

CITY

Naturopathic Doctor Nazirahk Amen Helps Bring Rice Farming Back to the Region

"Once I figured out the value of growing food, how important it was, it was almost like this fever took over."

BY LAURA HAYES — JUL 12, 2018 6 AM



Nazirahk Amen. All photos by Laura Hayes.

“The neighbors are going to be pretty surprised to see rice growing in their backyard,” says **Nazirahk Amen**. The naturopathic medicine practitioner and founder of Purple Mountain Organics pays \$200 a year to grow dry-land rice on a sunny field at the back of a suburban development dotted with mansions in Ashton, Maryland. He’s one of a few experimental farmers who have figured out how to grow rice in the region. And he doesn’t have to flood a field to do it.

Amen's distinct aesthetic is visible as soon as he turns into the development. He's outfitted his purple 2003 MINI Cooper with a racing suspension and the car purrs when he takes the turns that lead to the rice field. Then he steps out of the car. Loose-fitting purple clothing in hues ranging from eggplant to amethyst swirl around his frame like a tempest. "The neighbors know us as the purple people," Amen says.

Back at his purple home that doubles as his medical practice in Takoma Park, Amen's wife and children are also festooned in purple garb. "At this point the purple represents peace beyond gain or loss," Amen explains. "Whether you have everything or you have nothing, you're content with the life that you live." Amen lived in a spiritual community for three years, but elects not to discuss that period of his life.

Amen grew up with his family on 20 acres outside Opelousas, Louisiana. "We lived off of land between what we grew and what we hunted," he says. "My mom only went to the grocery store for oatmeal and stuff that wasn't a necessity."

But Amen's family didn't want him to become a farmer. "I grew up in a community that viewed agricultural pursuits as hard work and toil and education as the door to progress," he says. His parents sent him to get a college degree in biology, hoping he'd never look back.

During his stint as an EMT in New Orleans from 1987 to 1991, Amen decided to make a career out of natural medicine. "I saw there was little or no prevention offered to many of the problems encountered daily from chronic health issues to drugs and street violence," he says.

Amen enrolled in a naturopathic and acupuncture program at Bastyr University in Washington state. His first job in the field brought him to D.C., where he worked at a natural medicine practice on Connecticut Avenue NW before opening his own business in Takoma Park.

He sees patients at Wisdom Path Healing Center Mondays, Tuesdays, Thursdays, and every other Saturday. A tour of the purple-walled space reveals shelves lined with crystals Amen and his family mined in Arkansas, a pillow-packed meditation sanctuary, an acupuncture room, a closet of Chinese medicine, and a kitchen used for vegan cooking classes.

Amen places all of his new patients on a detox diet. "It's a way to trick people into eating healthier because if you eat healthier for three weeks or a month and try to go back to eating crappy food, your body will let you know," he says. "From there people started asking us how to grow the food," Amen continues. "That's how we started Purple Mountain Organics in 2004."

For Amen, farming is an extension of natural medicine. "At some point buying veggies and meats from the grocer became less expensive than growing your own and it's cost many communities their health," he says. "If people are healthy, they have some type of relationship with their food."

His first farming projects focused on urban agriculture, and included turning the ground over for the K Street Farm at the Walker-Jones Education Campus, working with Common Good City Farm in LeDroit Park, and teaming up with Bread for the City to launch the City Orchard at University of the District of Columbia's College of Agriculture, Urban Sustainability and Environmental Sciences (CAUSES) Firebird Research Farm in Beltsville.

But eventually growing fruits and vegetables wasn't satisfying enough for Amen. He yearned to try his hand at growing grains.

Amen wrote and received a three-year grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Institute of Food and Agriculture to determine if growing dry-land rice in the mid-Atlantic was feasible. He carried out his research from 2014 to 2016 at the Firebird Research Farm with **Che Axum**, the director of urban farming for UDC CAUSES.

With the grant, Amen became one of the first people to attempt growing rice in the Chesapeake region in more than a century. He followed **Heinz Thomet** of Next Step Produce, who first gave it a try in 2011 in Newburg, Maryland. Thomet once sold his rice at the Dupont Circle FRESHFARM Market. Now you can try it at restaurants like Baltimore's **Woodberry Kitchen** and Lovettsville, Virginia's **Restaurant at Patowmack Farm**.

The two rice farmers aren't at odds. "We have a slightly different approach, but it's mutually beneficial to learn from each other," Thomet says. Amen even brings his rice to Thomet's farm for cleaning and drying.

According to the International Rice Research Institute, the world produces 700 million tons of rice in paddies annually. The irrigated conditions make it challenging for weeds to grow, thus requiring less upkeep and labor. The downside to paddy production is that it yields a high amount of methane, a harmful greenhouse gas.



The dry-land growing technique Amen uses is modeled after techniques from the System of Rice

Intensification—a method designed to reduce methane emissions while increasing yield from rice fields. He lays biodegradable mulch and drip tape in soil high in microbial activity, and covers the middle paths with black landscape fabric, which controls weeds and speeds the maturation process by trapping heat. Then he pokes small holes and tediously transplants seedlings about ten inches apart.

His highest yielding variety produces about 4,800 pounds of rice per acre, while some of the better tasting varieties, such as the Japanese sushi variety, Koshihikari, yield closer to 3,500 pounds per acre. Comparatively, farmers growing rice in paddies in the U.S. net 8,000 pounds per acre.

Amen continues to work with UDC CAUSES to build a local grain hub where District residents and regional grain growers can access tools and other support to help them get their grains from field to table.

Like Thomet's products, the rice Amen grows on private plots of land like the one in Ashton ends up on restaurant menus. Chefs see the quality of the rice and make it the star of the plate, instead of a side.

Republic in Takoma Park, for example, serves a "Purple Mountain Rice Bowl" with baby bok choy, piquillo peppers, scallions, sautéed mushrooms, tempura baby carrots, and ginger sambal.

"We love working with local farms like Purple Mountain because they live and breathe the products they grow," says Republic chef **Danny Wells**. "There is a lot of character and subtle differences between the different varieties of Purple Mountain rice. The process by which the rice is hulled results in more texture and flavor than any rice I've tried."

Amen has experimented with more than 30 varieties of rice and waits to hull it until a restaurant places an order. He says rice loses half of its nutritional value and flavor within eight weeks of being hulled.



Chef **Spike Gjerde** also serves Purple Mountain Organics rice as an entrée at his restaurant, **A Rake's Progress**. A crown of hearth-kissed spring vegetables surrounds the mound of rice in the bowl. "Hulling it to order was an amazing move on his part," Gjerde says. "It underscores his commitment to nutrient-dense food."

Gjerde is hellbent on sourcing locally for his restaurants. "Small grains in the Mid-Atlantic for me in a way closes the circle on what our region is capable of," he says. "Guys like Nazirahk who are pushing it are doing the hardest, most interesting work. The price can be a little off-putting, but what you're buying is not just the product, but also the possibility that this could become a more viable part of our food system." Purple Mountain Organics rice costs restaurants \$10 per pound.

Amen's latest project involves experimenting with grains like sorghum, millet, quinoa, oats, and heirloom wheat. **Seylou Bakery** in Shaw has expressed interest in using his grains. To bring the project to fruition, Amen is working to secure a lease on a 12-acre plot near Bowie. "I consider myself a landless farmer," Amen says. "I have the skill and know-how, but not the land."

For a long time Amen hesitated to call himself a farmer. "I've never had to rely on selling food to pay my bills," he says. "It wasn't my livelihood, so as to not disrespect anyone, I didn't call myself a farmer."

But that changed once he started traveling to organic farm shows up and down the East Coast. “People would come up and say, ‘Tell us about rice production,’” he says. “We started teaching farmers how to farm. Now I can say we’re legitimate. Farmers call us farmers.”

Despite the fact that Amen’s parents urged him to find a career outside of agriculture, he couldn’t help but make it a significant part of his life. “Growing up black in the south, the goal was to get away from the toil, get an education, and have a better life,” he says. “But then there was this emptiness. Once I figured out the value of growing food, how important it was, it was almost like this fever took over.”

Amen is hopeful that others will catch on, even if they’re just farming backyard plots or shared city gardens. “The next generation of farmers has to come from the inner city,” Amen says. “It has to be those people who have come to value food security and sustainability. These people take the initiative ... You have to have people who bring the heart to farming.”

JOIN THE CONVERSATION!

This site requires you to [login](#) or [register](#) to post a comment.



Avatar

Posted by imnotdead84

Such a good Portlandia sketch

Jul 12 2018 10:09

[Load More](#)

RELATED



YOUNG & HUNGRY

What Does Town's Closing Mean for the Future of Gay Nightlife in D.C.?



YOUNG & HUNGRY

The Leftovers, Part Two: We Address Your Unanswered Questions About Initiative 77



YOUNG & HUNGRY

The Leftovers, Part One: We Address Your Unanswered Questions about Initiative 77