

STICKY BUSINESS

Sorghum was sweeter this season

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MUDDY POND -- John Guenther is used to this bit -- pun intended.

For more than 40 years he has operated an old fashioned sorghum mill in Muddy Pond, east of Monterey, feeding cane stalks into the horse drawn press and putting on a show for the visitors walking through.



And for a Tuesday, there are plenty of people around to see the action.

"It was January 1965 when we moved here," Guenther, 66, said. "We started having tourists the first year. The road out there was once a little one-lane dirt road, but so many people came, we had to put a sign up that said 'You are now on the Muddy Pond Interstate.'"

As he talks, two horses, Doc and Belle, make their way around the press in circles. From their efforts, the press squeezes the juice from the stalks, which is piped down to a shed to cook. And as the building below is busy with buzzing school children, church groups and a handful of retirees, the mixture is boiled and works its way through a series of baffles, before being cooled and bottled just feet away.

It takes anywhere from six to 12 people to work the mill and about 10 gallons of juice to produce a gallon of sorghum.

Guenther says they have already made about 280 gallons worth starting bright and early that morning.

Two years ago, the Muddy Pond Sorghum Mill pumped out more than 9,000 gallons worth, production that was cut nearly in half with last year's extremely dry weather. Things haven't been as bad this season, and Guenther says their sorghum has turned out a little sweeter because of it.

"It was just too dry last year," he said. "And this year, too, but the quality is much better. If it's a little dry, it makes the product sweeter, but too much rain kind of hurts, too."

And business in this small Mennonite community is booming. With more people vacationing close to home -- and plenty of other shops to draw people into Muddy Pond -- Guenther says he has seen an average sized crowd this year, even as his sorghum making draws to an end. The mill will likely wrap up production by the end of the month, after having made syrup every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday since September.

There's still, however, plenty to see, eat and taste, he said. The mill's operation has expanded to include the Muddy Pond Variety Store across the street, where visitors can browse through antiques, collectibles and hardware or purchase homemade breads, cookies and jellies, many with sorghum included.

Muddy Pond BBQ, which smokes Boston butts across the street, is also open year-round on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, owned by Carson Goddard, a transplant from Michigan who moved to Tennessee

after living in Florida to be closer to family.

"I married a city girl who said she would never live in the country," Goddard said. "But when we moved from Florida, my wife picked Tennessee. We looked at an apple farm in Baxter first, but a friend sent her a picture of Muddy Pond, we moved here and fell in love. One of the first people we met was John."

Guenther, originally from Canada, and his wife Emma have turned the sorghum mill into a family operation all their own with three of their sons -- and all of the couple's eight children live in the Muddy Pond area. Technology and the increase in demand for sorghum means the family now uses a self-propelled cane cutting machine in the fields, and Emma and Doc work mostly for show. But Guenther continues to welcome visitors and works hard to take them back in time -- not bad for a guy that admits he had never even tasted the syrup growing up.

Muddy Pond Sorghum Mill is located at 4064 Muddy Pond Road, east of Monterey and can be reached by taking Highway 164 to Union B Road or Highway 62 to Muddy Pond Road.

For more information, visit <http://muddypondsorghum.com> or call (931) 445-3357.

<http://www.ajlambert.com>