

Sassafras Tea Tradition

by Ruth Chin

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Family preserves historic beverage tradition

Don and Sandra Nordhaus and their son, Jeff, brew a beverage that's older than the nation itself, though they make it with modern equipment.

The Nordhaus family and four employees produce sassafras tea in a small factory in Columbus Grove, Ohio, (pop. 2,382). The tea is sold to people around the country and world who enjoy the taste and nostalgia of the aromatic beverage, which was popular centuries before Coca-Cola and cappuccino.

Using a recipe handed down by Sandra's father, Herman Kerner, employees at H&K (an abbreviation for Herman Kerner) Products fill stainless steel vats with root bark from sassafras trees, which grow throughout much of the eastern United States. They cover the bark with water and cook it for four hours until it releases a flavorful extract.

The bark is white, yellow, and red, but the red is best for flavor, says Jeff Nordhaus, who manages the company believed to be the only commercial producer of sassafras tea in the nation. It is harvested and dried in spring when the sap has settled in the root.

Sassafras tree bark has been used in North America for centuries. American Indians introduced Spanish explorer Ponce 'de Leon to the bark in 1512 and years later to pioneers who settled the continent. Europeans used sassafras as a medicinal tonic in the 17th and 18th centuries to treat everything from rheumatism to gout. In the 19th century, sassafras extract was used to flavor one of the nations first soft drinks, root beer.

The Nordhaus family's involvement with sassafras is much more recent. Don and Sandra first got involved in the tea-making business in 1986. Three years later, they took over day-to-day operations from Sandra's ailing father, who bought the business in 1962.

Everything was done by hand then, recalls Don, explaining how the bark was cooked on the kitchen stove and the tea was poured into bottles by hand.

Nowadays, the Nordhauses still buy sassafras bark from root diggers in the Appalachian and Ozark Mountains.

Over the years, the entire manufacturing process has been modernized. The Nordhauses now use large stainless steel vats and strainers to make Pappy's Sassafras Tea, and the product is bottled and labeled by an automated machine.

We taste test each batch just before bottling because we want to maintain that same flavorsome drink so many people remember when they drank it at their grandparents homes, says Jeff, who left a job as a fish biologist in Florida in 1998 to help his parents run the business.

The aroma of the Nordhauses tea brought back memories for Barbara Avery of Dover, Ark., when she opened a bottle last year. Avery recalled walking down a country road with her grandmother in Jay, Okla., when she was just 4 or 5 years old to visit a neighbor who had a sassafras tree. Her grandmother dug the root, took it home, washed it, and cooked it on the stove.

The aroma took me back to my grandmothers kitchen, Avery says, adding that she plans to share the tea with her own grandchildren when she gets her next order.