



Maasdam Sorghum

http://www.iowaartscouncil.org/programs/folk-and-traditional-arts/place_based_foods/stories4.htm

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Maasdam Sorghum Mills (sorghum syrup)

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The Maasdam family has been producing dark, fragrant, and healthful sorghum syrup since 1926. Now in its seventh generation, the family grows sweet sorghum on the family farm in Lynnville. They also press the cane and bottle the syrup under their own and several other labels. Currently involved in the business are Jennifer Kramer, whose young sons (the seventh generation) help out a bit, and her husband, John, father-in-law and mother-in-law, Charles and Marge Kramer, along with Marge's nephew Craig Maasdam. The family members operate the cane-powered furnace, steam engine, presses, and filtration system created by Marge's father, L.J. Maasdam.

One of the only surviving sorghum mills in Iowa, the Maasdam operation started at a time when many more Iowa farmers made syrup from home-grown cane for home use. A few other mills do exist northeast of Pella, in Kalona (Kaufmans), south of Knoxville, and perhaps in Bloomfield. Though family members made sorghum on and off for their own use prior to 1926, it was then that L.J. Maasdam, Marge's father, officially started the business. According to Marge Kramer, as far as she knows, her family's "S" corporation currently has the largest number of acres of sorghum grown in the United States.

Born in 1904, Leonard Maasdam, whose family was of Dutch heritage and settled around Pella, home to one of Iowa's earliest settlements (1847), spoke Dutch as his first language. His father, Leendert "Lane" Maasdam, had a farm in rural Lynnville, roughly 60 miles from Des Moines. Lane purchased a used cane mill in 1925 so the family could grind their own sorghum for syrup and not have to rely on that produced by their neighbors, also of Dutch background. According to the family story, Leonard, who was quite the mechanical genius who loved sorghum, fell ill in the fall of 1925 with measles. The illness eventually passed, and the family got back to producing sorghum, even tripling their output, thanks to some adjustments that Leonard made on the machinery, when he fell ill again, this time from what they reported as inflammatory rheumatism. Bedridden for much of the time between 1926 and 1928, he spent much of his time

pondering the sorghum business. In 1928, the family bought a larger mill from Missouri, tore it down, and moved some pieces by truck and the rest, piece by piece, by train. Up until 1945, when Leonard installed a steam engine, the family used horses to operate the mill.

With the beginning of the Depression, the market for sorghum was good. A cheap and locally available sweetener, sorghum was also high in iron and potassium. Available throughout the Midwest up until the 1950s and 1960s, sorghum sold at \$.60 - \$.90 a gallon—a good money maker compared to corn at \$.10 a bushel and hogs at \$.02 - \$.03 per pound (Kramer 1996:18). Leonard began peddling his sorghum door to door, giving tastes and building confidence in his product. Today, the family markets its sorghum under the Maasdam label as well as several others, including House of Webster, Midwestern Meats, and Rogers. Most of their business is wholesale and goes to Iowa supermarkets such as Dahls, HyVee, Fareway, Campbells, Heart of Iowa, and Iowa Orchard and as far afield as Arkansas, Missouri, Wisconsin, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Arizona.

The busy time of year for Maasdam-Kramers is the fall. “The steam engine is running and alive in September,” says Marge. “It’s like a junk yard come to life.” The noise of the machinery is so loud that the family has long used steam whistles to call for the mill operator, steam operator, and cook (furnace operator).

Sweet sorghum is planted in the spring, like most grasses, and is harvested in the late summer and early fall, usually in September. For about three to four weeks, work in the mill is nearly nonstop, and the family hires ten to twelve employees (mostly local retired people) to fill syrup jars. Marge and Charles Kramer, their son, John, and daughter-in-law, Jennifer, and their nephew Craig Maasdam are all busy in the mill. Everyone has a job to do, but they all know about other jobs as well, from loading and feeding in the cane, stoking the boiler, making sure that the machinery is operating smoothly, boiling, skimming, and straining the cane juice, filtering it several times, to finally bottling and sealing it for shipping. Each batch of sorghum takes about two hours and produces 60 gallons of syrup from 600 gallons of juice.

In 1970, the family started having field days for school children and their families. People come out to the farm, see where the cane is grown, how the mill works, and get to taste the syrup. They can also purchase sorghum suckers, jars of sorghum to take home, and sorghum cookbooks. Marge also gives samples and sells sorghum while a local cook demonstrates sorghum recipes at the Old Threshers Reunion in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa.

Unlike molasses (made from sugar cane and dependent on near slave labor conditions and resource depleting growing conditions in south Florida and elsewhere), sorghum is not a by-product of cane sugar manufacturing; it is *the* product from sorghum cane, does not need to be refrigerated, and contains high levels of iron, calcium, and potassium as well as antioxidants. Sorghum syrup can be substituted for molasses and corn syrup in all recipes as well as for sugar in many others (with some allowance made for reducing liquid in other ingredients).

Although the Maasdam farm is not an organic one, their management of the crop is close to sustainable. Family farm workers do apply minimal atrazine as an herbicide, but they are open to other methods that might make their operation eligible for organic certification. They use no fumigants or chemicals in the processing of the syrup, and the boilers that power the engines are fueled by sorghum cane stalks—making their operation remarkably efficient. The Maasdam-Kramer family also saves much of the sweet sorghum seed that they plant each year; that seed originally came from Waconia farm and mill near Cedar Rapids, which made sorghum from the 1930s through the mid-1970s. While they do have experimental plots of new seed each year (currently, Keller), the bulk of the crop is from that saved seed, which differs from varieties planted in southern states. According to Charles Kramer, the family currently plants three different varieties: Waconia (at least since 1963), Simon (since 1995 or so), and Mississippi (since 1970 or 1975).

Challenges that the business faces, according to Marge Kramer, are marketing and education. Those who are not privy to the delights of sorghum do not know that sorghum is not molasses. Their main competition is, in fact molasses, and not corn syrup. Molasses is stronger in taste than and not as sweet as sorghum, and neither molasses nor corn syrup has anywhere near the level of nutrients found in sorghum.

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