Historic Pepper Fields

by gene warren

"Where's the Tabasco sauce?" is a question Louisianians ask wherever they go out of state. And they usually can get it in eating places all across the land.

Tabasco sauce is a product of Avery Island, in the heart of Louisiana's Evangeline Country. Thrusting up over 150 feet above the marsh lands around it and covering some 2,000 acres, Avery Island - actually a salt dome - is famous for many things. Besides having the oldest salt mine in the western world, Avery Island has oil fields, Jungle Gardens and Bird City. But undoubtedly what makes the Island most famous is its tongue-tingling Tabasco sauce.

The McIlhenny Company people produce peppers, process them, and market Tabasco sauce right on the Island, and have been for over 100 years. Walter McIlhenny is president of the company founded by his grandfather, and his cousin, Ned Simmons, is the vice-president.

Both say there's more to making Tabasco sauce than meets the eye. For one thing, they believe the soils on the 500 acres of Avery Island fields grow better quality and better-flavored peppers. McIlhenny puts it this way, "Our operation here is similar to Louisiana's perique tobacco industry; there has never been a successful duplication of it. Others have tried to grow perique tobacco, but haven't been able to come up with the same quality found in St. James Parish. We think the same is true of our crop, tabasco peppers. Probably a combination of soil and climate is the reason."

The McIlhenny family faced a real crisis some 20 years ago. Erosion was threatening to destroy the precious century-old pepper fields. The 500 acres that produce the specially developed peppers are wrapped around the foot of the dome-like Island. Most of the Island's interior is too rough for crops and is used for wildlife. The Island is surrounded by low-lying marsh land and waterways. This means that water from the center of the Island must drain across the pepper fields causing erosion.

To save their pepper fields they went looking for help. Already cooperating with the Iberia-Vermilion Soil and Water Conservation District, they contacted Dolan Kleinpeter and his staff of the Soil Conservation Service in New Iberia. The aim was to develop a system to handle runoff from the central part of the Island and preserve the precious pepper-growing soil. They now have such a system and it is working.

"The first thing was to build a diversion terrace around the dome but just above the flat pepper field," Kleinpeter said. "Since the dome is circular we still had to move the water across the fields to dispose of it. We did this through drop inlets that emptied into diversion ditches."

Now the only water that gets on the fields is the water that falls on them. Much of the land has been leveled and has parallel terraces. "We have not stopped here," Simmons explained. "Many of the knoll areas were cut down to the sub-soil. We used molasses on these spots to increase bacteria action so soil would build up faster. This is working fine." Simmons also said an irrigation system has been installed to supply water if and when droughts hit the Island.

Though the tabasco pepper is perennial, new plants are cultivated each year in McIlhenny's greenhouses. These seedlings are transplanted to the fields in early April and begin ripening in August. The fruits ripen in stages on each plant, so the pickers have to go over every plant about eight times before the full yield in October.

The peppers, fresh from the fields, go to a warehouse for aging. There are several thousand barrels of peppers aging in fifty-gallon Kentucky white oak barrels at all times.

A few handfuls of salt are added as the peppers are packed in. The mash is covered with a filter, then a wooden lid with several air holes is put on. The barrel is sealed with a layer of salt and left to ferment for about three years. Gases escape through the salt. After the mash has aged, the barrels are removed from the warehouse as stock is needed. The usable liquids are drained off and the mash is transferred to mixing barrels - ten gallons of mash to thirty gallons of vinegar. Then every day for about a month two girls stir the mixture with wooden ladles. After this, the eye-watering brew goes through chaff removing machines.

Although peppers are the main crop on the Island, the Island flourishes with an assortment of wildlife, and a management plan is being carried out to keep it that way. Deer, wild turkey, quail and other wildlife are common on the Island. The pepper fields are fenced to keep the deer out, but Simmons has provided 100-foot "deer gaps" between the fields so deer can pass from the swamp and marsh areas to the interior of the Island. Conservation is now safeguarding Avery Island's historic pepper fields.

True Tabasco lovers season their dishes profusely with this palate-pleasing gourmet delight; but to the beginner I'll say, "Use sparingly, or you are in for a shock."

Louisiana's Shangri-La: AVERY ISLAND