Delta agriculture is known for field crops: corn, alfalfa, wheat, and other grain crops – including rice.

Rice has a limited history in the Delta. In the 1950s and 1960s, rice varieties grown in California had two problems when planted in the Delta. Rice stalks grew too tall in stature due to the rich Delta peat soil and would then ‘lodge’ (fall over under the weight of their seed heads), creating harvesting issues. Also, the cool Delta nights would create “blanks” – grains not properly developing in the seed heads and thus light yields.
Plant breeders developed varieties to counter these problems, and rice production became a crop that could be grown on Delta field crop land. Early adopters of these improved rice varietals were farmers on Brack Tract and Rindge Tract, located just west of Stockton and Lodi; rice has also been grown on Lower Roberts Island. These areas are all part of the deeply subsided Delta, where peat soil oxidation has reduced the surface elevation of farmland below sea level. Rice production, because the soil is wetted during the months when peat oxidation is most extensive, can substantially reduce further subsidence.

Rice was grown on 7,500 acres of Delta farmland in 2016. The crop has experienced significant increases in plantings over the past several growing seasons, with more to come. Staten Island produced 350 acres of rice in 2020 but there are plans to expand that to 4,000 acres by 2025. Similar increased plantings are occurring on Rindge and Terminous Tracts.

Rice produces a favorable return to farmers compared to other field crops, but does require an upfront investment to prepare the farmland (primarily laser-leveling fields to ensure appropriate water-level management). One buyer for Delta rice is agribusiness giant ADM, which will advance farmers $500/acre to pay for these ground preparation costs.

Rice grown in the Delta is a medium-grain variety common to the Sacramento Valley. And speaking of the Sacramento Valley – how can Delta-grown rice compete with the state’s massive production there? Because the Sacramento Valley is undergoing the same nut boom (conversion of rice production to permanent nut tree orchards) as many other California agricultural areas, rice processors are seeking new areas of production. The Delta can satisfy this perfectly.

And what becomes of Delta rice? After initial processing (drying and milling), Delta rice is consumed as either whole grain (some of it even exported to Asia and other parts of the globe through the Delta’s two ports in Stockton and West Sacramento), or further processed for food products. If you enjoy Budweiser beer (and who doesn’t!), you might have consumed some Delta-grown rice.

Exporting Rice from the Port of West Sacramento

The Delta’s Port of West Sacramento ships around 300,000 tons of bagged and bulk rice a year - making rice the port’s primary cargo!
As we look into the Delta sky, we marvel at the speed and extraordinary maneuverability of the cranes, geese, and small birds that dot the air. Always, too, we stare astonished at the synchrony of their movements. All change direction together. Rarely, it seems even a single individual is out of phase with the others. Stockton resident Donna Marciano, who co-leads her local Christmas Bird Count, says when she sees this event called murmuration she is amazed at the “coordination of individuals to move with such grace, dancing in the air.” No matter how often we have seen it, we tend to ask ourselves “How?” The synchronous flight of birds is often a gateway to bird watching (and counting) as a lifelong hobby.

To support this hobby, local Audubon chapters have been established in many areas and are brimming with fellow bird lovers. Their meetings and conferences can bring in hundreds of people who swap stories about near misses, latest discoveries, new books, and the best viewing locations. Donna also recommends checking the online classes offered through the web or community colleges, or you can check on Facebook for local birder groups.

The Delta’s birdlife is famous due to the diverse habitats and its location along the Pacific Flyway. Public lands like the Cosumnes River Preserve, Brannan Island State Recreation Area, Stone Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, and Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area offer rich birding opportunities. Sandhill Cranes are among the most charismatic of the Delta’s birds, and the Woodbridge Ecological Reserve offers Sandhill Crane tours during fall and winter months. Visitors and locals alike can learn about this region’s birding locations at the www.VisitCADelta.com website, a cooperative effort of the Commission and the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Conservancy. Here anyone can plan a perfect day of birding, dining, and exploring in the Delta.

If you love bird watching, you are in good company and part of a rising trend. Bird watching supports many local and national retailers. Nation-wide, trip-related and equipment-related expenditures associated with birding generated nearly $107 billion in total industry output, 666,000 jobs, and $13 billion in local, state, and federal tax revenue according the federal sources. So grab a pair of binoculars and head out into the Delta. There are many opportunities to satisfy both beginning and serious birders. Plus, you may meet some new friends – after all, “birds of a feather…”
The Delta’s varied landscape, remoteness, quiet byways and contrasting funky vibe of marina communities famously inspires artists and creatives to work their magic and produce the fruit of their imagination just as its soil and climate support farmers in producing the fruits of the field. It doesn’t come easy though - both the Delta artist and the Delta farmer come by their calluses honestly, whether it’s setting up an exhibit or maintaining irrigation. But for many the effort is worth it so long as they can call the Delta home and its residents their neighbors.

It’s no surprise that Iva Walton, with a wealth of artistic experience and business savvy, was likewise captivated by the Delta from her first visit in 1989. Years later she drew on both talents to set down roots with the vision of creating a true community gathering spot at the Mei Wah Beer Room, her establishment in Isleton. Walton’s passion for craft beers was
cultivated during a previous career in theatre. As tour manager for Axis Dance, a company integrating disabled and non-disabled dancers that toured widely nationally and internationally, she was often on the road during the 1990s, when independent craft brewing was rapidly rising in popularity. The experience took her through small and mid-sized towns all over the country. Iva fell in love with the friendly brew-pub culture that creates connections between people and draws them together over something to enjoy and share. The openness and friendliness of the Isleton community was reminiscent of the friendly communities she encountered on tour. It was a perfect fit.

A recent arrival by Delta standards – the Mei Wah opened in 2017 – the Beer Room has been a hit, in 2020 winning both the Sacramento County Small Business of the Year award and the “Best of the Delta,” in the Best Bar category. The recognition is well deserved, and hard-earned. Walton takes pride in her carefully curated, often local selections on 24 taps with two non-alcoholic offerings such as KC Kombucha and nitro coffee. And it’s not just the beer that brings in the customers. Iva’s ambition is to create a warm and welcoming atmosphere for longtime residents, visitors, and newcomers alike. Equipped with a degree in art and a minor in psychology plus her theatre design background, there is plenty of creativity behind the Mei Wah’s success. Furthermore, Walton has a keen eye for detail honed during her career as a tile-setting contractor specializing in Art Deco designs. She recognizes the importance of the building both to the community and to its place it occupies on Main Street. To highlight the historic elements of the building’s interior and exterior, she spent considerable time renovating, finding materials and furnishings that suggest aspects of its storied past. She researched and found reproductions of historic Isleton photographs for display that have been recognized by more than one local.

Partnerships with fellow Isleton businesses are important to her. She offers food provided by neighboring businesses on Main Street, currently featuring sandwiches from the newly opened McBoodery (proprietors Sarah McGee and Mike Abood). Walton is a Chamber of Commerce member and has worked with former Chamber president and longtime Isleton resident Jean Yokotobi and others in efforts to spruce up Main Street. One effort they are proud of, as yet unfunded, is a series of banners with artwork designed by the late, much-beloved artist Marty Stanley that would be mounted along Main Street. “We know what needs to be done, we just need to find the means to do it” Walton says.
While the cities and towns of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta may not possess a significant concentration of Art Deco architecture like San Francisco or Los Angeles, many hidden and no-so-hidden gems are found throughout the region.

Deco Architecture in the Delta

Art Deco first appeared in France just before World War I. As communities in the Delta began to grow in the 1920s, so too did the influence of Art Deco on architecture. Stockton, Rio Vista, Ryde, West Sacramento, Pittsburgh, Antioch, and Brentwood are some of the places where Art Deco buildings are found in the Delta. Some buildings have been lovingly preserved or restored such as the CineLux Delta Cinema in Brentwood. Others have been repurposed or face uncertain futures.

The Ryde Hotel serves as one of the best-known examples of Art Deco architecture in the Delta. Perched above the Sacramento River three miles south of Walnut Grove, the hotel has a storied history as a prohibition-era speakeasy. The hotel now serves overnight guests, hosts weddings and events, and offers Sunday brunch.

In Stockton, several Art Deco buildings have been revitalized. The former Kress Department Store (1) and the U.S. Post Office (2) in downtown Stockton both provide office space. The Gordon Hansen Company Building and the Vista Theater Building in Rio Vista serve retailers but still maintain their Art Deco exteriors. A former fire station built in the Art Deco style in West Sacramento is now occupied by Burgers and Brew, a local restaurant chain.

Sadly, there remain many Art Deco treasures in need of benefactors. The Gan Chy Chinese Restaurant (3), which once served as Stockton’s Greyhound Bus Terminal, has been closed for some time. The city’s Empire Theater recently held live events but has since closed (4). The Enean Theatre in Pittsburgh also has an unknown future.

Other Deco Treasures

Art Deco was more than just architecture. As a style of visual arts and design, it influenced art, jewelry, fashion, automobile and train design, furnishings, and home appliances. Examples can be found at the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento and the Haggin Museum in Stockton. At the California State Railroad Museum in Old Sacramento, you can discover Art Deco styling and design aboard the AT&SF dining car Cochiti, part of the permanent display.
Delta Agency Meetings

January

January 21 - Delta Protection Commission Meeting
www.delta.ca.gov/commission-meetings

January 26 - Public Comment Workshop for the Draft Economic Sustainability Plan Recreation and Tourism Chapter Update
www.delta.ca.gov/calendar/workshop-ESP-update

January 27 - Delta Conservancy board meeting
www.deltaconservancy.ca.gov/board-meeting-materials

January 28 - Delta Stewardship Council Meeting
www.deltacouncil.ca.gov/council-meetings

February

February 25 - Delta Stewardship Council Meeting
www.deltacouncil.ca.gov/council-meetings

March

March 18 - Delta Protection Commission Meeting
www.delta.ca.gov/commission-meetings

March 24 - Delta Conservancy board meeting
www.deltaconservancy.ca.gov/board-meeting-materials

March 25 - Delta Stewardship Council Meeting
www.deltacouncil.ca.gov/council-meetings

Broadband in the Delta

Broadband internet access continues to be a challenge for many communities in the Delta. A study completed by Valley Vision for the Commission has produced both a broadband map and a report card for communities in Sacramento and Yolo Counties.

Broadband map: www.ow.ly/KJ4o50CNrl5

Report card: www.ow.ly/l8ea50CNrl7

An interactive broadband map is also available to identify broadband access in other areas of the region: www.broadbandmap.ca.gov

It is important to document internet service speeds to improve internet connectivity in the Delta. An easy way for Delta residents and businesses to document their internet service speeds is to participate in the State’s CalSPEED program. This program provides users with a professional-level, industry-standard testing tool to measure the quality and speed of their mobile broadband connection and have that data transferred to the California Public Utilities Commission, the official source identifying areas of broadband deficiency.

iPhone app download:
www.ow.ly/pXt550CNrl6

Android app download:
www.ow.ly/geW850CNrl8

There is also an opportunity for Delta residents to volunteer for a separate, home broadband study. You can learn more about that project at the CalSPEED website and complete a survey to see if you may qualify as a volunteer.

Visit www.calspeed.net