FROM sap to syrup

A COUPLE OF GENERATIONS AGO, it was possible to find sorghum syrup used as a primary sweetener, alongside honey and maple syrup, in most rural Indiana households’ tables. Life-long Owen County resident Arthur Bailey, now in his late 60s, grew up using the homegrown sweetener and remembers five or six fellows who ran a sorghum mill in that county alone. His father was among the farmers who grow sorghum and processed it into the sweetener, which goes by various names: sorghum molasses, cane sorghum, sweet sorghum or just plain sorghum.

When his daughter, Linda Stout, was in high school, she hit on the idea of making the syrup for an FFA project. The whole family revived the tradition, and it continues every fall at Stout’s Melody Acres, the Franklin farm where she and her husband, Randy Stout, grow vegetables and develop their Taste of Summer sauces.

On a clear autumn morning, several family members gather at the Johnson County farm for the first day of sorghum-making. It’s a big production, and the more the merrier. In addition to Bailey, the Owen County kin in attendance are Linda’s sister, Rachael, and their uncle, Michael Creager. In the chilly sunshine, Bailey and Creager feed sorghum stalks into an ancient multi-geared machine hooked up to a small tractor.

“I’m an antique, but that’s more of an antique than me,” jokes Bailey over the grumble of tractor engine and squeak of belts. The 1920s-era press came from a long-ago farm sale and is one of many antiques he’s amassed over the years. But unlike his old-time washing machine, corn sheller and an even older horse-drawn press, this machine still sees use. The rumbling contraption takes a handful of stalks at a time through its rollers, and greenish fluid runs steadily from its spout. A sieve-topped funnel covers a food-grade bucket set to catch the sap.

But that’s far from the first step in producing this sweetener, which tastes milder than molasses but still full-bodied. First, of course, comes the growing season, which ideally starts around May 1. Bailey, who grows the crop on his land, says this spring’s cold and wet conditions delayed planting till July 17, and for a time they weren’t sure they’d get much yield. (He’s grown varieties from Rox Orange to Sugar Drip to Umbrella over the years.)

The plant grows similarly to corn, only with a cluster of seeds at the top instead of a tassel. About 120 days after planting, the seeds reach “dough stage” — meaning a certain toughness. By contrast, sweet corn is harvested at “milky stage.” At dough stage, the seed heads are cut off because they have high levels of tannins, which would give an off flavor to the final product. After this “heading” but before a hard frost, it’s time to take the machines to the field to harvest the stalks. Piled on trailers, the sorghum dries for several days to allow the moisture to evaporate from the stalks. This saves some time on the cooking end. Uncured stalks yield a sap that will cook down to syrup at a rate of 10 to 1 gallon, versus 8 to 1 gallons with drier stalks.

Finally, the press gets revved up for the first of several all-day cook-downs. Bailey and Creager lift bundles of stalks from the trailer and feed them between the rollers, while Rachael stands ready to clear bits of cane from the netting topping the funnel. Every so often, someone must stab a pitchfork into a slimy pile of pressed cane that collects from the discharge chute and fling the cane into another wagon.

Across the yard is the cooking station, where the transformation from plant to food will continue throughout the day. Once

The Stout Family Revives an Old Family Tradition

By Shawndra Miller
Photography by Josh Marshall
WHERE TO FIND IT:

1169 N. State Road 135, Franklin

indywinterfarmersmarket.org

Indy Winter Farmers Market

bloomingtonwinterfarmersmarket.com

Bloomington Farmers Market

WHERE TO FIND IT:

110,” he’ll say. Or “That bucket took us down to a hundred.”

it’s an exercise in frustration for much of the day. “We’re up to

periodically puts a thermometer in to check the status, though

new bucketful sets the temperature rise back a little bit. Randy

made the firebox from house trailer parts. He sized it to match the flat-

it through a cotton cloth, Randy stokes a fire in the firebox below. Bailey

Linda empties the first pail of sap into the 6-foot stainless sink, straining

that form a sort of ladder for the fluid, making the cook-down pro-

uous flow evaporator pans. These are divided into sections by baffles

ghum being processed here, but Randy speaks longingly of continu-

When the sink won’t hold much more, Randy and Linda sig-

This “batch pan” method works well for the small amount of sor-

course of an hour or two

fills with green sap over the
mences. The sink gradually

imperfections boil to the top. Randy will skim this off with a fine

mesh strainer. “If we’re doing 50 gallons (of sap),” he says, “we prob-

ably skim at least a gallon or maybe 2 gallons of crud off the top.”

Many hours of cooking the sap, the syrup will have thickened con-

siderably, to about an eighth of what it started out. Though he

tends the fire fairly closely the whole day, never going more than

10 minutes without checking it, Randy says that last hour is tricki-

ably skim at least a gallon or maybe 2 gallons of crud off the top.”

When it’s finally ready, they’ll pull the fire and coals out of the

At about 226 degrees, just enough water will have boiled

off, leaving the remainder at about 78 percent sugar. At that

point, when Randy inserts a butter knife and lifts it above the

sink, the syrup should “drop off in big tear drops,” he says.

When it’s finally ready, they’ll pull the fire and coals of

the firebox and tilt the scorching hot sink up, propping one end on a

block to drain the product into stainless steel kettles. While Linda

takes the kettles inside to bottle the hot syrup in glass jars steril-

ized in the dishwasher, Randy and the outside crew will finish the

cleaning — stoking the fire again to boil water in the film-coated

sink. The final scrub-down might not even happen until after dark.

By that time, everyone is sticky and covered with sugar. At the end of

the day “you’ve got enough syrup and dirt on your britches that you

can bind them up in the corner and they’d stand there by themselves,”
says Randy.

He confesses he won’t eat any sorghum for a good three weeks after all

this is done. After constantly tasting the sap as it cooks down, his taste

buds are tired of it. (“I’d hate to guess how many calories I eat during

this is done. After constantly tasting the sap as it cooks down, its taste

buds are tired of it. (“I’d hate to guess how many calories I eat during

the weeks we’re making this sorghum,” he says.)

But come wintertime, nothing beats the syrup on buckwheat pancakes

or biscuits, he says, and it’s a perfect match for baked beans, too.

Melody Acres customers agree. Amy Countryman of Bloom-

ington, who purchases the syrup at the Stouts’ Bloomington Farm-

ers Market booth, has found it a versatile sweetener. “The main

reason I started buying it is I’m trying to eat as much food as pos-

sible that comes from close by,” she says. “So that was my origi-

nal reason for checking it out — and I just really like it.”

Sweet, but not too sweet, is how she describes it. She uses it all the

time, and not just in baking. She loves it as an ingredient in sauces,

such as in Asian noodle dishes that have a salty-sweet tang.

Thanks to Stout’s Melody Acres, more people can up-

date their taste buds with sorghum’s old-time flavor.

SUBSTITUTION TIPS

Substituting sorghum syrup for sugar: Use a third more sorghum than

the amount of sugar called for in the recipe; decrease the liquids by a third.

Substituting sorghum syrup for molasses: Use an equal amount of

sorghum but reduce sugar, since sorghum is sweeter than molasses.

Recipe

Pie recipe

INGREDIENTS

1 cup sorghum syrup

½ cup sugar

1 tablespoon butter

Pitch salt

2 tablespoons flour

2 eggs

1 teaspoon vanilla

¼ cup half-and-half

DIRECTIONS

Pour into a standard 9-inch pie shell and bake at 325°F for about 1 hour until the pie sets.

Don’t just hope you have the crop coverage you need. Be sure.