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Doughnuts to die for

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ELKTON, Md. -- Two minutes can seem like two hours when you're waiting for hot, fresh, apple cider doughnuts.

The aroma of cinnamon mingling with fried dough is a seductive siren that woos, coos, whispers and teases. Slightly crunchy, warm deliciousness is its alluring, sweet-smelling song.

Sniff, savor and be prepared to brush sugary crumbs off your chin. This is the epitome of autumn, all in one bite.

But, patience, dear doughnut eater, patience.

It takes two minutes from dough to doughnuts, and the fryer is going full blast. Take 79 cents out of your pocket and sit tight. Evan Milburn will make sure you are soon rewarded.

For nearly 20 years, Milburn, the dean of doughnuts at Milburn Orchards, a few miles west of Newark in has watched the heady perfume of his apple cider-flavored pastries ensnare customers and make them weak in the knees.

On busy weekends in October, hungry patrons stand at the rural farm market's outdoor counter and bide their time until the next warm batch of cake doughnuts slides down the doughnut machine.

"Sometimes, there are two lines clear around the building," Milburn says. "I go out and tell 'em it's going to be a 30-minute wait. But nobody gets out of line."

Doughnut-making is a serious and an awe-inspiring business at Milburn, a 350-acre family-run orchard on Appleton Road.

Customers may come looking for Halloween pumpkins, freckled ears of Indian corn or baskets of crisp, snappy apples. But rarely do they leave Milburn's without buying at least one 79 cent doughnut. More likely a dozen for \$7.25.

The demand for apple cider doughnuts is so great from mid-July to late November that the Milburns had to build a separate kitchen adjoining the farm market just to make doughnuts.

Think about that for a minute.

A separate kitchen. Just for doughnuts.

It's not as mind-boggling as it sounds. Fried dough has helped keep this farm operation, which dates back to 1902, chugging along. Milburn says on a beautiful fall weekend, six employees can produce more than 800 dozen doughnuts in a day.

The beauty of the pastry lies in its simplicity. Apple cider is the soul of the doughnut. Milburn's homemade cider is made from a juicy blend of three to four varieties of sweet and tart apples that are grown and pressed on the Cecil County farm.

Milburn, a third-generation farmer, never really planned to become a doughnut fryer. During a trip to Michigan for a horticulture meeting, he talked to another farmer about apples and doughnuts. The man offered to give Milburn an apple cider doughnut recipe that had been passed along to him by an Illinois farmer.

"It just fascinated me," Milburn says.

He bought his first doughnut machine in 1988 and pumped out 10 dozen an hour.

But Milburn wasn't satisfied with the product.

"I was not pleased with his recipe. They were too much like you could buy someplace else. I wanted something unique."

So, with his wife Gail's permission, he took over her kitchen for nearly two months in 1989 and fiddled around with spices and ingredients until he was satisfied with the results.

"I was the taster back when I was kid," says Evan's son Nathan Milburn, who now runs the orchard. His cousins Jay and David are in charge of farm operations and cousin Melinda, a former stockbroker, runs the bakery.

The new recipe, which is still used today, was a success. By 1992, Milburn had to buy a bigger doughnut machine to keep up with customer demand.

Production begins early

During the week at Milburn's, Jesus Magana begins the doughnut production at 7 a.m. Evan Milburn, now semi-retired, taught him the technique and still watches the process to make sure that his exacting instructions are followed to the letter.

"I've done this for so long, when I bite into a doughnut, I know what's wrong," Milburn says.

Magana starts by weighing out two 15-pound containers of dry ingredients and sets them aside. In a large commercial mixer, he pours in spices. The blend is an orchard secret.

"I'm not going to tell you what's in the dough," Milburn tells two visitors watching the process.

Magana then takes two gallons of homemade cider and heats the liquid to about 78 degrees. This is an important step.

"If the temperature is too high, the dough is runny. Too cold and it makes a tough doughnut," Milburn says. "The finished dough has to be perfect."

Magana mixes the warm cider with the spices and then shakes in the two 15-pound containers of flour and other ingredients. The dough is blended for 1 minute.

"If you mix it too long, it makes it too liquidy. Too short and it's lumpy," says Milburn, who doesn't have to remind Magana when to turn off the mixer.

The dough is poured into the doughnut machine, where it will rest for exactly 10 minutes. One pound of dough will yield one dozen doughnuts.

After the dough has rested, Magana is ready to begin frying. The doughnut machine gives a click and four, thin rings of tan dough, speckled with spices, plop into a pool of melted vegetable and soybean shortening that's heated to between 380 and 400 degrees.

The plopping action is repeated again and again. The machine can pump out 120 dozen doughnuts an hour.

Oil bubbles around the rings, which quickly brown and plump into pudgy tires. As the doughnuts float down the oil-slicked river, the machine flips them over and nudges them along. The hot doughnuts then slide down a chute into the rotating bowl. Magana pats on a cinnamon and sugar coating and stacks the doughnuts on a tray.

The heavenly sugar and spice aroma -- is this what dreams are made of? -- hugs every corner of the kitchen.

But Milburn has long become immune. "I don't even smell it anymore," he says. It's the sad casualty of a frequent doughnut fryer.

Yet, the farmer is one smart cookie. Milburn knows that the apple-cinnamon-sugar perfume is the piped piper that brings in customers.

That's why he has directed the doughnut kitchen's exhaust fans toward the farm market's parking lot.

Customers often ask Milburn if he plans to make any other flavor doughnuts. He shakes his head and explains that he lives by a "keep it simple, stupid" philosophy.

"People love these so much, why should I do anything else?" he says.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: Milburn Orchards offers fresh apple cider doughnuts daily at its farm market through the end of November.

WHERE: 1495 Appleton Road, near Elkton, Md.

WHEN: The farm market is open from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays; and 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sundays.

INFORMATION: Call (410) 398-1349; www.milburnorchards.com

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