

AMBERWAVES ACTION, APRIL 2002

Richvale Café, by Edward Esko

*Tim Johnson (center), president of the California Rice Commission, accepting the Save Rice Petitions (in 2 green binders) from Edward Esko (left) and Alex Jack (right).*

*Grant Lundberg (left) and Edward Esko (right) in the organic rice fields of Lundberg Farms.*

Alex Jack, Lynne Dohm (an Amberwaves supporter from the Virgin Islands), and I rendezvous in the dining room at the Vega Study Center. Today is our meeting with Grant Lundberg at Lundberg Farms in Richvale; about ten minutes drive from Vega. The weather is chilly and everyone tries to warm up with hot bancha tea. Cornellia Aihara, the founder of Vega, is away teaching macrobiotic cooking in Berlin, so we make the tea ourselves.

It is mid April and the rice fields in the Sacramento Valley are bare. As Grant would later explain, planting is about ten days away. We drive past vast fields of rich black soil, which will soon be home to rice seedlings. Upon arriving in Richvale, we see the large metal silos that will house the rice crop. Stenciled on the long metal chute that crosses the road high above is a sign that says, "Butte County Rice Growers Assn."

Everyone is hungry and cold so we pull into the Richvale Café just across from Lundberg Farms. The sign above the Cafe has an image of a rice plant and the words, "Since 1924." Since it is late morning we have the Cafe to ourselves. We order hot oatmeal (cooked fresh on a gas flame that morning) plus dry wheat toast and hot black coffee. The food is hearty, warming, and satisfying. We are fortified and eager for our meeting with Grant. We notice several colorful posters depicting the rice fields as home to a wide range of animals, birds, and insects plus a humorous bumper sticker that states, "Eat Rice: Potatoes Make Your Butt Big!" The Richvale Café is apparently an epicenter of the California rice industry.

The day before we met with Tim Johnson, president and CEO of the California Rice Commission at his offices in Sacramento. The Commission represents the entire California rice industry. As our calling card we presented Tim with two large binders with copies of the Amberwaves Save Rice Petition signed by over 10,000 concerned citizens. The binders are a clear message that people do not want genetically modified (GM) rice in the Sacramento Valley or anywhere else.

Tim got the message loud and clear. He confided to us that farmers were "mad as hell" over the strong-arm tactics employed by the biotech industry to pressure them to adopt genetically modified varieties. He also told us that the "Seed Certification Act" adopted by the California Legislature mandating strict controls over biotech crops, in combination

with consumer resistance to biotech rice--both here and abroad-- could delay the introduction of GM rice for at least five years. Alex and I breathed a sigh of relief yet realized we must continually rededicate ourselves to the task of preserving organic rice, wheat, and other essential foods.

Grant echoes Tim Johnson's message and expresses his appreciation to everyone who signed the Save Rice Petition and who supports Amberwaves in its mission. We discuss with Grant the possibility of sponsoring an Amberwaves Forum on Biotech versus Organic Rice at the University of California at Davis. UC Davis is a center for biotechnology research and we plan to invite representatives from the biotech industry, environmental and health leaders and organic farmers to the forum tentatively planned for spring 2003.

After breakfast that morning, Alex, Lynne, and I toured the meeting room at the Richvale Café. The room has been the site of countless meetings with rice growers to plan the planting, cultivation, and harvest of the crop. There are large photos lining the walls representing the history of rice growing in the area. One large sepia print catches my attention. It is a photo of Grant's grandfather standing on a large mechanical harvester harvesting the rice crop. It was taken in 1950, the year of my birth. I feel I am viewing an event as significant, and perhaps more so, as any other event in American history.

The successful cultivation of rice and other cereal crops is nothing less than the foundation of the American dream; a dream in which all people enjoy health, peace, happiness, and freedom as their fundamental birthright. On behalf of everyone at Amberwaves, we offer our sincere thanks to you for your continuing support. --Edward Esko

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