RAISIN' CANE

The talent of making sorghum is unfortunately becoming a lost skill; however, a few people are still practicing the craft. Marvin Mears, owner of a farm west of Kirksville, has made sorghum every year since he was a young boy and continues to do so today. Raising sorghum cane is nearly a yearlong process, and many people have raised cane and made their own molasses for many years.

In the early 1900s sugar was considered a luxury, so molasses sweetened bread, cookies, and other sundry foods for many families. The sugar prices were high causing a demand for molasses, and mills soon became scattered throughout the countryside.

Butch Johnson, owner of a farm southeast of Kirksville, remembers learning the art of making sorghum from his father who cooked “for half. Back in that period of time, he would make anybody’s sorghum but he got half of it for making it.” Cane growers would take their crops to mill owners, who in return for “half” or a couple of gallons would make the cane juice into sorghum.

Raising sorghum cane is not easy. The crops can be damaged by insects, wind, improper harvesting, the amount of rainfall, or an early frost. The growers could take their crop to the mills only if the crop survived all the obstacles.

After the molasses was made and distributed between families and friends, store owners would purchase a few gallons, selling them to the townpeople. When mills were common, the average price per gallon was about 75 cents. According to the Missouri Yearbook of Agriculture 1922, 54th Annual Report the average yield per acre in Adair County was approximately 120 gallons. As time progressed, sugar prices declined; the demand for molasses dropped and soon many mills were abandoned.

Hundreds of man hours are spent planting, thinning, harvesting, and making the juice into a sweet sugar substitute called sorghum. Depending on the climate, planting of the tiny seed is done between late April and mid-June. Mr. Mears and Mr. Johnson, like others, plant in the first of May or later part of April, depending on the year. In order for the plant to grow, it must have warm soil for germination. The planting can be done by either hand or machine.

Soon the plants are ready to be thinned in order to produce larger stalks which will produce more juice. The need for thinning is caused by too many seeds in a hill. Thinning is done when the plant reaches knee height to create a ratio of one plant per foot. When the thinning is done, by either hoe or hand, the root system of the up-rooted plant must be taken out to prevent weaker plants from sprouting.

The cane plant resembles corn. It grows to a height of 3 to 15 feet when mature. Cane, like corn, grows in a tight curl with leaves sprouting on two sides. If the cane does not receive enough water, the leaves will roll up to reduce water loss.
Between August and October the sorghum is ready to be harvested. The head of the cane changes in color from green to brown. As autumn arrives, the juice leaves the top and moves closer to the bottom of the stalk. The cane must be cut before the first frost to prevent the juice from going to the roots. Usually the harvest is begun on Labor Day. From an acre of sorghum Mr. Mears can extract over 120 gallons of juice which can produce about 24 gallons of sweet, thick, light, golden brown molasses.

There are several methods of making sorghum. Some growers strip the leaves and the head from the cane, while the stalk is still standing; others strip the cane after the stalk has been cut; and others do not strip the cane. If stripping is done, a cane knife, wooden sticks, or a lathe is used. Many growers believe dry leaves and seeds from the head make the sorghum bitter; actually, they extract the flavor from the juice which causes the bitter taste.

After the cane is cut and hauled to the mill, the juice is extracted by crushing the cane, and the pressed stalks are now called pummies. The cane can be left for up to six weeks if it is cut and stripped properly. The mill is designed so the stalk can be fed into the rollers which extract the juice; the pummies come out the other side of the cane press. The extracted juice flows from a gutter through a filter into a container. The filter is used to catch any debris such as bugs, leaves, seeds from the head of the cane, or dirt that might have accidentally entered the juice. The juice is transported to a cooking pan and the pummies are at a later date fed to the livestock.

At Marvin Mears’ mill the juice is caught in a 50-gallon tub and then transported to the cooking house through a hose connected to the tub. Mr. Mears’ pan is steel and sits atop a stone and fire brick foundation and is designed to perfectly match

Mr. Mears builds a fast, hot fire in the fire box under the pan of juice before cooking. The cane juice, heated to a rolling boil, is a green color.

Mr. Mears skims green impurities that rise to the top after the cane juice boils. The skimmer is a homemade flat pan ladle with nail holes punched in the bottom. The skimmings are strained from the juice, which results in a great-tasting sorghum.
the length and width of the fire box to insure even and exact heating. The foundation and pan are set at a comfortable working height of three feet. In the front half of the fire box is the fire. The rear half of the box is left unfilled. The box is designed to heat the juice in the front half of the pan only, and due to its nature the heated juice then goes to the rear half where it can cool. The cool juice will go to the warmer part of the pan, creating a cycle much like air currents.

The juice slowly becomes sorghum after going through three stages. First, the juice is thin and very watery. Mr. Johnson describes it as "the color of peas; it's a real light green." These characteristics are obvious until the "skimmings" start to show.

During the second stage much of the moisture from the juice evaporates. As it thickens, the juice changes in color from green to a light brown, caramel color and has an indescribable aroma. In this stage the skimmings are removed from the boiling juice as quickly as possible with the aid of a skimmer. A skimmer is a flat bottom, metal strainer which is enclosed on three sides with a handle opposite the open end; it resembles a miniature shovel with sides and holes in the bottom. When the skimmer sweeps the surface of the juice, the skimmings stay inside the skimmer and the juice flows through the holes in the bottom back into the pan. The skimmings are then put into a bucket and later discarded. The skimmings rise for about two to four hours and the process of removing them must be repeated until there is none left.

At the end of three to five hours of cooking, the sorghum is near completion. The last stage is entered when the steam has lifted. There are many signs to tell when the sorghum is complete. Butch Johnson describes two ways:

When the sorghum is finished cooking, Butch Johnson and Marvin Mears remove the pan to start the cooling process. The sorghum is again siphoned and then stored in smaller containers for winter use.

"The old timers say that when the sorghum begins to boil and is beginning to get thick enough and the bubbles are about the size of a dime and they set for a moment or two instead of going right back down instantly, it's beginning to get thick enough. That's one way and you can take a metal cup and dip a little sorghum into it and cool it in some ice water and roll it around on the edge of your cup like you do when you're making candy. Then the sorghum is to what they call a softball stage and that's about the consistency you need to have sorghum for it to be decent, I think. But if you've done it long enough, you can tell by looking."

There are other ways to tell if the sorghum is the desired consistency. If a thread forms when a small part of the sorghum is pulled from the rest of the batch, it is usually ready. Others simply taste the foam which covers parts of the cooled sorghum. Mr. Mears uses all of these tests to make sure his sorghum is perfect.

When the sorghum has met all the standards, it is carefully removed from the fire box's foundation onto a rack which is on the side of the foundation. If the sorghum is cooked too long, it will become tough and have the consistency of taffy or if it is not cooked long enough, it is very thin and hard to control.

No two sorghum growers are the same and neither is their molasses. Many people still use sorghum as a way of sweetening their breads, cookies, and candy-like taffy. And like Mr. Mears and Mr. Johnson, many have found the best way to eat sorghum is "bite after bite!"

By Angela Briggs