

MOUNTAINS

A sweet harvest tradition returns



Word from the Smokies

Aaron Searcy
Guest columnist

Not so long ago, many farming families in Southern Appalachia celebrated the long-anticipated arrival of the harvest season with a special treat: fresh sorghum syrup.

Today, thousands still flock to see the syrup-making process and get a taste of the sweet stuff when Mark and Sherry Guenther of Muddy Pond Sorghum host their seasonal demonstrations in Great Smoky Mountains National Park. This year's run in the Cades Cove area of the park has already begun and will continue for 20 dates in total through Sunday, November 27.

"Everybody calls it molasses, but it is sorghum cane and the correct name for it is sorghum syrup," explained Mark Guenther, son of late Muddy Pond Sorghum founders John and Emma Guenther. For three generations, the Guenther family in Monterey, Tennessee, has practiced the old-fashioned mountain art of harvesting sorghum and processing it into a sweet syrup — a regional delicacy typically paired with butter on a hot biscuit, drizzled onto a pancake, or mixed into porridge or grits.

"Fall is when the sorghum is ripe and ready to start cooking, and that smell is what makes the whole season," said Sherry Guenther, Mark's wife. "We're usually at Cades Cove every weekend when the fall colors come in, and together with the smell of it cooking, it transports you back to a simpler time. It's so relaxing."

Determined to keep the practice alive, the Guenthers use a labor-intensive process to make 100% pure Muddy Pond Sorghum that involves squeezing juice from the cane, bringing the juice to a boil, and then reducing it down over a wood-fired furnace. Today, the smell of simmering syrup still summons memories of cool days, autumn leaves, and communities coming together to harvest and mill their crops.

"Sugar cane only grows farther south, but sorghum cane can grow here, so it became a regional staple," Sherry said. "It's sweeter and has a more complex taste, real earthy. A lot of older people remember it from back when they were kids, and we get to remind them of that part of their heritage."

For years, the couple has traveled



In a live demonstration staged in the Cades Cove area of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, Mark Guenther puts sweet sorghum cane through a mule-powered mill. Milling is the first step of the sorghum syrup-making process. VALERIE POLK, PROVIDED BY GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS ASSOCIATION

with mules, tools, equipment, and supplies in tow, demonstrating their chosen craft at the old cane mill near Cades Cove Visitor Center. Never failing to attract a crowd of onlookers, the Guenthers sell their Muddy Pond products through Great Smoky Mountains Association stores as well as at various fairs, theme parks, and festivals across the region.

"It's a dying art — not a lot of people are making it anymore, especially on the level that we are," Sherry said. "But it's a good feeling to be making a product that's so rare, showing people part of their heritage and keeping this tradition alive. It's great to love what you do for a living."

Over the past few years, the COVID-19 pandemic brought some particularly tough challenges for the Guenthers as festivals, fairs, and other crowd-attracting events were closed due to social-distancing measures.

"One after another, all the events got canceled," said Sherry. "And without the shows, we don't sell much."

In 2021, demonstrations resumed in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, but tastings were not available. This year, the Guenthers will be making up for lost time as both demonstrations



The practice of sorghum milling in the Smokies remains much the same today as it was here in September 1935. Sorghum juice runs from the rollers through a burlap strainer and into a tub below. CHARLES S. GROSSMAN, PROVIDED BY GSMNP ARCHIVES

and on-site tastings return.

The scheduled dates for the remainder of the 2022 fall sorghum season in Cades Cove are as follows:

- Friday through Sunday, Sept. 16–18.
- Friday through Sunday, Nov. 4–6.
- Thursday through Sunday, Nov. 10–13.
- Friday through Sunday, Nov. 18–20.
- Friday through Sunday, Nov. 25–27.

Should severe weather or other unforeseen circumstances require the cancelation of a scheduled demonstration, a new date will be added in its place.

Muddy Pond Sorghum products can

be purchased in-person at demonstrations, online at SmokiesInformation.org, and in all 11 of the park's visitor center stores. For ways to use sorghum syrup in your own kitchen, Great Smoky Mountains Association's "Mountain Makin's in the Smokies" and "Food & Recipes of the Smokies" books both feature recipes including sorghum syrup.

Aaron Searcy is a publications association for the 34,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Reach him at Aaron@GSMAssoc.org.



Two men skim boiling sorghum in a park demonstration circa 1930. It takes some approximately ten gallons of sorghum juice to render one gallon of syrup. CARLOS C. CAMPBELL, PROVIDED BY GSMNP ARCHIVES

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