

# Making Molasses in the Mountains



A thin, mint green liquid trickles out of a spigot. Bits and pieces of fiber flow with it. It doesn't look the least bit appetizing at the onset but give it a few hours. Soon that liquid will look thick and golden brown, pure sweetness.

Daniel Mace is the chief molasses maker at the West Virginia Molasses Festival held every September in Calhoun County at West Fork Park in Arnoldsburg.

"I was in the Boy Scouts. I learned how to make molasses in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade," says Mace "I started here helping in 1977. I've made molasses with a lot of people who have come and gone."

The official tally for the festival is 48 years and counting. However, Mace says the community came together long before that to turn local sorghum cane into the edible syrup used on biscuits, to make cakes and candies, and sweeten tea and coffee. Before there was processed white sugar, West Virginians ate molasses.

Octogenarian Benjamin West lives in Grantsville, just up the road from the West Fork Park.

"Me and my dad, we used to grow cane. It's hard work. Blading the cane is the worst of it," explains West.

A smile comes across his face when he remembers the 'old days.' "We would put the finished product into 5 gallon jugs with pop-off plugs, a rag tied around it. We kept it in the cellar. We used it for pancakes and toast, whatever you wanted to put it on. It's good stuff if you like it."



Sorghum cane has been in short supply in Calhoun County of late. The past two years Harold Carpenter, the Chairman of West Fork Community Action, the group that organizes the festival, says they had to purchase cane in Ohio so they could make molasses for the event. The weather just wasn't right for sorghum.

"You need fairly dry weather. You want it to rain at the correct times," says Mace. "This year in May and early June, right

after we planted, it rained. It was terrible weather for cane. But it's been real dry for the first three weeks of September. That works good for harvest."

This year one farmer and a group of FFA students from Calhoun County High School grew enough cane to make "real West Virginia molasses."

"I wish we had more. We don't have as much cane as we thought we would get, but it's great to see it running through the mill again," says Carpenter.

The cane is cut down several days before it's ready for processing. Truck beds full of 14 foot stalks are transported to the park. They're run through a motorized machine that's taken the place of horse power, literally.



"They used to do it with horses out there in the field," says Carpenter. "They've come a long way."

Mace explains the process.

"The farmer hauls it in here to the mill. Then we run it through the juicer and it squeezes all the juice out. Once that happens, it runs into a container."

That green, pulpy juice looks nothing like molasses.

"We pump the juice through a hose, across to the pan, and let it gravity feed," says Mace.

The pan is a large, shallow, square box.

"The juice has to run up and back all the way up the pan. There's six sections and those are each divided into three more sections. It goes back and forth across the pan."



The liquid moves through one section after another with help of a wooden paddle. Along the way, pieces of fiber are scooped out and tossed into a pile. By the time the liquid is halfway down the pan, it's already turning a light tan. In the last few sections, it becomes a rich, warm brown with steam rising off of it.

What's the secret to successful molasses?

"It depends upon the sugar content in the cane. You don't know what you're going to have until you're in the middle of making it," says Mace. "You can tell how it's going by the way it boils off the pan. If you don't have too much steam coming off the pan, you know you don't have a lot of moisture in it. This year it's not too bad. There's a pretty good sugar content."

After about four hours, the thickened syrup goes into quart jars and is set aside to cool.

Mace isn't sure how much longer he'll continue to make molasses. He says it's time for the younger generation to step up. He hopes the Molasses Festival will continue another 48 years.