

> Story and Photos By Des Keller

Farmers Strike CAROLINA GOLD

Prospecting for ideas to satisfy a love for duck hunting, two growers turn heirloom rice into a business.

The desire of two duck-hunting buddies in North Carolina to create more habitat for their habit has led to a burgeoning value-added rice business that embraces the challenge of growing the very same variety brought to the U.S. on merchant and slave ships more than 300 years ago.

In the process, their company, Tidewater Grain, fully acknowledges and shares the story of the crop's original dependence on slavery. The journey, for partners Al Spruill and Tommy Wheeler, began a few years ago with their plan to create more water habitat to accommodate more duck hunting—and more duck hunters.

“We had a 17-acre pond but needed to expand,” says Spruill, whose family has farmed in the coastal Oriental, North Carolina, region of Pamlico Sound for 12 generations. “We had more kids and grandkids all the time that wanted to hunt.”

The idea, of course, was to create impoundments into which crops would be planted then flooded to attract

waterfowl. Spruill and Wheeler are founding members of a local hunting club, whose members—friends and family—provided plenty of support for the project.

“The cost to plant corn, for example, is expensive, and you're then destroying the crop to flood the field for ducks,” says Spruill, who farms 4,000 acres with his son, Andrew. “Tommy Wheeler and I wanted to find something more sustainable.”

> RICE REVELATION

Both Spruill and Wheeler had hunted in Arkansas' famed Rice and Duck Capital of the World region, near Stuttgart. Tens of thousands of acres of flooded fields of rice in that waterfowl migratory route make for world-class habitat and hunting.

Could they grow commodity rice in smaller plots in coastal North Carolina—and be able to recoup some of the cost by selling the crop?

The answer, as it turns out, is not really. There was no elevator or mill in the region to take conventional rice for processing. They'd likely have to ship it to

Al Spruill (left) and Tommy Wheeler are growing and promoting what was once the preeminent rice grown in the U.S.



Lauded chef Ricky Moore (above) uses Carolina Gold Rice at his Saltbox Seafood Joint restaurant.

Arkansas, and the extra expense would more than negate any income.

Enter Carolina Gold, the gangly rice descended from seeds brought to the U.S. in the 1680s and planted in southern coastal areas. By the mid 1800s, the multi-state region of the Carolinas, Georgia and Virginia was known as The Rice Kingdom, and Carolina Gold was the preeminent rice in the U.S. An estimated 100,000 acres was devoted to the crop along the coast with the help of plentiful water and enslaved people.

The end of slavery after the Civil War greatly curtailed labor-intensive Carolina Gold production on the Southeast coast, and by early in the 20th century, hybridized rice cultivation was moving to Arkansas, Louisiana and Texas. There, huge flat fields with plentiful water made the most of farm mechanization to plant and harvest rice.

Carolina Gold seeds remained in several hands (public and private) over the decades, particularly in Louisiana, South Carolina and Texas. By the early 2000s, a group of ag scientists, chefs, food historians and farmers created the Carolina Gold Foundation to



preserve, promote and propagate that rice—and other historical grains/foods.

> FROM HOBBY TO BUSINESS

Carolina Gold seeds were maintained by USDA in Louisiana and Texas, points out David Shields, chairman of the board of the Carolina Gold Rice Foundation. An English professor and a noted food and culture historian at the University of South Carolina, he says: “This rice seed was kept because it was the standard for flavor and mouthfeel. Many of the new hybridized rice varieties have genetics of Carolina Gold.”

One reason Carolina Gold isn't generally raised commercially is the stalks grow more than 5 feet tall, which makes the plant susceptible to lodging. A second reason is that the rice, whose genetic origins are Indonesian, doesn't yield anywhere near conventional rice of today.

Spruill and Wheeler worked with the foundation to learn about the rice and then source seeds. They planted 3 acres of their own in 2019 with low expectations. Spruill impounded and flooded the 3-acre plot after planting Carolina Gold seed. They managed to harvest their first crop.

“I thought it was a failure from the little bit of rice in the back of our truck,” Spruill says. “It was about 9,000 pounds total, so 3,000 per acre. ‘We'll never do this again,’ I thought.” Typical hybridized commodity rice yields 8,000 to 10,000 pounds per acre.

They were in for a surprise when they took the grain to be processed. “The miller in South Carolina who could handle this amount told us, ‘Y'all did outstanding—you got this much off 3 acres,’” Spruill explains. Apparently, an expected yield from Carolina Gold would be about 2,500 pounds per acre.

> MARKETING THE NICHE

Buoyed by their relative success on yield, Spruill and Wheeler had their rice tested by several chefs and others for flavor and usability. The response was very favorable. >

“Tommy and I looked at each other and said, ‘Let’s move on this, let’s do this thing,’” Spruill says.

This “thing” was their idea of packaging, branding and selling their own rice, and they dubbed their company Tidewater Grain. Wheeler, who worked for years managing a NASCAR racing team, had experience developing and promoting a brand.

Wheeler laughs: “The original business model was to lose somewhere less than \$500 per acre. That’s because this experiment had 100% been about more duck hunting, not growing or marketing rice.”

They saw the new business as possible because, despite low yields and challenges growing it, Carolina Gold Rice is terrific—to taste and to smell. There’s a rich depth of flavor with the rice that can be made to be light and fluffy, or cooked down to a sticky consistency. Advocates say it can stand by itself on the plate, and the nutty, almond, almost floral scent is enticing.

The fledgling business received a boost from the North Carolina Dept. of Agriculture and Consumer Services, which promotes state-made products with the Got To Be NC program. Chad Blackwelder, the department’s food marketing specialist, encouraged the “Tidewater Boys” to staff a booth at the annual Flavors of Carolina show. The show is a business-to-business upscale trade show for retailers, distributors and restaurants.

> A WARM RECEPTION

“I had heard they were bringing back Carolina Gold, and as a chef myself, I know that’s an important, coveted ingredient,” Blackwelder explains.

Even though they had a few thousand pounds of rice in storage, Wheeler says they wanted to make sure “we are going to do this right.” Their booth featured a professional logo backdrop, and they wore Tidewater Grain caps and vests. “Our goal was to find one customer.”

When Blackwelder stopped by the booth several hours into the trade show, Spruill and Wheeler were already having a beer at the bar. “This doesn’t look good,” Blackwelder thought to himself.

Turns out they had a reason to celebrate. “We sold everything we had produced on 3 acres within the first

hour of the show,” Wheeler adds. “We also realized we didn’t have enough acres set to grow the next year to cover just the people we talked to that day.”

Tidewater Grain went from 3 acres to 40, to 70, to 120 acres in subsequent years. They planted 170 acres in 2023 and have their sights set on 500 acres down the road. In 2022, Tidewater Grain finished building its own rice mill to sort and package the grain. It is now also milling rice flour and selling the popular “middlins,” or broken rice, as a kind of grits.

The company has intentionally spread its sales among retailers, restaurants and food service wholesale. One of its first clients was the Charlotte, North Carolina-

based wholesale service, Freshlist, which distributes North Carolina products to Charlotte-area chefs. Players with the NFL’s Denver Broncos are also eating Carolina Gold at the training table.

> THE FOOD OF HISTORY

“Tommy was, and is, very careful about how they market the rice,” Blackwelder says.

Wheeler, for example, was forthright when chefs—including several black chefs—visited the farm as part of a GTBNC [Got To Be NC] Chefs Field Trip. “We are growing a historically African crop,” he says. “The only thing that Al and I can do is pay homage to that ... we take that very seriously.”

One of the chefs was Ricky Moore, who owns the lauded Saltbox Seafood Joint, in Durham, North Carolina, but grew up in this coastal region. “For me, to find out there’s an historically significant rice growing here was super intriguing,” says Moore, who was named the Best Chef: Southeast by the prestigious James Beard Foundation. Moore uses Carolina Gold in his restaurant. “To be in these fields with it solidifies everything, and I can share this information authentically,” he says.

In the farmhouse that serves as the offices and duck-hunting club headquarters for Tidewater Grain, there is an entire room filled with camouflage hunting equipment: guns, overalls, decoys and boots. Tidewater Grain’s business may be taking off, but its owners are never far away from the avocation that brought them here. ///



For More Information
www.TidewaterGrain.com