a piece by the late John McNulty in the New Yorker in 1953. McNulty recounted then that he got interested in the label of the bottle when he was dropping some Tabasco sauce on his clams in a New York restaurant. So he just went down to Louisiana to look in on its origins.

"I knew he often dipped his pen in vitriol," Walter McIlhenny recalled the other day, "but I decided to let him come on down. If we didn't like him, we'd throw him out. But he turned out to be so charming, he was very welcome."

Fortune Magazine thought in 1967 that The Family—some 50 of whom are now the sole stockholders of Avery Island, Inc—received more than $1 million annually from those carefully camouflaged oil wells and the salt mine and that the ever-growing Tabasco business produced some $250,000 a year.

Several of The Family's families live on the island with Walter McIlhenny, a bachelor occupying one of the older, more picturesque dwellings.

But they welcome visitors to the island, to share with them the jungle gardens and Bird City, to let them drive under the massive, moss-hung oaks or walk the paths through the towering bamboo.

And when one does, he gets the feeling that Avery Island will be there forever—a piece of heaven where they make a sauce hot as hell.