SUGAR SHACK — Emile Young, 88, keeps cooking shed. He says he can tell when it is an eye on the thickening cane syrup in the done by the way it boils.

Photos By Paula Latiolais
PLAISANCE — The sweet, penetrating, slightly burnt smell of cane syrup cooking in an outdoor kitchen can be carried for miles on a cool, blustery day in the fall.

Although grinding and cooking the sweet juice has become mostly a commercial enterprise done with machines, there are still a few around who believe that the only way to make authentic cane syrup is by the sweat and the burning smoke smarting the eyes, and a little help from the intense heat of a brick wood-burning oven.

Emile Young of Plaisance is an 88-year-old perfectionist. He makes the thick, dark syrup the same way he learned many years ago when he worked as a laborer at a similar cane mill in Loreauville. "At that time, we got paid $1.50 a day and that was a good wage," the old man reminisces. "I'd stay there until the end of the season and then come back home." Since that time he has been married three times, he announces with a devilish glint in his bright eyes.

After the cane is cut from his small field, his mule and his horse, Judy, are hitched to the press, which turns around the stalks and squeezes out the clear juice. Under the watchful eye of Carlton Stelly, a retired bricklayer from Melville, the cane is put into the press a few stalks at a time and the precious juice trickles through a screen into a barrel placed in a pit. Every time the animals circular pace slows, Stelly yells out, "Come on Judy" in a musical tone and the pair picks up the pace.

Stelly just started this year helping out Young, but said that before he learned his bricklaying trade in New Orleans, he used to harvest and process cane this way. And now at 63, he's back at it again.

The second helper for the operations is Young's grandson, Patrick. At 15, he's been helping his grandpa out with the syrup-making for about six years. With the long-wooden pole swinging around as the animals trudge along, Patrick said he's been whacked by the pole quite a few times when he forgot to duck.

When the juice accumulates, it is brought in buckets to the cooking shed, where it is poured into another bucket, which lets the juice leak slowly into the oblong cooking pan. Before the juice is poured in, a roaring wood fire is built up underneath the cast iron trays. The cooking shed is strictly Young's territory. Like a master chef, he checks the progress of the boiling, steaming juice, skimming off the impurities with a screen.

His head immersed in the thick clouds of smoke, Young eyes the cooking process and takes time out every once in a while to add more long branches to the fire which defiantly blow out sparks. The intense fire burns all the way back to the other end of the tray, which is divided in the middle.

"You have to let the juice drizzle into the tray slowly so the syrup cooks evenly," Young explains in his gruff, raspy voice. "Once that fire is going good and hot, she can burn all through the night," he added. The last batch is left in to simmer overnight, although the batches made while the fire is hot are ready in about three hours.

At the end of the tray is a specially-sectioned portion which is used for cooking the clean, bubbling juice into syrup. "I can tell when the syrup is ready just by looking at it and seeing the way it boils," the old master cook says. When the syrup thickens after boiling for a while, a white foam begins appearing on top. When the syrup is ready, a wooden stopper on the side of the bricks is removed and the thick, dark fluid runs slowly through a piece of cheesecloth into a pail. A gallon of juice produces about a quart of syrup.

Young built the cooking shed and oven himself about 40 years ago when he began making his own syrup. Although the shed shows signs of wear, the tin still holds in the heat and smoke, leaving out a trail of smoke through the chimney and the doorway.

While the cooking process is going on, the bucket is constantly refilled by Stelly and Patrick, who continue their grinding. The juiceless stalk can be used for fertilizer or ground into flakes and used to keep soil from packing when it rains, Stelly said.

"I don't think I'll be doing this much longer," Young says while he stirs the juice. "Maybe a few more years." Although he plans to stop the annual cooking process soon, he seems determined to hit his 100th birthday, and at the rate he is going, he probably will.
Scene from the past — Young's horse, named Judy, and a mule turn the old cane press and juice is squeezed out of sugar cane stalks.