Sorghum Syrup in High Demand as Consumers Search for Alternative Sweeteners

MICHELE KAYAL, Associated Press

This April 21, 2014, photo shows a sorghum syrup in Concord, N.H. **(AP Photo/Matthew Mead)**

When chef Josh Feathers was growing up in Tennessee, his grandmother always had a jar of sorghum syrup in the cupboard. But he never gave much thought to it, or its significance to Southern culture.

That didn't happen until he'd grown up, moved away, then returned home to work at Blackberry Farm in Walland, Tennessee. "My mentor, while we were creating desserts he said, 'This is one of the main ingredients you need to look at,'" recalls Feathers, now corporate chef at Blackberry Farm. "This is a truly Southern heritage ingredient we want to highlight."

Today, much of the country — even the South itself — is experiencing a similar delayed appreciation for sorghum.

Sorghum syrup — or "sorghum molasses" as it's sometimes called — has long been a staple of certain Southern cupboards. Pressed from the tough, grassy stalks of the sweet sorghum plant, then boiled down, it was seen as the province of grandmothers, a stodgy, household ingredient no one paid much mind.

No more. Sorghum syrup and even sorghum grain are being thrust into the limelight by a new generation of chefs in the South and beyond who appreciate its complexities and its provenance.

"Sorghum wasn't considered a noble ingredient 10 years ago," says Edward Lee, chef of two Louisville, Kentucky, restaurants and author of the cookbook "Smoke and Pickles." ''The first thing I get is this very rustic nuttiness, this umami nuttiness, then the grassiness. And then the sweetness unfolds around that. It's a unique flavor. And it adds a lot of depth to what you're cooking, more so than honey."

Lee is not alone. He uses sorghum as a glaze for foie gras and highlights its distinct flavor in sorghum-and-grits ice cream. Feathers calls it "an all-purpose item" that can be drizzled over biscuits, shines up breakfast sausage and enlivens vinaigrettes. Vivian Howard, chef and co-owner of The Chef and the Farmer in Kinston, North Carolina, has deployed sorghum in candied yams. Washington, D.C., chef and restaurateur Jeff Tunks uses sorghum on his "low-and-slow" roast duck. And in Philadelphia, chef Jeremy McMillan of Talula's Garden combines it with black garlic to glaze carrots.

Demand for sorghum syrup has doubled during the last five years, says James Baier, executive secretary of the National Sweet Sorghum Producers and Processors Association, rising so fast that some of his 300 members have begun running out before the new season starts.

Demand is being driven by the public's search for alternative sweeteners, Baier says, and also by the light shined on sorghum by chefs, restaurants, even cocktail mixologists. Distillers have begun producing a rum-like product from sorghum, Baier says, and others using it to make whiskey, beer and cocktail bitters. Soy sauce producers have also shown interest, he says.

Sorghum grain also is ambling to center stage on many chefs' plates. Harvested from a short, stout version of the sorghum plant, the tiny grain has been used as food in Africa for thousands of years, but has been known in the United States mainly as biofuel or animal feed.

Today, the grain is being milled into flour and marketed to the gluten-free and whole-grain markets, and is being used by chefs in soups, stews and salads. Only 2 percent of production currently goes to food, says Tim Lust, chief executive officer of the United Sorghum Checkoff Program, which markets the grain, but that figure is growing by 25 percent a year.

Cookbook author Martha Rose Shulman has compared sorghum grain to Israeli couscous, and recommends it as a base for a black-bean stew as well as for a salad with cucumber, avocado and cherry tomato. At the Clifton Inn in Charlottesville, Virginia, chef Tucker Yoder combines the grain and the syrup in a quinoa and sorghum pudding. New York chef Marc Forgione has offered sorghum as a side to items such as arctic char.

"The closest possible thing you can compare it to is a real heirloom farro," says

Forgione, who is working with Lust's group to cook a three-course sorghum lunch at a June trade show. "It tastes like the ancient grain that it is. It's got a great bite to it. It's very earthy. When we do it risotto style — I cook mine al dente anyway — it has a nice chew to it, a full texture."

So is sorghum the next quinoa? Forgione has one word: Sriracha.

"If someone had told us 10 years ago that this condiment you can't even pronounce was going to be the number one selling condiment, you wouldn't have believed it," he says. "You never know."

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