

## GAME ON

Sorghum resurgence leads distiller to create No'Lasses spirit

BY JILL WARREN LUCAS

**C**HRIS JUDE HAD NEVER HEARD OF SORGHUM before he enrolled at Appalachian State in 2002 to study renewable energy.

"It just blew my mind to have a local sweetener other than honey," says Jude, a second-career distiller preparing for this weekend's official debut of Fair Game Beverage Company's No'Lasses, a rum-like spirit made from sorghum syrup. Fair Game also will introduce its new Apple Brandy, a calvados-like sip made from North Carolina apples.

Both liquors, along with Fair Game's established line of fortified wines, are produced in a warehouse off Lorax Road in Pittsboro. No'Lasses is similar in taste to rum made from sugarcane, which is difficult to grow north of South Carolina. Sorghum, which is drought resistant and doesn't mind marginal soil conditions, is abundant locally and statewide.

Jude came across sorghum again as an employee of Piedmont Biofuels, which is the primary occupant of the office park where Fair Game started producing scuppernon and apple wines in 2009. Sweet sorghum, a summer grass that can be pressed to release fermentable sugar, is easy

to convert into biofuel.

Jude was attracted to sorghum's potential to replace cane in spirits. There are only a handful of distilleries in the U.S. that make a sorghum-based spirit; none that Jude knows of use North Carolina-grown sorghum.

"I always tend to do the odd, slightly difficult thing without worrying about what's ahead," he says with a smile.

"I believe that if you do something good, it will speak for itself. It's also nice to be reviving sorghum, which ought to be in everybody's cupboard."

While Jude grows some sorghum at his Chatham County home near the Haw River, he sources most of what he needs for No'Lasses from Ofuskee Farm in Silk Hope. He also uses pure sorghum syrup from area providers, such as Lewis Berrier Farm in Lexington, as well as Tennessee's Muddy Pond, one of the nation's best-known brands.

In her new book, *Sorghum's Savor* (University Press of Florida), Ronni Lundy writes that sorghum was popular among moonshiners: "It grew more quickly and was less trouble than corn. A distiller could grow his own sweetening without calling much attention as buying big bags of sugar at the store surely would."

During Prohibition and the Depression, Lundy adds, sorghum's appeal spread beyond the mountain south and generated a spike in national production. The spirit was called "sucrat" in some places to distinguish it from sugar-based liquor. A contemporary product made in Indianapolis is called Sorghrum and, like many rums, is available in light and dark versions.

With a color reminiscent of pale straw, No'Lasses falls somewhere in the middle. It has an appealingly mellow aroma and



**Chris Jude of Fair Game Beverage Company ages No'Lasses, a rum-like spirit made from sorghum, in repurposed bourbon barrels.** PHOTO BY JUSTIN COOK

a deep, complex flavor that makes it agreeable for sipping straight.

"It's very good in a Dark & Stormy, too," Jude says of the cocktail made with dark rum and sharp ginger beer.

Jude sampled early sips of No'Lasses and Apple Brandy a few months ago with local chefs and bartenders. Jay Pierce, who recently left Lucky 32 Southern Kitchen in Greensboro and Cary to open RockSalt in Charlotte, believes they are the best products Fair Game has produced. "Subtle and divine," Pierce says. "I really look forward to the release."

Jude also has a batch of sugarcane spirit fermenting at Fair Game and is making plans to add other products in coming years. "I'm in talks with a local brewer about a malt whiskey," he says cautiously. "I have dreams of doing sweet vermouth and a jenever gin, but I'll have to talk to my accountant before I can get serious about that." ▲

*Jill Warren Lucas is a freelance food writer. Reach her via Twitter @jwluucasnc.*

## SORGHUM HELPS SAVE SMALL FAMILY FARMS

**W**hile Tennessee and Kentucky rank as the nation's largest producers of sorghum, Ronni Lundy says North Carolina has a storied history with the crop.

"Particularly the western mountains and parts of the Piedmont have one of the strongest continuing traditions of making sorghum syrup for personal use and largely regional sales," says Lundy, author of the new *Sorghum's Savor*.

"Agriculturally, it's becoming a potential cash crop for farmers who can use tobacco buy-out money to set up small processing facilities."

Sorghum also appeals to former dairy farmers who can repurpose some equipment in sorghum syrup making..

"Having a stand of sorghum and producing syrup for sale can be an integral piece in sustainable small farming," adds the Appalachian foodways expert, who lives north of Asheville.

Farmer Doug Harrell of neighboring Mitchell County has maintained a six-generation family farm in part by selling sorghum through local Ingles Markets. Lundy profiles Harrell and other North Carolina sorghum growers and users and includes a few recipes from John Flee, who

was nominated by the James Beard Foundation as Best Chef Southeast for his work at Rhubarb in Asheville.  
—Jill Warren Lucas



**Ronni Lundy**

PHOTO BY MARTHA WILSON VOZOS

**RONNI LUNDY BOOK SIGNING**  
Thursday, 4–6 p.m.  
Lucky 32 Southern Kitchen  
7307 Tryon Road, Cary

### FAIR GAME BEVERAGE COMPANY

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Tasting Room: Wednesday–Friday,

5–8 p.m.; Saturday–Sunday, 1–5 p.m.

### SPECIAL EVENT: OFFICIAL LIQUOR RELEASE PARTY

Saturday, 5:30–9:30 p.m. | \$8–\$10

With food trucks and music; sample tastings of new No'Lasses and Apple Brandy spirits, plus a cash bar for cocktails (proceeds benefit Abundance North Carolina).