Resilient Roots

by John Breerwood

In the smoking world, things can change overnight. And, as a smoker of pipes, cigars, cigarettes, or all three, you're probably fully aware of the ups and downs surrounding the tobacco industry. But one thing is certain: perique is known for its uncertainty.

Nearly everything about the rare tobacco is shrouded in wonder.

It's been said that Jean Lafitte and his pirates smoked it, and that, later, Joseph Stalin had a fond taste for it. While only one of those assertions turned out to be true, I was intrigued. Back in 2006, I bought a few discontinued jars of pure perique, fearing that they were the last on Earth—the retailer "wasn't certain" if he could ever get more.

After smoking it, my interest grew. It gives any pipe blend a pungent zest, but perique should primarily be used as a "garnish" tobacco due to its uncanny strength. Smoking it straight not only gave me a drunken headache, but my teeth felt as if they were burning up from their roots.

Few think of Southern Louisiana when they think of tobacco, but perique can only grow on a triangular ridge of about 10 square miles within St. James Parish. In the book *All This Is Louisiana* by Frances Parkinson Keyes, it is referred to as "the greatest mystery crop in the world" for this reason, though the fertile soil deposited from the Mississippi River is often credited for perique's unique qualities. Ken Guidry, St. James Parish Agent of Louisiana State University's Agricultural Center, explains, "Before the levee, topsoil built up over time, making it a very rich soil." Attempts to grow this crop elsewhere, whether as far as Honduras or just a few miles downriver, have failed. But St. James Parish's adjoining communities of Grand Pointe, Paulina, Lutcher, and Convent all share a rich heritage in perique's cultivation.

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Escorted by Guidry, I was able to visit this area, where I met the farmers. Unlike the vast sugarcane fields, perique farms are easy to miss, as only a handful of families grow enough for commercial use. However, their roots are tightly connected with the very rows they sow. "This used to be their living," says Lee Leblanc of his father and 20 other families. "Now, we got five families that just do a little on the side." The Leblanc family's harvest once filled 11 barns, but now they're down to two. "I think I do it more for the tradition," Ricky Leblanc says, explaining that both he and Lee work full-time jobs, but also grow vegetables along with the tobacco to make ends meet. The Leblancs' Uncle Dudley, also a grower of perique, sells his crop to L.A. Poche Tobacco Factory, while the younger Leblancs sell theirs to Percy Martin.

At 90 years old, Percy Martin currently grows the most perique in St. James Parish, even though his main crop is sugarcane. "Everything was family-grown and still is," he notes. Percy and his sons are unique in that they not only cultivate perique full-time, but fully process it themselves. They grow up to 25 acres.

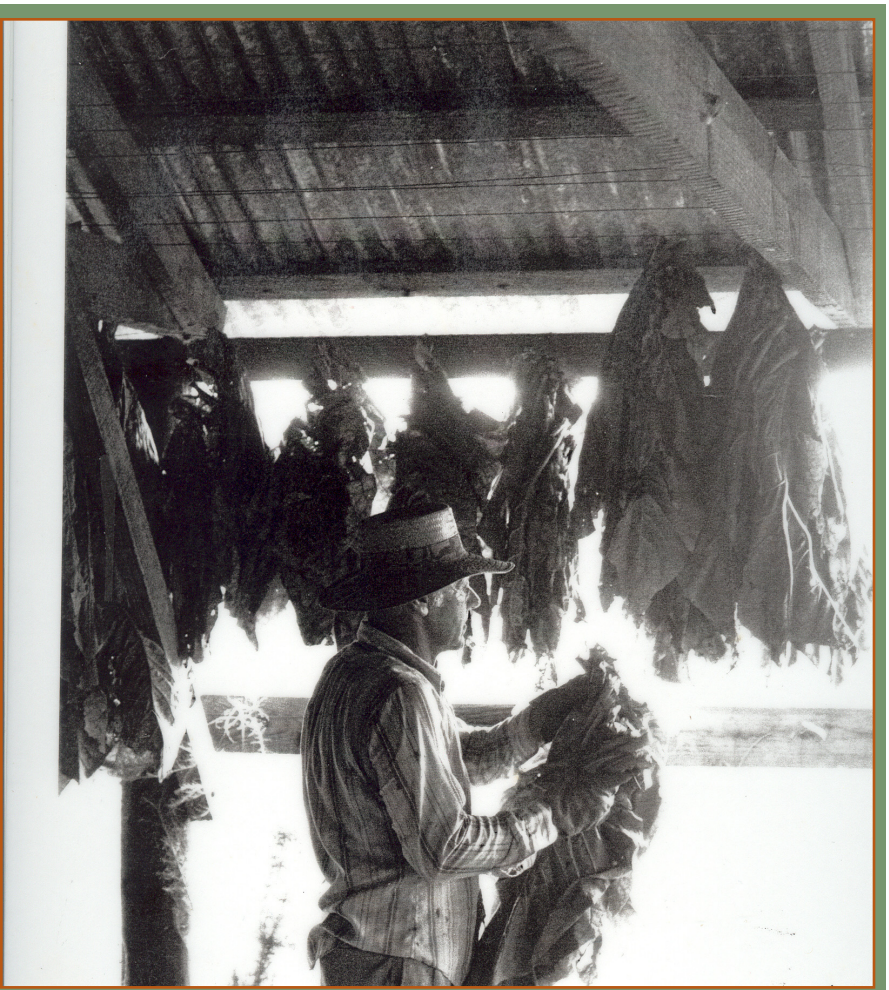
Grant and Geno Martin, distant relatives of Percy, grow 24,000 stalks on 10 acres. Geno explains that he and his brother are no strangers to working the fields. "Before *and* after school," he recalls. "We couldn't even go out for sports." And, even though Grant is the vice president of First American Bank, and Geno works for Williams Gas Pipeline, they still labor diligently to retain the tradition of their late father, Pershing Martin. Their crop is processed at L.A. Poche.

Perique is a demanding crop. In December, seeds are planted in "hotbeds," traditionally under windowpanes that guard them from frost while allowing sunlight, though Percy uses a greenhouse. The tobacco's nearly microscopic seeds are mixed with white ash to prevent overplanting. Some farmers make their own ash, while others use the ash from the traditional Christmas Eve levee bonfires that guide Santa down the Mississippi. Once germinated, 2,500 fledglings are transplanted to every acre around March. The stalks are topped at two to three feet, directing growth and richness to the bottom leaves.

Breaking "suckers" (secondary growths that contain seeds) is the next task. A chemical spray inhibits the suckers' growth—but only so far. The farmers have to break each sucker by hand or the shoots will sprout flowers and prevent maturity. Due to the intense heat of the region, only early morning and late evening are proper times for this operation. "When the tobacco is good, it's gummy on your hands," Ricky Leblanc says. "We would go play baseball, and our dad said, 'Ya'll don't need no gloves. That ball will stick to your hands!'"

Letting the tobacco mature is essential but risky; a hard rain can kill the whole crop. "Once it rained for 40 days solid," Geno remembers. "We brought in 1,100 of 7,000 plants." Equally damaging, a drought can trigger sickness in the crop, such as wildfire or mosaic.

Family and friends gather for the harvest—or the "fabrique"—in midsummer. The Martins invited me to join them one weekend, and I can say with authority that those with a weak work ethic need not apply. In the late afternoon, the stalks are cut with a sugarcane knife so the tobacco can wilt overnight. "By the next morning, it's soft like a rag," Grant says. At dawn, a small crew follows the wagon, whipping the



After the grueling harvest, perique stalks are hung to dry on wires inside barns. After three weeks, the leaves turn brown and the intense tobacco aroma can be near intoxicating. *Photo courtesy of St. James Cooperative Extension Service.*

wilted stalks aboard. Once the tobacco is unloaded in the barn, wooden hammers are used to drive old nails into the stems' bases at a 45-degree angle. The stalks are then hung by the nails from wires running the length of the barn, which is entirely filled on two levels. In order to prevent the tobacco (and the farmers) from scorching in the hot midday sun, all work ceases until late afternoon when the next rows are cut for hanging the following morning. The hanging stalks will then dry for three weeks. Despite the backbreaking job, it felt great to be a part of that tradition.

After those three weeks, processing begins. Excess dust is beaten from the stalks and the tobacco leaves are stripped from the stems, twisted into "torquettes," pressed in whiskey barrels by jackscrews, and left to ferment in their own gummy juices. The tobacco is aired out two or three times and then aged. The first time it is aired, the leaves are reddish but, by the second and third times, they turn black. "If you don't ferment it, you don't have perique," Percy Martin succinctly notes. Overall, perique (now sold primarily by the barrel, but once sold by a tight four-pound roll called a carrotte) is in the barrel for one year.

This labor-intensive procedure began when a Frenchmen named Pierre "Perique" Chenet settled along the river in about 1820. From the Choctaw and Chickasaw Indians, Chenet learned to compress twists of tobacco with stones in hollowed stumps. Chenet then refined the technique and taught it to the new settlers.

It's commonly believed that perique's name derived from Chenet's nickname. However, according to the Tobacco Institute, another claim of origin is the French word *perruque*, which translates to "wig," particularly a long, curly one. In all probability, the torquettes resembled such a wig. This etymological theory, however, predates the name three decades before Chenet settled in Louisiana. Nevertheless, in the sandy, alluvial soil, Chenet would plant a tradition that grew as prominently as the tobacco itself.

Before sugarcane, perique was the main cash crop in St. James Parish, though it was never grown on a large scale; it's always been a small, family-based industry. In 1879, traveler Nathaniel Bishop reported that a typical perique farm measured eight acres and produced an impressive 3,200 pounds of tobacco. In fact, no more than 1,000 acres produced an impressive 478,000 pounds in perique's record year of 1922.

Most perique was exported as pipe tobacco, particularly to England. Perique cigarettes also became available in the late 1800s and two brands were exhibited at the Paris Universal Exposition of 1878. Perique's industrialization and international interest was greatly influenced by Christopher Roussel, whose company, Louisiana Perique Tobacco Co., became a major broker that widened the tobacco's national attention at the 1915 San Francisco World's Fair. Allegedly, Roussel sent Joseph Stalin a carrotte of perique to calm his nerves in the midst of the dreadful siege of Stalingrad during WWII. "My father thought that the tobacco must have done some good because, after that, all went well with the Russians," Roussel's daughter, Elmire Hatchet, told *The Times Picayune* of New Orleans in 2007. (Let's just hope old Joe McCarthy never found out about that.)

After the Roussels quit the business in the 1950s, only two brokers remained: Guglielmo and L.A. Poche. At this point,

Left: Grant and Geno Martin with their 2008 harvest. *Right*: Ricky Leblanc breaks off "suckers" (secondary growths that contain seeds) from his crops. Because tobacco farming alone cannot sustain the average family in today's world, all three perique men work full-time jobs outside of their fields. However, carrying on their families' traditions of cultivating this mysterious leaf is just as important to them as making ends meet.

the perique market had become increasingly unstable, forcing both companies to adopt new methods to ensure profit. Guglielmo attempted to grow perique in Honduras, but failed after regional mold killed the crop. Guglielmo Perique Tobacco Co. closed down by 1990 because of limited supply. The year 1990 yielded 30,000 pounds, down from 1979's production of 148,750 pounds.

L.A. Poche, the sole remaining broker, processed Kentucky Green River tobacco in the same way as perique before blending it with pure St. James. Green River tobacco ferments in a way similar to perique, and is brought down from Kentucky to be processed at the L.A. Poche factory. This is known as Acadian perique. "Acadian perique is what the world market knows as perique," says Mark Ryan, owner of D&R Tobacco. "There has not been enough St. James perique to supply the world market in 50 years." This fact may be a bitter bite for pipe purists, however, this blending is not necessarily new. Ryan knows former workers from the Roussel and Guglielmo factories that claim to have also used Green River. While some might argue that Green River lacks perique's unique flavor and potency, Ryan insists that there's very little difference between the two after fermentation and aging. Either way, blends that contain no St. James perique cannot be labeled as perique. And, as with anything, *quality* is a matter of opinion for the smoker. Purists gravitate toward the straight St. James, while avid smokers prefer the consistency and reliability of Acadian.

The future of perique didn't simply appear uncertain, but downright bleak, with only 6,800 pounds produced in 1995. In 1999, L.A. Poche and Percy Martin parted ways over pricing and quality disputes. "Once the broker wouldn't pay, I told him to kiss it!" Martin says. According to the St. James Parish Tourist Information Office, only two farmers commercially grew a total of 15 acres at this time. "A lot of people stopped growing because there was no stable market," Ken Guidry explains.

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Just when it seemed that perique was being transplanted from the fields to the history books, new developments would stabilize the current market. Not long after Percy Martin broke with L.A. Poche, Santa Fe Natural Tobacco Company committed to buying his entire crop, which would then supply American Spirit's Perique Blend cigarettes that contain 10 to 20 percent perique. "It was our way to support perique's tradition," says Mark Smith of Santa Fe. And, a couple of years ago, Ted Breaux, founder of Lucid Absinthe, decided to buy Percy's personal stash and distill a perique-based liquor, which has won acclaim internationally.

In 2005, Mark Ryan bought L.A. Poche Perique Tobacco Co., which unfortunately had no yield from the prior year. "The world didn't know it but the world's supply of perique,

other than what Percy grew, was gone forever," Ryan reveals. (So, perhaps, I wasn't far off when buying those jars!) Ryan also says that perique veteran Dudley Leblanc was the "anchor" that encouraged others to grow again, and that Grant and Geno Martin delivered a fantastic crop last year.

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With the exception of Percy Martin, these perique farmers work full-time jobs to keep up with the industrialized world. Hence, they cannot devote the time and labor that perique demands. But, because the Poche factory now takes on the laborious stripping and fermenting processes for them, farmers are encouraged to continue growing the crop. A few young members of the Gravois family, direct descendants of the Poches, are now growing for Mark Ryan, who has a strong passion for perique's culture and plans to build a heritage center in St. James Parish.

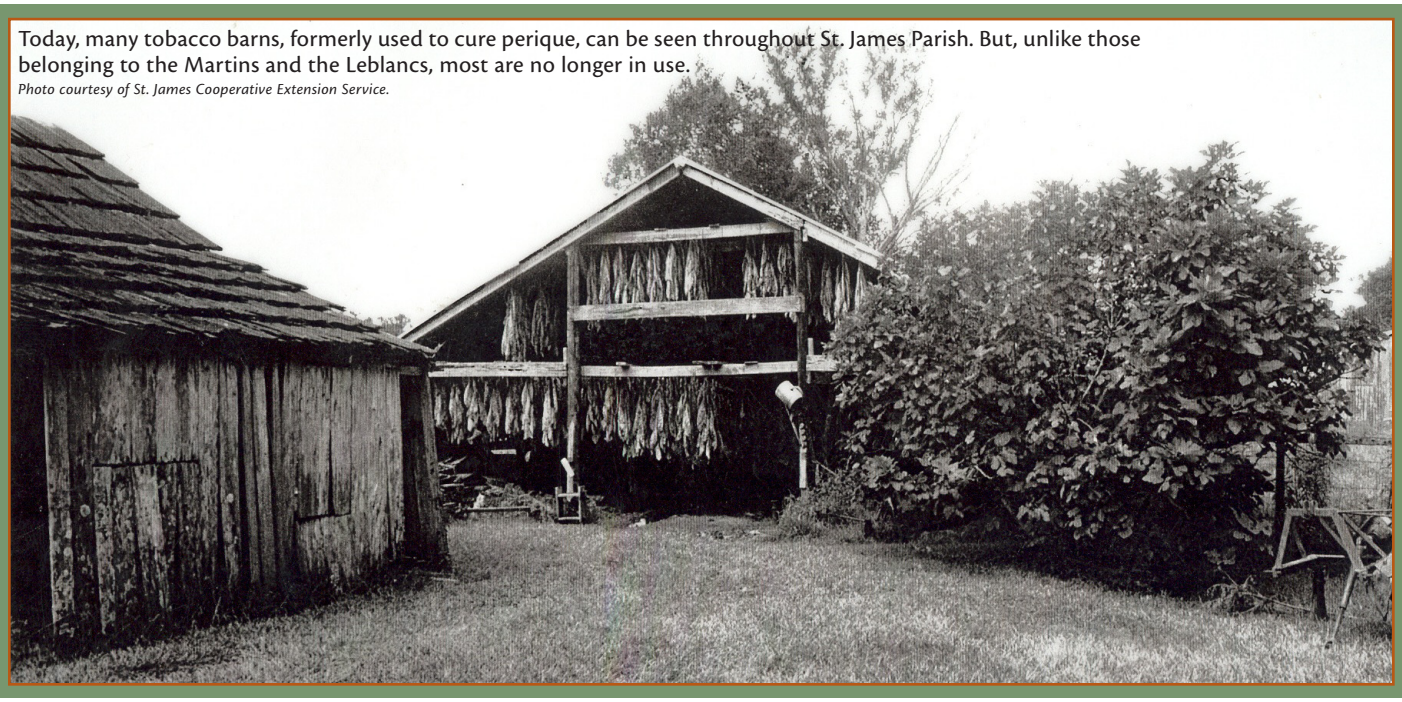
D&R Tobacco offers both Acadian and pure St. James tobaccos, and also supplies pipe tobacco companies with perique for their blends. D&R also sells eight to 12 barrels to its broker in Germany, depending on European demand. According to Ryan, Acadian is requested more frequently. "The straight St. James is too unpredictable," he explains. "However, we've had gorgeous St. James in the last few years, so I'm optimistic."

The year 2007 produced the best-quality crop anyone can remember, with 58,362 pounds produced on 40.6 acres, according to the Louisiana State University's Agricultural Center. And, the 2008 crop may even surpass that. "The Poche factory is full," Gene Martin says, "so we're stripping and pressing in our barn." Despite the current market, the farmers are still uncertain and perhaps even skeptical about the future of their perique.

Nearly everything about perique is a mystery. Although Chenet's story is the closest thing to the truth, some still doubt its origin. The crop is unpredictable from year to year, and, after discovering how limited the supply is, I can't help but question some brands' authenticity. With younger generations moving out of the fields and into office jobs, who knows what the future holds for this unique leaf? And I'm still searching for a definitive answer on the Jean Lafitte thing.

As for its growth, this native Louisiana tobacco has adapted for over 200 years to the "magnolia soil" within a small area of St. James Parish and simply refuses to grow anywhere else—as if its loyalty to its roots runs as deep as the farmers' dedication to their own. Sure, mystique might be what sells it, but it is resilience and hope that *grow* it. That's why, under the constant care of these devoted farmers, perique tobacco grows only here in St. James Parish.

And, *that's* a certainty. ***CM***



Today, many tobacco barns, formerly used to cure perique, can be seen throughout St. James Parish. But, unlike those belonging to the Martins and the Leblancs, most are no longer in use.

Photo courtesy of St. James Cooperative Extension Service.