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FOOD, WINE & SPIRITS IN ST. LOUIS

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A Snack with Swagger: Braggadocio Popcorn



For a healthy snack, popcorn is hard to beat. If you're like many people, your version comes flat in a bag, is cooked in a microwave, and is often less healthy than you think. Or, you splurge—both calorically and monetarily—at the movies. While the days of popping kernels over the stove may seem long gone, that “old-fashioned” method appears to be making a comeback thanks in part to recent press about area popcorn. One of several local popcorns, Braggadocio Organic Popcorn, is more than worthy of its name.

Located in Braggadocio, MO, the McKaskle Family Farm, led by fifth-generation farmers Steve and Kaye, produces popcorn, brown basmati rice, and long grain brown and long grain white rice. The McKaskles have been farming since 1973, and in 1991, they decided to go organic. Originally planted as part of a 3-crop rotation necessary for organic farming, the popcorn was so good, the McKaskles decided to begin marketing it under the Braggadocio label in 2010.

When asked what makes his popcorn so special, Steve explained that it's an old, non-GMO variety that comes out of the Ag Alumni Seed Company in Romney, IN. But, really, the popcorn's flavor, according to McKaskle, results from the fertile soil in which it's grown—both its Bootheel location near the Mississippi River, and the results of organic farm practices. “The health of the soil is going to determine taste and quality,” the farmer said.

During our conversation, we may have asked some ignorant questions about popcorn and grits, but McKaskle—his twang more Southern than Midwestern—couldn't have been nicer as he explained the differences among cornmeal, polenta, and grits (it's all about how finely the product is ground), and how popcorn looks compared to other types of corn (popcorn cobs are smaller in diameter, but longer than other corn varieties).

Braggadocio
Organic Popcorn

And, popcorn is the only corn that will pop. We turned to NASA for why: because each kernel stores a small amount of water that creates steam when heated, and once the kernel eventually explodes due to the pressure, it turns inside out. According to McKaskle, grain sorghum also pops when heated, but the results aren't nearly as tasty as popcorn.

Currently, the McKaskles grow 120 acres of popcorn, with each acre's yield at 5000 pounds. “The coolest thing,” McKaskle shared, “is when we have it in a grain bin, and you look down into all that popcorn.” Something else that's cool is that his family's popcorn and rice are served in the Maplewood School District.

The Braggadocio line of products can be found in a radius around the Bootheel, including St. Louis, Springfield, Columbia, and Cape Girardeau in Missouri; Little Rock, AK; Nashville and Memphis, TN; Tupelo, MS; and will be entering into the Carbondale, IL market just this week. For purchase, the McKaskles' popcorn and rice are carried in Whole Foods and Local Harvest Grocery here in St. Louis. Andy Ayers, owner of Eat Here St. Louis, sells the McKaskles' rice to Cardwell's at the Plaza, Whittemore House, Harvest, Local Harvest Café, and Sunset Country Club, while recent restaurant customers for the popcorn include Acero, Blood & Sand, Café Nadoz Wine Bar, Taste, Bailey's Range, and SqWires.



With Braggadocio rice already in Little Rock and Memphis Chipotles—a restaurant chain renowned for its “food with integrity” mission—McKaskle revealed that a deal has been struck with the company's CEO, who recently toured the farm, to build a rice mill in Braggadocio and increase future rice production for several Chipotles in the Bootheel radius. One Chipotle, McKaskle explained, uses about 2500-3000 pounds of rice per month, so the relationship will start off small, beginning in the fall, with the addition of 2-3 Chipotles in 2014, as production increases.

We asked Steve if he eats popcorn every day, and he said, no, not every day, but pretty close. We also asked how to prepare it. “As plain as possible,” he recommended, with a little salt and pepper to taste. The McKaskles pop their corn in olive oil or organic canola oil. We've heard that coconut oil is popular, and he said that's good too, but it “reminds [him] of dessert popcorn.” We popped one batch in canola oil and another in coconut oil and found both to have the “unique and fresh taste” McKaskle mentioned early in our conversation. While he wasn't bragging, he certainly could have.