



# Go with the Grain

BY CAROL PENN-ROMINE  
PHOTOS BY MELISSA PETERSEN

“*Kin khao roo yang?*” In Thailand, this means “hello,” but the literal translation is, “Have you eaten rice yet?” Common greetings throughout China and Southeast Asia translate similarly. While rice is grown right here in the Mid-South, it doesn’t carry the significance that it does in Asia and elsewhere. And that’s unfortunate, because rice is one of the most nutritious and versatile foods we have.

My household was an anomaly in the rural Tennessee community where I grew up. While the primary starches of most kitchens were potatoes, biscuits, cornbread and white, presliced bread, ours included rice as well. But it wouldn’t have, if not for my family’s rice country connection.

Each summer we’d make the trek from our farm in northwest Tennessee into the swirling rice fields of southeastern Arkansas to visit my aunt and her family. My uncle owned a rice mill there in the midst of that verdant and fertile Mississippi delta country. We’d enjoy rice dishes while we were there, and at the end of our stay, we’d carry home a generous supply of rice to see us through until our next visit. Thanks to my family, every potluck at our church had at least one rice dish.

Those green, swirling fields begin within just a few miles of crossing the Mississippi River and heading into our own local Low Country. If you’ve never seen a field of rice, it’s worth a Sunday afternoon drive to go and find this decidedly different crop. Not that you’ll be able to buy a pound of freshly-grown rice at a roadside stand, but getting a close-up look at a crop that grows standing in water will give you a better idea of how rice production differs from that of other grains.

Rice is a significant part of the Mid-South economy. Arkansas is the single largest rice-producing state in the United States, contributing more than 40 percent of the nation’s yield and bringing some \$1.55 billion into the state’s economy each year. Add to this the significant rice production in northwest Mississippi and the Missouri boot heel, and it’s apparent that right

here on our doorstep lies a wealth of potential for varied and healthy meals.

Rice just needs a good PR agent. While some varieties of rice have intriguing and melodic names: carnaroli, valencia, wehami, rosematta, gobindavog and the amusing bash ful, rice itself is not a terribly glamorous food. It doesn’t have the eye-grabbing appeal of those products you rush to at the farmers’ market or the artisanal products you make or buy from special producers. And since rice requires acreage and equipment well beyond what most of us own, we tend to overlook it when it comes to plotting out our gardens.

Consider this: How often have you seen directions in a recipe to “serve over a bed of rice?” This makes it sound as if the rice itself is of little importance, that its purpose is merely to support what it rests beneath, or that it is something employed to make a complete protein, but of minimal interest otherwise. Too often rice is what gets raked into the trash once all the “good stuff” has been picked off the top.

But rice is more than a bed for your beans or a lounge for your lentils. It should be tasty and satisfying all on its own. Not that you should eat it to the exclusion of all else, but whether you’re making a pilaf or preparing a basic rice as an accompaniment, pay attention to the variety of rice you use, and look for one that satisfies. Essentially, your rice should be so good that you’d want to serve IT on a bed of rice.

Naomi Duguid and Jeffrey Alford, authors of *Seductions of Rice*, perhaps the definitive work on rice, remind us to watch out for rice that has no flavor, noting that genetic engineering has presented us with a lot of bland, high-yield grain. “Rice, like bread, should have good flavor, smell and texture,” they explain. If yours doesn’t, change brands.

This notion might be surprising to some, because it’s easy when you see bag after bag of rice in the grocery to assume it’s all the same. But it’s not. In fact, the United States, which is the world’s largest exporter of rice, has more than 100 different varieties of rice in commercial production. (If I were to list all of the hundreds of



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The wetlands of the Mississippi Delta perform double duty. After the harvest, flooded rice fields provide a winter home for North America's migrating birds and waterfowl. This winter flooding also deters erosion and helps the soil retain its nutrients for the next year's crop.



varieties of rice in the world it would take up at least half of my word allowance for this story!) But among the short-, medium- and long-grain varieties are flavors and textures that lend themselves to myriad uses: long-grain for pilafs, side dishes and salads; medium-grain for risotto and paella; and short-grain for sushi and rice pudding. And then there are brown rice and wild rice, and all sorts of exotic rices such as red and black varieties. So much rice ... so little time!

Growing and milling rice tends to be left to large-scale operations, but for those with the desire to do something not all their friends are, it could be fun to try. If you have a low-lying bit of yard, you can try your hand at growing a patch of rice for yourself. Rice requires about 60 days' growing time in the Mid-South, so if you're really dedicated and well-organized, you might be able to produce two crops in a single summer! While rice does need a good amount of water, you do not need to flood your yard. Commercial operations flood fields to keep other grasses in check. Small, personal-use milling machines are available on the Internet, so it is conceivable that you could raise and mill your own rice.

#### **Buying Locally-Grown Rice**

Brinkley, Arkansas-based Della Gourmet Rice grows and mills five types of rice: white basmati; brown basmati; jasmine; arborio; and koshihikari, better known as sushi rice. Della Gourmet Rice is available at Wild Oats or online at [www.dellarice.com](http://www.dellarice.com).

Rice is inexpensive, so it's easy to become acquainted with by cooking small amounts of several and doing a taste test. This way you can decide which you like most and which types perform best in different recipes. It stores indefinitely, requires no refrigeration and travels well. It is the staple of more than half of the world's population and central to global cuisine. This means it will be a standout regardless of what region's or country's seasonings and ingredients you mix with it. Rice opens up endless variety and flavor in our meals.

Can any other grain make this claim? Probably not! *eM*

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Carol Penn-Romine grew up on a farm in northwest Tennessee and lived in Memphis for 15 years before moving to Los Angeles, where she is a chef, writer and culinary tour guide. You can visit her company, Hungry Passport Culinary Adventures at [www.hungrypassport.com](http://www.hungrypassport.com).



## PARMESAN & RICE SPOON BREAD

*Recipe adapted from Gourmet*

Makes 6 side servings. This recipe lends itself to some experimentation. It's great for using leftover rice of any type. Try it with a dusting of your favorite spices for variety.

- 1 cup cold, unsalted, cooked brown rice
- 1½ cups whole milk
- ¾ cup chicken or vegetable broth
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 5 large eggs, separated
- 1 cup finely grated Parmigiano-Reggiano
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh chives
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper

Put oven rack in middle position and preheat oven to 350°F. Butter a 9½-inch deep-dish pie plate (1½-quart).

Simmer rice, milk, broth and salt, uncovered, in a heavy 3-quart saucepan over low heat, stirring frequently, until very thick, about 30 minutes. Remove from heat and stir in butter, then yolks and cheese.

Transfer to a large bowl and cool to room temperature. Stir in chives and pepper.

Beat egg whites and a pinch of salt with an electric mixer at high speed until mixture just holds soft peaks, then fold into rice mixture. Pour into pie plate and bake for 20 minutes, then cover loosely with foil to prevent burning, and continue until golden brown and just set, 30-40 minutes total.

### WINE PAIRING *courtesy of Wine Market, 4700 Spottswood*

To offset the savory and rich character of this spoon bread, choose a lean and stony Riesling.

- Villa Maria Riesling**, Marlborough, 2007 \$16
- Monchof Estate Riesling**, Mosel, 2006 \$15

### BEER PAIRING *Growlers are available at Boscos' Brewing Company, 827 South Main Street*

The crisp, hoppy finish of **Ghost River Glacial Pale Ale** is a refreshing accompaniment to the saltiness of the Parmesan.