

From Eunice fields to Rouses shelves, Parish Rice's high-protein, diabetic-friendly rice is booming | Business

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Second-generation rice farmer Michael Frugé always thought his brand, [Parish Rice](#) — grown from a variety of high-protein, low glycemic index-scored rice developed through the LSU AgCenter — would take off. The Eunice farmer just never expected his business would go from marginal popularity to striking a deal to stock all 65 Rouses locations in under a month.

The [Rouses](#) deal, inked just over a week ago, is the caper to a mind-boggling month of growth for Parish Rice, the farmer said. In the week between Christmas and New Year's Day, Frugé said his business did 45% of its total gross online sales and roughly 80% of total grocery store sales since he launched two years ago.

The farmer credits word of mouth and an LSU AgCenter feature circulating on social media for sparking the rising interest.

When Frugé launched his brand in 2019, he set several big goals, one of which was to partner with Rouses Markets. The Eunice businessman is passionate about quality and celebrating local agriculture, and he felt his values aligned with the Louisiana-grown supermarket chain.

“This is everything I’ve ever wanted,” Frugé said.

“This is a fantastic addition to our Eat Right with Rouses program, which makes choosing healthy easier, by identifying grocery items that have lower sodium, lower saturated fat, healthier fats, more fiber and less sugar,” CEO and third-generation company leader Donny Rouse said in a statement. “Our customers who are watching their carb intake are always looking for more options, and I love that it is local.”

Frugé said he’s been passionate about rice farming and the rice industry since boyhood.

He grew up learning the trade from his father, and, post-college, worked for a seed company with a focus on the rice industry before easing back into farming full-time himself.

“I love knowing that you go into a grocery store and see rice on the shelf and know that we had something to do with that. Now, I can go into a grocery store and know that is my rice, know that people are going to sit down at night or during the day, and eat my rice and have the opportunity to know where it came from,” he said.

While working in the seed industry, Frugé said he had the opportunity to travel internationally, visiting countries like Japan and Uruguay and gleaning insights into how different rice growing regions produced varieties for targeted clientele, he said.

Frugé said he saw opportunities for the U.S. rice industry, especially growers in Louisiana, to distinguish themselves similarly, but he didn’t have a clear plan.

Enter Frugé’s fellow rice grower and friend, Blake Gerard. Frugé became intrigued by an LSU AgCenter variety [Gerard, a farmer in south Illinois](#), had begun working with, and he and Frugé struck a deal for the Eunice farmer to begin growing the rice in Louisiana in 2019.

The variety, officially called [Frontière, was developed at the H. Rouse Caffey Rice Research Station in Rayne](#) by LSU AgCenter scientists Herry Utomo and Ida Wenefrida.

The agricultural scientists spent around 10 years developing the rice, taking the high-quality long grain variety [Cypress](#) and using non-GMO, conventional breeding techniques to home in on and cultivate beneficial genes that would yield a higher protein variety. In 2015, after years of lab work and testing the rice in the fields, they released Frontière for the first time, they said.

The scientists said they're still improving the variety, including developing a version that produces higher yields, and are similarly exploring high-protein versions of medium- and short-grain rice.

Utomo and Wenefrida said their ultimate goal is for the rice to supplement the protein intake of people worldwide who have high-carb, low-protein diets. Getting to that point requires making the rice's value known while inspiring growers to consider the variety, which is where producers like Frugé come in, they said.

Seeing interest in the rice boom has been a thrill, they said.

"It's what we were waiting for for a long time," Utomo said.

"We're very thankful that Michael would grow this and market this. I have been here for more than 30 years, for more than half my life. ... We did this in our backyard, our scientists did this, and we just don't want it to go anywhere else. We'd like it to be grown in Louisiana so it's to the benefit of the people in Louisiana," Wenefrida said.

At first, Frugé said he and Gerard were unaware of the lower glycemic qualities of the rice they were growing. The Eunice farmer said one day Gerard was approached at a professional show and a dietitian broached the idea that because of its higher protein content, the rice would naturally have a lower glycemic index score than other white rice.

Despite having extended family members with diabetes, Frugé said he wasn't familiar with the glycemic index or the value of food scoring.

"Once we figured out what it was, I realized that was a major deal. The number one reason people don't eat rice is because of the carbs and what it does to your body and your blood sugar," Frugé said.

The men put in motion a plan to have the rice tested, but the COVID-19 pandemic threw a wrench in their plans. After months of delays, they signed a contract in fall 2020 with [Inquis Clinical Research in Toronto, Canada](#) to have the rice analyzed and scored. Frugé said the

high-protein rice scored a 41, considerably lower than a standard white rice's score of 70.

Frugé said he knew he needed to capitalize on the news.

At the beginning of 2021, he hired Lafayette marketing firm brandRUSSO to help him reimagine his brand and incorporate the low glycemic index score revelation into his messaging. The partnership yielded a name change, from Prairie Acadian to his new Parish Rice, just in time for his popularity explosion, the farmer said.

The more diabetic-friendly rice is receiving good feedback from customers so far. Frugé said he's spoken with buyers from almost all 50 states in the last month, and they're sending Facebook messages and emails sharing their blood sugar numbers and the stark difference in their body's response to Parish Rice versus standard white rice.

The Frontière variety isn't a cure all — customers with diabetes still need to be mindful of their intake and be aware of what they're eating with the rice, but it opens the door for people to enjoy foods they love that they may have missed out on, like gumbo, jambalaya or étouffée, he said.

The journey hasn't been all sunshine and rainbows.

The swift influx in demand has put stress on Frugé's inventory, forcing the producer to rethink how often he has rice milled at [Falcon Rice Mill in Crowley](#) and keep a close eye on things like his supply of branded rice bags, which could be susceptible to pandemic-induced delays if a sudden restock were required.

"When I started I'd go get a truckload milled and keep on hand what I needed and it would go out real slow. As I needed more, I'd go get more bagged up. I always had time. When you go to selling half of your gross sales in a week, managing that inventory becomes a challenge," Frugé said.

"There's growing pains and there's going to be more. But we're going to fight like heck. We've been fighting for two years and I'm going to keep fighting to keep it going and make sure we stay on top of it as best we can. ... It's been a challenge but it's really exciting," he said.

Frugé said to keep up with the business's growth he plans to devote more acreage to the Frontière variety. In 2019 he started with 40 acres, then expanded to 100 acres in 2020 and 2021. He plans to increase that "significantly" but is monitoring demand to determine just how much when he plants his crop in March.

The Eunice farmer counts Rouses, local grocers and retailers around Acadiana, a large nursing home group and the LSU Athletics department, one of his first buyers, as clients and the list grows weekly. Frugé said he still has his eyes set on several long term goals, like serving his rice in K-12 schools and expanding his partnership with LSU.

“Where’s it going to go? I don’t know,” he said. “So much has happened over the past three weeks, but I’ve got some more goals in mind. ... There are some other things I want to go after. I don’t know where the top is but I’m going to keep pushing.”