Red White still makes own syrup

Art of syrup-making revived

by Chris Fernsler

PECAN ISLAND- Every autumn Louisiana State University wins football games, the leaves turn a pleasant shade of orange, Santa Claus frantically prepares for his late December gift giving trip around the world and since 1971 Red White makes a delicious brew of corn syrup.

The Pecan Island native makes his sweet brand of corn syrup just for relatives and friends. The lively farmer has never sold his syrup.

“I make corn syrup just because I like to. I guess I got the idea of doing this years ago from having made pig and peach preserves,” White said.

Before this hobby was begun, though, a mill was needed. White found that to be just a minor problem. He hastily found a mill and did not have to pay even one penny for the grinder. White discovered the machine one day in 1971 while walking through a Pecan Island swamp. The mill was half-way packed in mud, but he took the scuffed up machine home and soon whipped it into working condition.

Today that 75-year-old mill (made in 1905) is helping White to make some of the most taste bud satisfying corn syrup in south Louisiana.

That machine will most likely never see mud again. It, however, isn’t housed in a $500-a-month apartment. The mill now sets under a half-dressed shack on White’s property in Pecan Island. It is protected from rain by a tin roof. The structure is well supported by four thick slabs of wood. The building isn’t enclosed, though. Within three giant steps of the mill is the boiler, where the sugarcane is cooked after it has been ground, cleaned and strained.

The steel boiler, which White built, contains three compartments. The back two sections contain just water. The first compartment, however, is where White cooks the cane. Once the product reaches the boiler it is stirred occasionally during a seven-hour cooking period.

“You really have to make sure the syrup doesn’t boil over,” White replied.

If the soon to be corn syrup does act as if it is attempting to ooze out of the steel box, it is wisest to simmer the fire by pulling one of the blazing logs from under the boiler.

White’s boiler looks much like a tomb. It sits atop a 10x5-foot mound. Carved under that brick and dirt constructed small hill is a homemade fireplace, stretching from end to end of the boiler.

The fire from that minute tunnel is quite effective. White prefers to heat the syrup.
with the use of Willow wood. “Willow wood burns well. I usually cut and dry it during the summer,” White responded.

That wood certainly has plenty of work to do in cooking the cane. When the liquid is poured into the boiler it has a bright orange tint. As the cooking stage proceeds, though, it gradually develops into a fairly dark caramel-type shade.

While the cane is becoming syrup in the torrid pot White cautiously watches for dirt which sometimes lands in the boiler from the atmosphere. Those particles are dissected from the pot with a strainer.

White uses his judgement to decide when the syrup has reached the right stage for the likes of toast, biscuits and muffins. He, however, usually checks the texture of the syrup first by pouring a spoon full of the creation on a plate. If the syrup runs down the plate rather slowly when it is tilted it should be at the eating juncture.

When the syrup is at the preferred stage it is then dumped into a massive tub. It is allowed to cool for a few moments and is then poured into jars of all sizes and shapes for those corn syrup craving friends and relatives of White.

The Pecan Island corn syrup king enjoys to discuss the local history of the product. “There used to be five or six mills in Pecan Island. Gosh!, a lot of people used to get together and cook corn syrup all day. Sometimes they would even cook syrup for three straight weeks,” White commented. He added, “Elysse Veazey was growing sugarcane in 1892 on Pecan Island.”

According to White corn syrup was also used during the depression instead of sugar, which was quite expensive. Thanks to Red White a delicious Pecan Island tradition is still alive.