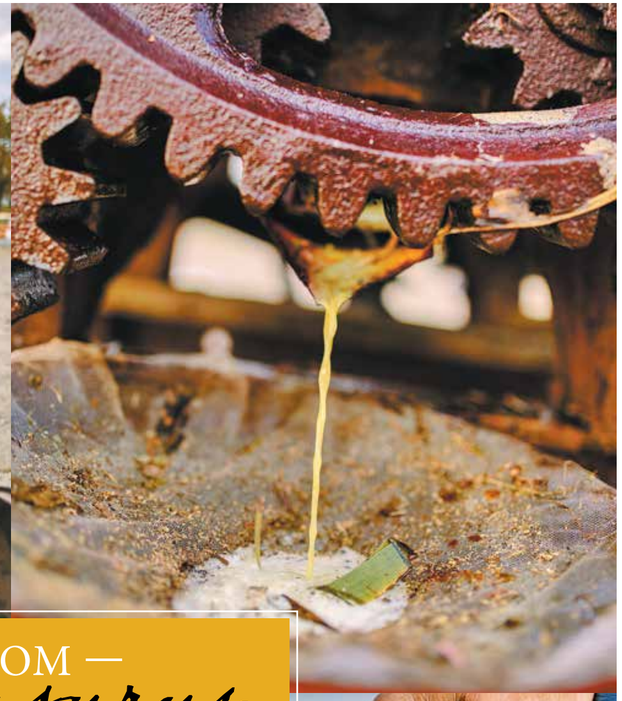

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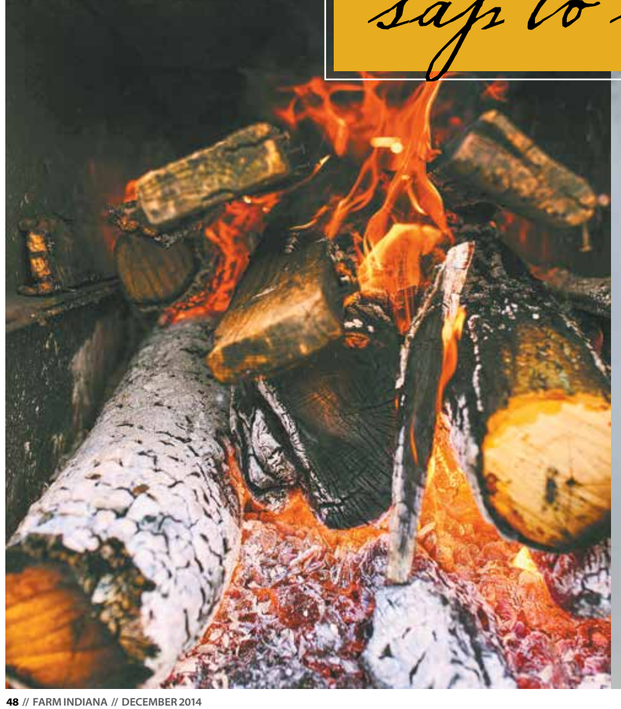

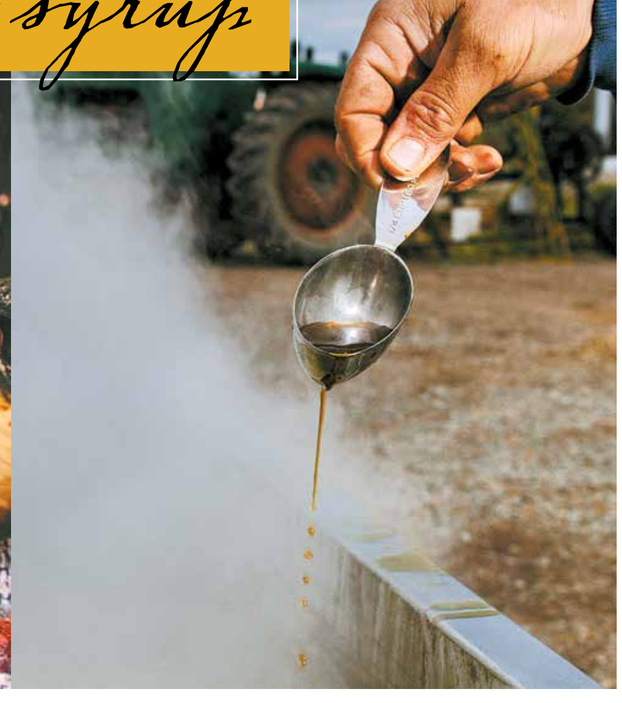

By Shawndra Miller
Photography by Josh Marshall

A THE STOUT FAMILY REVIVES AN OLD FAMILY TRADITION

A COUPLE OF GENERATIONS AGO, it was possible to find sorghum syrup used as a primary sweetener, alongside honey and maple syrup, on most rural Indiana households' tables. Lifelong 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 grew 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 now 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 "milk 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 machetes 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 gallons, 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 canes that collects from the discharge chute and fling the canes into another wagon.

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

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
Linda Stout and son, Rance, push sorghum through a press that extracts the juice.
Sorghum juice exits the tractor-powered press into a bucket.
Randy Stout collects sorghum to check the consistency.
A wood fire heats the sorghum throughout the day.
INSET | Linda and Randy Stout of Stout's Melody Acres.

Linda empties the first pail of sap into the 6-foot stainless sink, straining it through a cotton cloth, Randy stokes a fire in the firebox below. Bailey made the firebox from house trailer parts. He sized it to match the flat-bottom sink, which has had its drain welded shut and a spigot added to the far corner, for draining the finished product.

Now the two-steps-forward, one-step-back game commences. The sink gradually fills with green sap over the course of an hour or two of steady pressing. Each new bucketful sets the temperature rise back a little bit. Randy periodically puts a thermometer in to check the status, though it's an exercise in frustration for much of the day. "We're up to 110," he'll say. Or "That bucket took us down to a hundred."

This "batch pan" method works well for the small amount of sorghum being processed here, but Randy speaks longingly of continuous flow evaporator pans. These are divided into sections by baffles that form a sort of ladder for the fluid, making the cook-down process much more efficient. Such a setup would at least quadruple the potential daily output, and someday Randy hopes to try one out.

In the meantime, it's small batch sorghum for the Stouts. When the sink won't hold much more, Randy and Linda signal the crew over on the press to stop milling after the next bucket. Soon the rumble quiets, and the last sap of the day gets poured through its homemade cotton sieve.

"Soup's on, get your spoon and crackers," jokes Creager, peering over the edge of the sink. An algae-like film has formed on top of the green juice, decidedly unappetizing, but Linda has a different association.

"I smell it," she says, breathing deeply and smiling. "It smells like home to me."

While the juice heats, a scum continues to coat the surface as the 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 probably skim at least a gallon or maybe 2 gallons of crud off the top."

Many hours of cooking later, the syrup will have thickened considerably, 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 trickiest. Without regular stirring, the thickened syrup will scorch.

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 "drip off in big tear drops," he says.

When it's finally ready, they'll pull the fire and coals out 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 sterilized in the dishwasher, Randy and the outside crew will finish the cleanup — 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 ashes. At the end of the day "you've got enough syrup and dirt on your britches that you can lean 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 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 Bloomington, who purchases the syrup at the Stouts' Bloomington Farmers 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 possible that comes from close by," she says. "So that was my original 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 update their taste buds with sorghum's old-time flavor.

WHERE TO FIND IT:

Bloomington Farmers Market
bloomingtonwinterfarmersmarket.com

Indy Winter Farmers Market
indywinterfarmersmarket.org

Stout's Melody Acres
1169 N. State Road 135, Franklin

Pie recipe

INGREDIENTS

1 cup sorghum syrup
½ cup sugar
1 tablespoon butter
Pinch 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.

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.

SOURCE: FARMFLAVOR.COM