

Michael Bosworth stands amid his rice crop at Rue & Forsman Ranch in Olivehurst. Photo by Raoul Ortega

Fields of dreams

Rice is California's real food story.

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On a drive through the countryside, perfectly patterned green squares lay out like a carpet ahead, blue sky sharply surrounding them. The patches on this agricultural quilt are fields of California rice, a crop that covers 500,000 acres in the state. Ninety-seven percent of these farms are located in the Sacramento Valley.

Rice plays an important part in the Sacramento region's agricultural story. Americans will eat a forecasted 8.4 billion pounds of rice in 2017-2018, according to the consumer data company Statista. California produces 20 percent of America's

rice. About half of the state's crop is exported. Rice is a \$5 billion industry in the fifth wealthiest economy in the world.

Rice is serious business. The farmers in charge of this commodity crop aren't working with hoes or shovels. They aren't growing food for the farmers' market down the block. They are multitasking CEOs tracking the GPS on harvesters while juggling calls to Washington, D.C., and booking appointments for local duck enthusiasts. *Farmer* isn't quite the right word to describe California's rice growers. These are business leaders — and their kingdom of grain spans the horizon.



Photo by Debbie Cunningham



Silos at Montna Farms. Photo by Debbie Cunningham



A field of short grain rice, Koshihikari, at Montna Farms. Photo by Debbie Cunningham

BECOMING CEO

According to the 2012 USDA Agriculture Census, 93 percent of California farms are family owned. Montna Farms stands as one example.

Nicole Van Vleck grew up on the walnut ranch near Yuba City that her parents, Al and Gail Montna, owned. At an early age, she learned the value of hard work and the financial rewards of running a business. She and her little sister didn't earn any allowance; at the age of 10, Van Vleck was working as a small farmer for her own spending money. The sisters were responsible for gleaning walnuts that fell through the harvesting machine. They sold the nuts to a local drying station, where they received a check for their crop.

Once Van Vleck was old enough to drive, the sisters were responsible for cleaning the office at their main farm — which they call a rice ranch — Montna Farms. Van Vleck also weighed trucks there that were hauling rice to local rice mills.

Yet Van Vleck didn't feel a calling to farm as a teenager.

"I thought there had to be something else," Van Vleck says with a chuckle.

Van Vleck traveled to the University of California, Los Angeles,

for college, aspiring to become an attorney. She took a job with a Sacramento law firm, working on agricultural policy issues as a legislative analyst. Yet, despite the distance, her family farm was calling her back.

In 1994, Van Vleck returned to Montna Farms to help her dad run the business, and she's been a farmer ever since. Today, she runs the family operation as its president and CEO and is a partner with her parents and sister, Michelle Vogt.

ONCE A FARMER, ALWAYS A FARMER

Unlike Van Vleck, Michael Bosworth never questioned what he wanted to be when he grew up, and that was a farmer. He comes from a family of farmers dating back to the 1870s. As a little boy, Bosworth loved spending time outdoors on the family farm property and wanted to learn everything he could about the business. He took odd jobs around the farm, such as mowing. He spent every summer working there and even did a stint as a peach farm field representative for a fruit cannery.

"I got to eat a lot of peaches," Bosworth says, smiling.

When Bosworth went to college, he stayed close to the Olivehurst, Calif.-based family farm, Rue & Forsman Ranch Inc., attending the University of California, Davis, to study crop science. He also



From left, Michelle Vogt, Gail Montna, Al Montna, and Nicole Van Vleck stand on a weir located in the middle of the main rice water canal at Montna Farms in Yuba City. Photo by Debbie Cunningham



A tractor at Montna Farms. Photo by Debbie Cunningham

obtained a graduate degree in agriculture — a farmer to the core.

Grad school sparked an idea for Bosworth. He wanted to reduce volatility in the market by creating branded products, partnering with local farmers to aggregate crops to sell under that brand. In 2006, he started Next Generation Foods, a seller of various Northern California products. They include a wide range of specialty rices, such as jasmine and basmati (varieties unique to California), as well as walnuts, cornmeal, and vinegar.

In 2008, continuing his long-sought career path, Bosworth went to work full time as a rice farmer, joining his stepdad on Rue & Forsman Ranch as manager. Even as his own company continues to expand, Bosworth remains closest to the fields. He loves working alongside his family, raising a crop.

“It’s a massive effort every year,” Bosworth says about growing rice. “To get harvest going and get harvest finished and see how we did ... I get a lot of satisfaction out of that.”

PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT

Van Vleck and Bosworth may have found their way into farming by two different paths, but the road they travel as rice growers is paved with shared experiences. Environmental stewardship is one of them.

According to a mapping project by California State University, Chico, 90 percent of California’s wetlands have disappeared in the last century. Many species of birds and land animals rely on this habitat for survival. Because rice requires standing field water for growth, these wetland species have made rice farms one of their migratory homes, and rice growers work intentionally to help protect them.

At Montna Farms, wildlife protection has been proactively built into the company’s ethos, a purpose-driven practice started by Al Montna, an avid duck hunter. In 2002, the Montna family worked with the nonprofit Ducks Unlimited to create the first-ever agricultural easement with a winter water component designed to provide a duck habitat in California. The agreement, in which Montna Farms agrees to leave standing water in its fields for a designated time to support protected birds’ migratory patterns, stands in perpetuity.

“This land will never have a house on it or a strip mall,” Van Vleck says with pride.

Vogt serves as president of the Montna Farms Family Council, an entity created by the company to preserve the values of land stewardship and help carry it into the next generation of the business.

“Our parents involved us in the decision to protect the ranch with the easement,” Vogt says. “It is our role to be stewards of this land for our children and grandchildren.”

Montna Farms set a trend that today benefits not only waterfowl, but also farmers such as Bosworth. Rue & Forsman Ranch also holds environmental easements. Bosworth’s farm receives payments from The Nature Conservancy for its easement, making it a win-win solution.

“We’ve got the land out here 365 days a year, and I need about 170 to grow my crop,” Bosworth says. “What else can we be doing out here that’s going to add value to the economy, our individual picture, and habitat for wildlife? It’s been an amazing collaboration and creativity between scientists and growers to come up with these programs.”

PARTNERING FOR CHANGING TIMES

Wildlife protection wasn’t the only intention of that first environmental easement that Montna Farms obtained. Al Montna also was responding to political change. Up until the 1990s, rice farmers regularly burned their fields after harvest to remove rice straw stubble left behind. At the time, air quality and public health

were growing social concerns. Smoking no longer was allowed in restaurants, and rice farmers saw the writing on the wall for the future of their burning practice.

“Farmers ultimately are very practical and results-oriented people,” says Tim Johnson, president and CEO of the California Rice Commission, which advocates for rice farmers (and, disclaimer, is a donor of the nonprofit where this author works). “If you go to a farmer, if you say, ‘Hey, what could we do in our fields to help with salmon?’ that’s the big red button in the middle of the room. Instead of reacting negatively, our farmers talk about how we can be part of that solution.”

Working creatively with scientists, technology experts, and legislators has kept the rice industry evolving. Those early environmental easements provided a multipronged solution to burning fields and air quality. Today, in times of water shortages, these same partnerships have expanded as engendered salmon rely on water that rice farmers also need. Together, groups such as California Trout Inc. and rice farmers are exploring how rice farming might provide needed food for fish and animals from flooded rice fields.



The Montna Farms dryer and storage bins sit beside a field of short grain rice. Photo by Debbie Cunningham