In the late autumn, Abbeville turns sweet. It's not just the Cajun joie de vivre of the holiday season, the very air has a sweetness. It wafts from the plant between the Vermilion River and St. Mary Magdalen Parish Catholic Church, carried by steam that floats upward like a pure, white mist and billows from the old river boat steam whistle which sounds noon and 6 p.m. like a ghostly wail of history.

It's syrup-making time at Steen's. Albert Steen knows that sweet aroma better than anyone else is still living. And he knows the five generations of his family that have turned the acres of tall sugar cane into the thick concoctions in the yellow cans that have sweetened countless breakfasts.

By Chris Segura

Albert "Ugly" Steen tempers blades in machine shop. Donald Grogan tends to his "fireman" job at the syrup mill. 

Please see Syrup B4
"It sure makes you want to hit those biscuits, all right," he says with a satisfied smile, standing in front of the huge mounds of cane being relentlessly loaded into a plant that combines the past and the future and bears his personal stamp in the ingenious inventions which make the Steen's factory unlike any other in the world. His son Charley, 35, takes a short break in a hectic day, rubs eyes red from lack of sleep and attests to his father's ingenuity and love of inventions.

"My father's first great love is mechanics," he says with a mixture of affection and admiration. "He and my brother Bert (32) work our machine shop. Everything is repaired and kept running right here on the yard.

Steen's innovations have attracted sugar and syrup interest as far away as Australia. Albert, in his mid-60s is a pleasant, youthful man. His nickname in Vermilion Parish is "Ugly." It is a mysterious moniker and one Albert has always been a singularly handsome man and middle age has done nothing to alter that.

He is generally of a happy disposition, as though his life had been sweetened by his family's product. But he seems even happier when he is discussing the mechanics of sugar cane harvesting and sugar making.

At the moment his imagination is fired — as the furnaces in the plant are fired — by the reality of the cane combine.

"This is something brand new, never done before," he says. "This machine cuts, cleans and loads cane in one operation. The cane is not burned (the process of burning the leaves or "flags" from the stalk is unacceptable in syrup making,) there's no mud on the cane, it's a clean cut.

He says the average cane farmer, using the traditional harvesting methods removes with the cane an average of one-half ton of topsoil per acre per year. That mud makes problems for syrup makers and leaves the roads from field to plant littered and dirty.

In years past, the cane trucks lined the streets of Abbeville. Much cane fell to the pavement to be crushed by tires and ferment in the gutters, mixing a pungent smell with the aroma of cooking sugar.

But in the early 60s, Albert loaded his family into his private airplane (He's a pilot of long standing and great ability) and flew to Washington D.C. where he perused documents in the U.S. Patent office to learn how to build his cleaning plant.

He borrowed a little from one inventor and a little from others, gradually fashioning out of a piece of trial and error the cane cleaning plant three miles from Abbeville that eventually attracted international attention. The attention was not his greatest reward, however.

That reward came from pride in accomplishing something that augmented the business his grandfather started in 1911 when he made syrup from cane that had been frozen in the field.

At the cleaning plant the flags were stripped by vacuuming, avoiding the burning method. The cane is loaded into 60-foot carts pulled by tractors and transported to Abbeville.

At this stage of the process, Charley is mostly concerned with logistics. He drives approximately 8,000 miles per week, all in Vermilion Parish, purchasing carts in the field and supervising the cutting and transportation.

In days gone by, farmers transporting cane on the roads and waterways of Vermilion Parish used to throw stalks to children along the way. And the children of the town used to help themselves to the long blue stalks stacked high at the Abbeville plant.

Then they'd peel the cane with pocketknives and chew the pith, swallowing the juice and spitting the residue into the slow-moving water, itself the color and almost the consistency of the syrup being made nearby.

But that is a thing of the past. Something must give way to progress. The cane arrives chopped into small pieces and is almost immediately transported to the conveyor belt that feeds it into the marvelous machinery of the plant.

The interior of the plant is somewhat like that of the inside of Willie Wonka's Chocolate Factory, filled with enormous and complicated machinery, huge furnaces that glow orange with heat, and steam that rises to the high ceilings like the smoky halls of a medieval cathedral.

Although it's an imitable comparison for such a delectable enterprise, the system of serpentines, conveyor belts and marvelous machinery is like the snake devouring its tale. This is because the cane residue, bagasse, is dried over the furnaces where it will be burned for fuel to produce the steam to run the plant.

As the chopped cane enters the plant, it is crushed a total of five times by huge, heavy rollers. The rollers are adjacent to the turn-of-the-century steam engine that provides the power. The great, yellow, plunging apparatus is like a stationary locomotive.

It powers a gigantic yellow flywheel that turns gears almost 11 feet in diameter to create the pressure needed to squeeze out the cane juice.

The juice itself runs through a sort of sluice like a coulee of thick, sweet water until it is pumped settling vats where impurities are removed and then to the upper floors of the plant where it is turned into syrup in a series of flat troughs that boil and steam like the hot wells of Yellowstone.

The concoction of constantly skinned of impurities with flat paddles like old-fashioned bed warmers with the tops removed. Gradually it is thickened, but fresh juice is constantly added to give the syrup its distinctive, buttery flavor.

It is canned hot but instantly cooled so that it will not continue to cook in the famous yellow containers.

The plant employs more than 100 workers, all of whom seem to be pleasantly and comfortably busy, engulfed by the aroma.

They treat Charley and Albert with a familiar affection as they walk the plant at intervals.

They convert 1,200 to 1,500 acres of standing cane into almost one-half million gallons of the syrup.

"Whether it's syrup or molasses depends on where you're from," Charley says with a smile, settling into the chair at his desk. "Around here they call it syrup, so we call it syrup. In other places they call it molasses."

He points out that Steen's sells the syrup to manufacture many other products, among them barbecue sauce and bread. The company also makes a fine, sweet vinegar and a thicker syrup called "La Culite". French for "the remainder," which used to be gathered from the bottom of the vat. It has a consistency nearly that of taffy.

But whether it's French bread with a thick, dark crust, barbecue to flavor charcoal-cooked roasts, vinegar to sprinkle on gourmet salads, whether its molasses or syrup, it means pride and history to the Steens.

And to everyone within smelling distance it means it's time to "hit those biscuits."