Where Hot Sauce Reigns Supreme

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On the muddy banks of the Bayou Petite Anse sits a little kingdom blessed with all the riches of southern Louisiana. atop a gigantic salt dome, it towers 152 feet above the surrounding marshland southwest of New Iberia, an isolated concentration of wealth much like Monte Carlo on the Riviera or Kuwait in the Middle East. Oil, salt and tourists are among its profit-making operations, but, as gambling is to Monte Carlo, as oil is to Kuwait, so Tabasco to Avery Island, the five-and-a-half-square-mile hillblock 10 miles north of the Gulf.

The world's best known and most expensive commercially-produced hot sauce starts here as tiny potted pepper plants carefully nurtured in a greenhouse, grown from seeds that found their way from Mexico centuries ago and have been crossed since to produce the hottest peppers possible.

THE ISLAND boasts one of the best-tended families of pepper plants in the world. More than 15,000 acres are under cultivation, and nearly 100,000 plants are harvested each year. The peppers are picked by hand, and each bottle contains exactly 152 pepper pods. The pods are then processed in the factory, where they are ground into a gooey red mash and combined with a little salt, covered with a wooden lid that has been perforated with exactly five holes. The mash is mixed with vinegar, which produce thousands of barrels of Tabasco sauce. The peppers are harvested, washed, and then put into huge metal vats, where the mixture is stirred constantly for 30 days.

By far the most splendid of the island's facilities is the Avery Island Bird Sanctuary. It is one of the largest breeding grounds for the snowy egret, the world's most endangered bird species. The sanctuary is operated by the Avery Island Foundation, which was established by William McIlhenny, who discovered the peppers in 1868.

The sanctuary consists of three lakes, its makeshift door windowless on a small rise overlooking one of the island's three lakes, its makeshift door windowless on a small rise overlooking one of the island's three lakes, its makeshift door windowless on a small rise overlooking one of the island's three lakes. Its makeshift door windowless on a small rise overlooking one of the island's three lakes.

Tung Dynasty Buddha, said to be the finest Chinese Buddha in America. It was reportedly stolen after the fall of the Chinese empire, and the general who sent it to New York City asked for a museum to house it. Shortly before he was caught and beheaded, the idol was packed away in a warehouse and later sold at an auction in a museum, where it was bought by friends of McIlhenny and sent to the jungle gardens.

The crowning touch to the gardens' wild beauty is the daily return of the snowy egrets to their homes in the garden's "Bird City." Once faced with extinction because their cliffs of sea birds, grown only at mating time, were highly valued ornamental stones for women's hats, the snowy egrets now nest by the thousands on an artificial lake there. Each spring, 20,000 nests are built, and 20,000 egg families raised in Bird City.

This relatively large population grew from the seven young egrets discovered at Avery Island. The birds are fed by the workers, who spend the summer months feeding on the island's many crops. In the winter, they return to the island to breed and raise their young. The egrets are fed with a special diet that includes fish, shrimp, and other sea creatures. The birds are also protected by the Avery Island Foundation, which was established by William McIlhenny, who discovered the peppers in 1868.

The workers are an integral part of the island. Most of the field hands are seasonal, migrant laborers, but those who work in the old Tabasco factories line company housing down the street. Their homes are gray, unpainted cottages which look like shabby outside, but are complete with a bathroom and a small window to provide sufficient nesting material for the thousands of birds, which live in harmony with the "tame" alligators and other wildlife. They are fed by the workers, who spend the summer months feeding on the island's many crops. In the winter, they return to the island to breed and raise their young. The egrets are fed with a special diet that includes fish, shrimp, and other sea creatures. The birds are also protected by the Avery Island Foundation, which was established by William McIlhenny, who discovered the peppers in 1868.

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