By DOUG LeBLANC

Advocate state writer

PORT SULPHUR - Citrus permeates Plaquemines Parish, from southern orange groves to the pungent lemon-and-bourbon drink called a Tako Toddler to Elaine B. Buras' recipe for Orange Cool-a-Daze in a parish cookbook.

Though a freeze in 1988, however — when temperatures plunged to 18 degrees for about 10 hours, according to residents — citrus has been in short supply.

Nevertheless, the Plaquemines Parish Fair and Orange Festival continues each year at Port Jackson.

This Dec. 6 and 7, parish residents will have something to celebrate again.

"I've eaten fruit from Florida and from California, but Louisiana citrus is definitely the best," Bourgeois said, standing next to a tree in his backyard. "That's because we ripen our fruit on the tree. We don't pick it prematurely, as they sometimes do in Florida and California."

For several decades, the orange industry in Plaquemines Parish has moved from bustling to battered. Oranges are making a comeback in Plaquemines, where residents have grown the crop since the 1700s.

"This is the king," Dr. Wayne Bourgeois said, standing next to a tree growing Washington oranges at the LSU Citrus Research Station. "This is what everyone wants to grow in Plaquemines Parish."

Since a brutal freeze in 1983, however — when temperatures hovered at 16 degrees for about six hours, the research station was able to save about 75 percent of its trees, Bourgeois said.

"Basically everything we've planted since 1983 has used freeze protection," Bourgeois said as reporters sipped homemade orange wine to a potent orange wine and admired oranges on a table today are part of that new crop."

"On a young tree I would say yes," he said. "But on a mature tree I could not say."

Bourgeois and County Agent Alan Fehrman said orange farmers cannot afford the freezing technology. "It looks good, as long as we don't have the freezing cold weather or the hurricanes," he said. "I think a lot of farmers are just sitting back and looking at it for awhile."

Chauvin Brothers now farms about 30 acres of orange trees. Fehrman said orange farmers cannot rely on municipal electricity and water supplies if they embrace such technologies, because those utilities are often as vulnerable as naked orange trees in the freezing cold.

Instead, farmers must siphon into the abundant water supply of the Mississippi River, and it through filters and use diesel-powered pumps to move the water to their trees.

Such technology would cost about $15 a tree, he said. But $15 a tree is a lot of money when one's orange acreage includes about 3,250 trees, as it does at Chauvin Brothers Citrus Grove. The company had about 12,000 trees before the 1983 freeze, said Daryl Chauvin, 32, a fourth-generation orange farmer.

"It's more or less year by year. You're always replanting," he said.

Chauvin said his family has used diesel-burning "smudge pots" to keep the crops warm, "but if you have a 45-mile-an-hour wind, it's not going to do much."

Even so, Chauvin said he is optimistic because the resilient orange industry of Plaquemines will always bounce back. "It's more or less year by year. You're always replanting," he said.

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"I've eaten fruit from Florida and from California, but Louisiana citrus is definitely the best," Bourgeois said during a recent media tour of the research station. "This is what everyone wants to grow in Plaquemines Parish."

Since then, the research station has begun experimenting with a method that deliberately forms ice on the trunk and main limbs of young orange trees. "Freezing" weather means that deliberately forms ice on the trunk and main limbs of young orange trees. "Freezing" weather means that

Bourgeois seems confident that the freezing process can protect young trees.

"On a young tree I would say yes," he said. "But on a mature tree I could not say."

Bourgeois and County Agent Alan Fehrman said most orange farmers in the parish are still recovering from the freezes of 1983 and 1986, so they cannot afford the freezing technology. "It's more or less year by year. You're always replanting," he said.

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entitlement programs like Social Security, Peterson said he wants to see which recipients truly are in need through a means test.

"Entitlements do not use income of any sort as a method, as a criteria, for distribution. All of us ... are beneficiaries of these programs," he said.

One of Peterson's proposals seeks to put a 2 percent cap on non-meanstested entitlement and transfer payments. This step would save the government about $150 billion a year by the year 2000, Peterson said.

Transfer payments are a source of income from the government, given in addition to an individual's earned income, and include cash and services. They are known as entitlements and include Social Security and other payment

are welfare in effect. And it's tax-free welfare for the middle and upper classes," he said.

The retirement programs such as Social Security, and military and civil service retirement pensions account for 35-40 percent of the budget and have been growing at about 10 percent a year, he said.

"They're destined to explode in the future," he said.

The entitlement programs are scheduled to go up from the current level of 9.7 percent of the Gross National Product to nearly 17 percent by the year 2000, he said.

"We're talking about payroll taxes in the range of 30 percent or more to finance these huge, unfunded liabilities," he said.

Of them all, Social Security is the "real unmentionable," Peterson said. "That has a toxicity level that

Citrus

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Fehrman said.

Most orange farmers in the parish have inherited the crops from their forefathers, Fehrman said.

"A lot of them work in the oil industry, and a lot of them work for the parish," he said.

Fehrman said growing oranges in Plaquemines is not an undertaking a person could start from scratch, what with land selling at up to $30,000 an acre.

"I wouldn't want to borrow money to do it or put myself in a precarious position," Fehrman said, "because you can get wiped out overnight."