

North Carolina Men Make Molasses A Tradition

NASH DUNN, The Dispatch of Lexington

DENTON, N.C. (AP) — Gilbert Futrell kept a keen eye focused on his gurgling evaporator pan. Perched atop a wooden bench surrounded by auburn leaves, the 76-year-old Denton resident watched closely as a bubbling concentration of sugary juice and water meandered its way down the 10-foot-long aluminum maze of a pan.

To the average person, it was just a heap of steam, heat and sweet, smokey aromas. But to Futrell and the other "Old Men Makin' Lassis," it was the end of a long, three-day process — the finished product.

Beckoning the others to push the solution his way, Futrell used his right hand to turn a lever at the end of the pan and released a golden, gooey substance that flowed into a tub already half-full of the good stuff. It was top-notch sweet molasses — a steady stream of it.

"It's a 10-to-1 ratio," Futrell said. "For every 100 gallons of juice, you usually get 10 gallons of molasses."

In about three-and-a-half hours, Futrell, along with Fred Misenheimer and Mike Lowder, both 71, cooked up about 20 gallons in all. It was the easiest part of the process, they said.

The group will cook about a dozen times this fall until the end of October and early November. Based in Denton near the most southern portion of Davidson County, the group is one of the only in the region that still practices the trade of turning stalks of sorghum into sweet molasses.

For Futrell, Misenheimer and Lowder, the entire process takes about three days.

From the field, the stalks of sorghum, a crop similar to sugar cane, are taken to a grinding mill, which squeezes the juice from the plant. The juice then runs into a stainless steel container before it's taken to an evaporator pan and cooked to maximum temperatures of about 280 to 285 degrees.

Futrell said he is confident he is the only person in Davidson County who cooks with an evaporator pan, which is divided into multiple compartments that allows multiple batches to be cooked at one time.

"It's a lot of hard work," said Misenheimer, a Rockwell resident who's been cooking with Futrell for about five years. "It's too much work for no more than you get. We do it for the fun of it, not for the money."

Misenheimer said each batch brings anywhere from \$600 to \$800, selling the molasses for about \$40 a gallon. The group said most of their buyers are neighbors,

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friends, family members and those who have come to crave the Old Men's Molasses over the years.

Futrell said he started cooking about 12 years ago. A former owner of a prominent lumber company in the area, he said he got into as a hobby.

"I retired and wanted something to do," Futrell said. "I've always loved molasses, and no one made it like I wanted it. So I said, 'I'll just make my own.'"

So he took up the trade, learning slowly by "trial and error."

Jim Goins, a Lexington resident and Futrell's brother-in-law, said the "Old Men Makin' Lassis" are some of the only people in the region to practice what he called a dying trade.

"A lot of local farmers used to do it on their own property for the sugar content and because of the health properties some people believe it has," Goins said. "It's a dying trade, and it's hard to find anymore. A lot of work goes into it."

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