

# **Swisher/Sunbelt Ag Expo**

## **Southeastern Farmer of the Year**

News Release  
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For Immediate Release

### **MICHAEL L. WAGNER NAMED 2022 MISSISSIPPI FARMER OF THE YEAR**

Located in the rich, highly organic, blue gumbo clay soil or 'terroir' of the Mississippi Delta is Two Brooks Farm, owned by Michael L. Wagner. His family can count an unbroken line of ten generations of farmers back to 1742. Their prodigious, consistent labor has produced a whopping 281 consecutive harvests of rice and other crops.

Wagner said, "While ours is primarily a rice farm, we also grow Non-GMO soybeans and manage several acres of woodlands, lakes, bayou, and river frontage for the benefit of wildlife and plants growing there. Our main goal is to strike a balance between the long-term needs of a healthy natural habitat and the daily caloric needs of consumers. It's ingrained in me and my two children, Lawrence and Abbey, to work with and through nature to produce the highest quality food for those who rely on us."

It was only natural that Wagner became a farmer. He recalled, "I followed my father's footsteps through rice, cotton, soybean, and milo fields, through cattle pastures, timber, and along sloughs, bayous, and rivers. Guided by his vision and wisdom, I learned farming organically, and it instilled in me a passion for the land and all natural resources."

Wagner took a lot of business classes at the University of Missouri and graduated in 1985 with a BS in Agronomy. He started his operation from scratch in 1988 with rented land. Later he was able to purchase it and make innovative improvements that became an integral part of his approach to farming.

Two Brooks Farm has seven full-time and three part-time employees. It has grown from 400 acres from its inception to 3100 acres currently operated, with 1700 acres of rice yielding 140 bushels/acre and 100 acres of soybeans yielding 60 bushels/acre. Part of the rice is marketed through normal channels such as Farmer's Grain marketing pool and direct sales. The Rice Company buys a large amount as well. Through Two Brooks Rice, Wagner markets his on-farm milled rice directly to consumers, to food services, and through second party channels for national distributions. The farm reserves about 80,000 pounds of milled rice for food banks annually.

The finely textured, predominately clay soil of the Delta is rich in nutrients that lend themselves to the flavor of Two Brooks Farm rice. The terroir's physical properties and structure resist degradation, leaching, wind erosion, and depletion of the nutrients required by rice. Products from Two Brooks Farm fall into the general sizes (short, medium, and long-grain) and categories of white, brown, jasmine, basmati, red, and black rice, along with a number of varieties of rice grits and rice flour. Some have distinctively colorful names like Blue Jasmine White Mississippi Jasmine Rice, Original Mississippi Middlins White Rice Grits, and Delta Belle Rice Flour Stone Ground White Rice Flour.

Wagner noted, "We like to offer the public a wide array of products in terms of taste and nutritional value. For example, brown rice has more bran than white rice. But our scarlet rice has five times the antioxidants of our brown rice, and our sable or black rice has eight times the antioxidants of brown rice."

The unique rice cultivation system at Two Brooks Farm adheres to nature's rhythm, lending to and taking from it the means to produce whole, healthy, glycemic friendly, non-glutinous and non-GMO food. Rice yields are comparable to conventionally grown rice with fewer environmental costs and match or exceed many of the advantages of organic rice without the disadvantage of generally lower yields and corresponding demands of land and water usage.

For example, one-third of Two Brooks rice is produced conventionally and two-thirds are produced on continuous rice fields (or permanent rice culture), thus requiring no insecticides or fungicides. Since the farm is located in the Mississippi Flyway area, over 300 species of birds drop their natural fertilizer on the rice fields. They also consume many lost and undesirable seed left after harvest and rogue spring seedlings.

Two Brooks Farm conservatively uses the many inputs nature allows—rich soil and a unique on-farm ecological system and a minimum of manmade inputs—to produce rice. "It's a low-tech approach to address many highly visible problems confronting our world today," he added.

Recycling water on the rich, composted, perfectly flat continuous rice land reduces the need for aquifer water and the energy to pump it. Some years it requires no additional irrigation, being rain fed. Farm-emitted water is at least as clean as it was when it entered the fields, especially free of silt and fertilizer. This is accomplished through the filtering action of a connected labyrinth of continuous (up to five or six) rice fields.

Wagner explained, "Over half the land has no slope, and this land is divided according to elevation to impound water so that none accidentally escapes. These water-miserly fields act as giant bladders during Mississippi rains by storing all water for future use. So our flat, ecologically farmed fields yield at least 50 percent more rice per unit of

water used than our conventional fields and at least 70 percent more rice per unit of water than our small acreage of organically grown rice produced on flat land.”

He added, “These types of fields and aquatic life also do a great job of filtering and recycling any excess resources, and thereby mitigate environmental pollution. The goal is to send clean water back through the meandering streams into the Gulf of Mexico after it’s nourished the farm’s crops.”

Wagner summarized his family’s approach to rice growing: “We continue to meet our goals through our unique systems of rice and soybean production by reinserting our farm land back into our local ecology. We also improve water quality, use fewer carbon inputs, and improve organism habitat on multiple linked levels that serve the environment. These practices allow for lower diesel expense through complete no till and water fowl activity, lower fertilizer inputs, and low water use on irrigated farm land.”

And rather than continually expanding land ownership, Wagner decided to usher in his family’s next generation of farming through the art of vertical integration. “That is,” he noted, “we decided to build our own rice mill so that our employees could not only grow but mill and market our plantation’s rice production, ensuring an extra layer of freshness and therefore flavor in the product. Most rice is stem ripened in field, enhancing grain flavor while reducing drying costs.”

The single estate rice is stored and small-batch milled on site in a kosher-certified, highly sanitary rice facility situated among the fields from which it was harvested. This practice minimizes food miles and saves transportation costs. Wagner reflected, “We are all stewards of the land’s resources and must continually restore what we take out of it. It truly does take a village for our farm family to meet our collective social and environmental obligations.”

As to county level agricultural activities, Wagner is a member of Delta Rice Promotions, Inc. and the Planters Bank Advisory Board. He has served as vice president and president of Tallahatchie Farm Bureau Board of Directors, is a member of the Planters Bank Advisory Board and the Emmett Till Commission of Tallahatchie County, and serves as the Tallahatchie Commissioner to the YMD. On the state level, Wagner is a board member of the charitable organization, Extra Table, the Mississippi Rice Council, the Mississippi Farm Bureau Rice Advisory Board, and the Tallahatchie County director for the community foundation of Northwest Mississippi. On the national level, Wagner has served on the board of directors of the US Rice Association and been a member of its international marketing committee in the past.

Confronting farming’s challenges, Wagner observed, “Uncertainty is the word that comes to mind: scientific, social, and economic. It’s a constant issue of whether or not the clouds will yield the right amount of rain, or the seed will be viable and the soil

fertile. Whether markets might yield parity or profitability and cash will flow on the stream of expenses. And there are always the long hours for my family and employees and keeping up strength and fortitude to get the job done.”

As to the rewards of farming, Wagner said, “I’ve been fortunate to have space in this enterprise for my children to enter and build their lives. I also cherish my employees, vendors, and customers who are an integral part of the operation.” He added, “Above all, there’s the unquantifiable blessing of experiencing an ever-deepening relationship with God, developed while walking, working, and praying on my farm. Stewardship over such fertile land is a gift that keeps me in awe and gratitude for the opportunity. It takes an earth and a sky full of faith, hope, and love to do what I do, and I’m richly blessed with each.”

When Wagner has a few non-farming-related free moments, he enjoys studying and working with architectural design, both historical and modern. He said, “I like to think about ways that humankind can more sensibly use space and resources for the betterment of themselves and nature.” He also takes contemplative walks in the woods and fields where his fertile imagination can have free rein.

Laura Jane Giaccaglia, Bolivar Extension Coordinator/Agent IV, nominated Michael Wagner for the Mississippi Farmer of the Year award. She said, “Mike has a unique farming operation, and I have gotten to know him through our Mississippi rice promoting activities in conjunction with the Delta Rice Promotions Board.” She added, “Mike will be the first one to tell you that his main focus is the quality, not quantity, of his product. It’s what distinguishes his operation from others. He is a steward of the earth and works to bring awareness to the public of building ecological systems and promoting sustainability and healthy agricultural environments.”

A distinguished panel of judges will visit Michael Wagner, along with the other nine state winners via zoom at a later date this summer. The judges include John McKissick, long-time University of Georgia agricultural economist at Athens, Georgia; David Wildy, Manila, Arkansas, the overall winner of the award in 2016; and Joe West, Tifton, Georgia, retired dairy scientist and assistant Dean of the University of Georgia Tifton Campus.