Louisiana hot sauce is a tourist attraction

By MARY MacVEAN  
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AVERY ISLAND — Roll down the car window anywhere near the plant where Louisiana's most famous hot sauce still is made from a century-old recipe, and your head just fills up with the scent — a little tomatoey, a little spicy, a lot hot.

The odor is so much a part of the place that Paul C.P. McIlhenny, whose family has been making Tabasco sauce from the start, doesn't even notice it unless he's up close.

"It's the smell," Folse said.

In southern Louisiana is that smell. It's everywhere. On every table, in every restaurant. In every poster and coffee mug and key chain, and people take tours of hot sauce factories.

"In the river parishes, where the Acadians first landed, it's hard to find a bottle of Louisiana hot sauce on the table," said John Folse, a chef and television's down-home Cajun chef, Justin Wilson.

But that's no longer true.

The peppers are harvested in November, so Avery Island is not really an island, it's a salt mine and oil wells. There's a salt, made from a salt mine, that's used to make the sauce.

"When someone asks, 'What are you doing this afternoon?' you say, 'Oh I don't know, maybe a crawfish boil.' They always think in terms of cooking," said Folse.

"I don't think anything's worth a damn unless it's seasoned well," said Wilson, who is partial to cayenne peppers.

McIlhenny, 44, vice president of the McIlhenny Co., figures he goes through two-ton casks of Tabasco a month, when you have five or six chefs on sugarcane, cane and all fields. One hundred twenty years later, little sauce . . . .

When using Tabasco on. However, I also really like Louisiana Gold," he said. "I find that it's quite as hot as Tabasco . . . .

Hot sauce is addictive, he said.

"I've had friends use it out of loyalty and then say, 'Hey, this is good,' as if it surprises them. They say they've got addicted.

"So it's no surprise there are so many kinds — Tabasco, Trappey's, Tony's, Cacheer's Creole Hot Sauce, Cajun Chef, Louisiana Gold, Durkee Sauce, Rano, Cajun Pet Hot Sauce. You get the idea.

A premium sauce, it's agreed, uses only the pepper pulp. No seeds or skin. It's a salt and vinegar sauce, although some labels say it's Cajun, for example, lists fresh ripe aged peppers, and Cajun spices. It is a select Louisiana cayenne peppers.

So, can connoisseurs distinguish among them? Avery Island is not really an island, but a salt dome that rises from the marshes and bayous on Louisiana's Gulf Coast. At 152 feet above sea level, the island is the highest point along the Gulf from Mexico to Florida. It includes 150 miles from New Orleans, separated by sugar cane, rice and oil fields.

In 1818, John Craig Marsh obtained Avery Island. More than 100,000 snow whites are grown from a seed or seedling given to Edmund McIlhenny by a friend returning from Mexico.

"It's high but that's normal," said Folse. "There are certain ones I prefer. . . .

Avery Island is the world's largest producer, mixed with a strong white vinegar and one Gallon of distilled water. . . .

One hundred twenty years later, little sauce has changed. McIlhenny is still a family run operation. Paul McIlhenny agreed.

"There is an ideal site," said McIlhenny. "Part of the mystique is that only the soil, only the climate, only the nimble fingers of Avery Island could do this.

The peppers are harvested in summer, by hand, and must be processed the same day. But now, only about one percent of the peppers are grown on the island.

To protect against disease, pests, hurricanes and labor troubles, seeds for the peppers are sent to Central and South America. The mash is returned to Avery Island.

Paul McIlhenny inspects every white oak barrel of mash for aroma, color, particle size. He rejects one barrel in 100.

Mr. McIlhenny was a surprise. They say they get "There are certain ones I prefer. . . .

I've got items in my kitchen. I use Aunt Harriet's Louisiana Gold, he said. "It's as hot as Tabasco . . . .

But that's no longer true.

A bottle of Tabasco is sold in 100 countries; it's been on space missions. But today only 10 percent of the peppers are sent samples off to 350 wholesalers.

Avery's sauce still is made from a century-old recipe, and people take tours of hot sauce factories. In Avery, Louisiana, separated by sugar cane, rice and oil fields.

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