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Straight From The Source

Author(s): VIC BRADSHAW Daily News-Record **Date:** February 6, 2017**Section:** Local

HARRISONBURG — Hannah Johnson and other folks **from** Hickory Hill Farm in Keezletown generally have to pitch their sorghum molasses to potential customers one at a time, either during sales calls or when they're at **the** Harrisonburg Farmers Market.

"It's a natural sweetener," Johnson said, "one of **the** few we can grow around here."

But next month, she'll have a chance to extol **the** product's sticky, sweet virtues to multiple restaurant owners and chefs that could buy **the** syrup in bulk.

Several Shenandoah Valley localities are teaming up to hold a free trade show **from** noon to 4 p.m. March 6 at **The** Mimslyn Inn in Luray aimed at connecting area producers with large-scale consumers.

Called Farm2Fork Affair, its goal is to allow farmers and food and beverage producers **from** Rockingham, Page, Shenandoah and Frederick counties and **the** cities of Harrisonburg and Winchester to pitch their products to restaurateurs, food distributors, school systems, grocers and others **from the** Shenandoah Valley, Northern Virginia, Charlottesville, Washington, D.C., and Berkeley Springs, W.Va.

John Hoffman, executive chef at Keswick Hall, which features dishes made with ingredients **from** Virginia suppliers at Fossett's, one of its restaurants, will deliver a keynote address.

The event reprises "Love at First Bite," which was held for Lexington-area producers in 2015, and Farm2Fork Affair, held in 2016 for Staunton, Waynesboro and Augusta County food businesses.

Tracey Coltrain, coordinator of **the** Fields of Gold Farm Trail for **the** Central Shenandoah Planning District Commission, said Northern Valley tourism and economic development officials wanted in on **the** action going on to **the** south.

"It was something they definitely wanted to make sure was available to their farmers in their region, and their restaurants," she said.

Tutorial First

Consumers **from** a wide area that buy foods and beverages in bulk are being invited to check out some of **the** best **the** Shenandoah Valley has to offer, said Coltrain. They should register at Farm2ForkAffairNSV.com if they plan to attend.

It's an invitation-only event for producers, however, with local officials helping to decide which producers to ask.

The event is free for **the** consumers and producers who attend.

In addition to **the** localities involved, **the** Fields of Gold program and **The** Mimslyn Inn, event collaborators include **the** Shenandoah Valley Buy Fresh Buy Local program, **the** Virginia Cooperative Extension and **the** Staunton Creative Community Fund.

To help them get **the** most out of **the** event, Coltrain said a workshop will be held to educate

participating producers on setting up their booth, engaging potential clients, sharing their story, and having **the** proper materials ready.

Producers will be given a list of consumers who sign up for **the** event and will be able to let organizers know which ones they most want to meet.

"We're going to work to really prepare our producers," she said, "so they feel ready to conquer **the** day."

Last year's Staunton-area Farm2Fork resulted in at least "five or six" farmers meeting business owners they made deals with, Coltrain said. All participants said they'd like to see **the** event held again.

That's **the** goal, as a grant is being sought to hold an event for producers **the** length of **the** Shenandoah Valley in Virginia as early as spring 2019.

"Ideally, we'd like to do annually," Coltrain said. "If that proves to be too challenging, at **the** very least every other year to keep **the** momentum going and for branding purposes."

More Than Syrup

While Hickory Hill Farm will be glad to sell sorghum molasses to customers who want to use it as a Virginia-made syrup, that's not where Johnson sees **the** biggest opportunity. She wants chefs, bakers and others to know it can be a tasty, different ingredient in an array of dishes.

"It can be used in shoo-fly pie," Johnson said, "and I recently had a pecan bourbon sorghum pie that was pretty out of this world. I've had winter squash with a sorghum drizzle, and it can be used in milkshakes and smoothies."

Hickory Hill Farm also grows blueberries, Concord grapes, sweet corn, tomatoes and other vegetables, but Johnson said **the** farm has enough retail and wholesale outlets for what it grows of those products.

The event, Coltrain said, isn't just for farm producers. Some of **the** region's wineries, craft breweries and cideries will be there.

Brenda Black, Harrisonburg's director of tourism and visitor services, said some of **the** city's restaurateurs will attend Farm2Fork Affair as consumers, and Brothers Craft Brewing will be there as a producer.

While **the** beermakers are well known on **the** local food and beverage scene, she said they're seeking exposure to bars and restaurants in D.C., Northern Virginia and other markets they might not have penetrated significantly.

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