



# Harry Simmons

## Simmons Catfish

BY JOY BETHEA PHOTO BY HUBERT WORLEY

“Looking back, I wonder, ‘what in the world made me jump into catfish?’ If you had told me when I first got out of college that I would be raising catfish, I would have told you that you were crazy. You never know how your ideas will change.”

Each morning as the sun climbs over the flat Delta landscape, Harry Simmons, Jr., president of Simmons Farm Raised Catfish, oversees the day-to-day operations of his 2000-acre catfish farm. Harry did not originally plan on raising catfish but as his ideas changed, so did the path of his career.

Forty years ago, after studying agricultural economics at Mississippi State University and serving in the National Guard, Harry returned to his childhood stomping ground

in Yazoo City to farm cotton and soybeans. During the lull between planting season and harvest, he considered creative ways to produce high-quality crops on his average-quality land. After noticing how neighboring farmers had stable work throughout the year, he decided that he would need a way to “generate some consistent revenue for my employees.” The way would be catfish.

Harry went far beyond merely generating steady revenue as his company surpassed even his own expectations. But after 20 years of astounding growth, the surge in imported fish from Asia, along with the growing popularity of tilapia, caused drastic difficulties for the company.

In order to compete in the changing market, Simmons Catfish

is perfecting their Delacata, a special cut that has the top layer of fat removed, leaving a soft, white, buttery 3-inch, 6 ounce fillet. "It is better than any wild caught species," Harry says, "It's just a really good piece of fish." We can compete because the Delacata is in the \$6 to \$7 per pound range but taste as good as wild caught species in the \$7 to \$12 range.

"If you asked what my favorite way to eat catfish was 2 years ago, I would have said fried. But now with Delacata, I would have to say grilled or sautéed. It's just that good."

Despite the ups and downs of market spikes, floods, international competition and the economic crisis in 2008, Simmons Catfish maintains a consistent factor: a dedication to quality. "We can claim to have the best catfish in the world," Harry says, "because of our focus on quality. Our processing technique is unique – we are a hand-processing plant. Most other companies use technology and equipment that leave bones and don't preserve freshness. We pay attention to detail and take pride in our work."

From the moment when fish hatch to the finished product

after processing, Harry goes beyond quality assurance requirements. During processing, the work stops every two hours so that surfaces can be cleaned. Samples are regularly tested and the fish are chilled, packed on ice, and flash frozen to preserve freshness.

Harry learned the importance of quality from his parents. "My family owned a bakery," he explains, "and in high school, I had to get up to cook donuts before school. When I would try to cut corners, they made it clear to me that people aren't going to return for something that isn't good quality. They taught me to do more than just enough to get by."

Harry extends this example to his employees. He measures his standard of quality by listening to how individuals in the company feel about the final product. "It should be good enough," Harry says, "for us to spend part of our paychecks on a box of catfish." ◉

Harry's catfish is served at many local restaurants, including Bravo!, Char, Table 100, Nick's and Walker's Drive-In. It is also available for purchase by the box at [www.simmonscatfish.com](http://www.simmonscatfish.com).

**"If you asked what my favorite way to eat catfish was 2 years ago, I would have said fried. It's great. But now with this Delacata, I would have to say grilled or sautéed. It's just that good."**

*Harry Simmons*



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